

The Kongo Conception of the World

S. N. KISANGA, O.P.

One of the most remarkable features of the Church's life today is its persistent and widespread effort to return to the springs of that life. In every domain—biblical, liturgical, catechetical—there is a desire to re-discover the sources in their freshness, to re-animate the Church with the primitive vitality, and power which enabled it to reach out all over the world. So far as biblical studies go, this effort finds one concrete expression in archaeological and anthropological research into the history of the Jewish people. The object of this research, as Fr Joseph Bourke, O.P., suggested in his recent 'Survey of Old Testament Studies' in this review, is to reconstruct the 'living context' in which the Old Testament traditions were originally formulated.

It is remarkable to find that this concern for the revival of the past also exists in the African continent. Anthropologists in Africa are more and more interested in the study of African culture, and particularly African religion and ritual, not in order to reject them but to re-discover virgin Africa. Seized by the passion for *négritude*, this movement to renew negro-African culture, occurs just at the moment when Africa is opening out into modern life, and seeks to advance but realizes it cannot do so without returning to the authentic roots of its history.

This impulse, on the part both of the Church and of Africa, to re-discover primitive values, should cause us to reflect. May it not be within divine providence that the Church should help to build Africa from its foundations upwards rather than arbitrarily to juxtapose a Christianity which the African has difficulty in distinguishing from western culture as such? It is this situation which seems to me to be an appeal to African priests, as well as to all those who wish for the prosperity of the Church in Africa, to pay more attention both to the movement of a return to sources within the Church and to *la négritude*. It is certain that African culture and conceptions of life furnish valuable elements which should be integrated into the work of salvation.

It is in this connection that I should like to indicate a few elements in the conception of the world held by the ba-Kongo. The Kongo is a

tribe in the Lower-Congo. It is not my own tribe. My choice of this tribe was not made at random, nor because the conception of the world held by its members is necessarily to be found among all tribes of the Congo, but because the Kongo tribe, under the influence of Christianity, has already given birth to a large spiritual movement¹ which slowly, but surely, is spreading throughout the Congo and Congo Brazzaville.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO THE KONGO

Every people wants to interpret its own living context and to give an answer to the main problems of life: Where am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? How should I live? The attempt to answer these problems is what one may call the conception of the world.

According to the Kongo conception, we can divide the world into three parts²:

1. The world of living men.
2. The world of spirits.
3. Nzambi.

I. THE WORLD OF LIVING MEN

For a Kongo, man is built up of four elements, namely, the body, the *moyo* (soul), the *mfumu kutu* (a kind of double soul), and the name.

(a) *The body*. The Kongo conception of the body is almost the same as the European conception. But, for a Kongo, when, after death, the man leaves his former body, he necessarily and immediately takes on another body, for it is impossible to conceive of a man without a body, in accordance with the saying: 'We (human beings) are built up of body and soul'. The sense of this saying is: 'We cannot change what we are', or, otherwise expressed, 'Once a man, always a man'.

(b) *The soul*. The soul (*moyo*) resides in the blood. That is why the soul suffers by the loss of blood and finally leaves the body which has lost all its blood. The main seat of the soul is the heart, vital centre of the blood. The soul is the principle of life. It is by the soul that 'man lives his life'. The soul is able to resist death; and after the death of its earlier body, the soul goes down to the water (the water of life) and

¹These movements have been widely described by *Efraim Andersson*, 'Messianic Popular Movements in the Lower Congo'. *Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia*. XIV, Upsala 1958.

²This division is a schematical one and only helps to facilitate understanding, for Nzambi, for example, as we shall see, is not a part of the world at all.

there takes on another body, which is however no more black but white.

(c) *The mfumu kutu*. The *mfumu kutu* (the lord of the ear) is the principle of sensible perception. It is called the lord of the ear, for it is presumed to reside in the ears. The *mfumu kutu* is a mysterious thing, a thing of *Nzambi*. When it enters into the ears of the child, it has come from afar, and when it leaves the dead man, it goes far again. What it has done before entering into the ears of a person, what will become of it when it leaves a dead man, we do not know. We know only what it does when it is at home, that is to say, in the ears. The *mfumu kutu* controls the eyes and ears. In its absence these organs cannot operate. During the day, if the *mfumu kutu* leaves the body, the man lapses into a state of semi-consciousness. During the night, the *mfumu kutu* goes out wandering in the country, and therefore the man sleeps. Even when the *mfumu kutu* is away from the body, its own activities do not diminish, they are only different. During its wandering, the *mfumu kutu* meets such things as one may meet in the dark night: phantoms, witches, wild animals, and has to fight against them. Sometimes man is aware of these activities during his sleep: this is dreaming.

The *mfumu kutu* is also the cause of the shadow.

(d) *The name*. Instead of being a pure sign, the name is closely associated with the personality. To each transformation of the personality there corresponds the transformation of the name. One who enters a new sect takes on a new personality; consequently he must have a new name which corresponds thereto. In order to bewitch a person, it is quite enough to bewitch his name.

2. THE WORLD OF SPIRITS

Spirits have their origin on earth. A spirit is but a man who formerly lived on earth and who became a spirit after death. When a man dies, his *mfumu kutu* goes away and we do not know what happens to it. The body is condemned to putrefy. But the soul (*moyo*) goes down to the world of ancestors and there takes on another body which is no longer black, but white, less tall than the former body and with long hair. It becomes a spirit. Hence, for a Congo, a spirit is a corporeal being. There are different groups of spirits.

(a) *The Bankulu*. The first group of spirits is called *Bankulu*. It is composed of the dead members of the same clan. So each clan has its own *bankulu*. The *bankulu* live underground, near woods and rivers.

They have their own villages like the earthly villages³: men and women, chiefs and subjects live an organized life together. Their mutual understanding gives them a happy life.

The *bankulu* admit into their community only such people as have during their earthly life observed the divine laws, who have not been guilty of loose morals, witchcraft, etc.

(b) *The Motebo*. The *tebo* spirits are men who after death are not accepted in the *bankulu*'s community, namely, evil persons, witches, etc. Generally the *tebo* is small and ugly, with dark and smoked skin, and spreads an unpleasant smell. The *tebo* build their huts in woods, near springs and streams. Often, in the evening, they go to the villages to steal chickens or goats. Sometimes they lie in wait to attack people and carry them off to their huts to eat them.

(c) *The Bankita*. The *bankita* are the spirits of people who died a violent death. The most important among them are the earliest forbears, killed in war or assassinated. There are three classes of *bankita*. The first class comprises the heroes who were killed in war, and these are the most powerful. The second class is composed of women killed with a knife. And to the third class belong all others who have been assassinated.

The *bankita* are white and very strong. They live in forests and rivers. During the dry season they often go wandering round the villages and eating the ripe fruits they come upon.

(d) *The bisimbi*. The ba-Kongo discuss whether these spirits have ever existed as living men at all. The *bisimbi* live either in open fields—these are field *bisimbi*—or near water—these are water *bisimbi*. Water *bisimbi* reside specially near lakes, streams and springs, some of which are even considered to belong to the *bisimbi*. Nobody is therefore allowed to take water from them.

(e) *Other spirits*. Besides the principal groups of spirits which we have just considered, there are other sorts of spirits which need not be discussed here.

3. NZAMBI, OR THE SUPREME BEING

The supreme being is called *Nzambi*. He is the creator of man and of everything. We discover this idea expressed in many proverbs, legends and wise sayings. On earth there are very many things of the nature of

³'Earthly' is not to be taken in opposition to 'heavenly'. I use this term only to make the difference between the village of living people and the village of dead men.

which and of the reason for which man is ignorant: minerals, plants and animals. They are 'Nzambi's things'; he knows why he made them. Nzambi knows everything; he understands the cry of animals, we do not. Even the most mysterious things are of Nzambi's creation; it was Nzambi who made the sky, the stars and the sun.

So Nzambi appears as the creator of everything. But nobody knows what Nzambi is: he is not a corporeal being, he is not a man, he is not a spirit, he is Nzambi.

4. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIVING MEN AND SPIRITS

(a) *Man and the family or the clan.* The relationship between living men and the spirits of their ancestors is essentially based upon the relationship between the members of the same family and clan. Therefore any attempt to consider the relationship between dead and living people must take in account the mutual relation between kinsfolk or the same clan.

The clan is an entity, organized in a hierarchy according to the principle of primogeniture. Each member of the clan is related to every other by the blood-tie. Within the clan, this blood-tie is especially strong among the members of the same family,⁴ and confers on parents and ancestors a special power over their descendants. They can use this power either to bless or to curse their descendants. The exercise of this power is called *loka*. Here, for example, are certain formulas in which a father exercises the power to curse his child. He first asks him to obey:

'My son, I am truly your father by Nzambi who made you with fingers and finger-nails (i.e., with hands to feed, protect and help yourself). I, your father, beseech you, by Nzambi, to go now and to obey'. If the boy continues to refuse, then the father curses him as follows:

'Man, I am indeed supposed to be your father, by Nzambi who made you with fingers and finger-nails. If then I am your father, are you to kill and catch animals? Are you to live and survive? Are the women to think of you? Are you to have anything to say that will find favour with the wise men or with the chiefs? Depart. Go wandering alone'.

A child so cursed can no longer have peace or rest; he is cut off from his vital source. A child may be cursed for ever, but often, after a more or less long time, he apologises; he begs his father to forgive him, and to accept him again as his child. Then the father retracts his malediction in the following way:

⁴The African family is more wide than the European: all near relations, as uncle, cousins, etc., also belong to the family.

'What I have said, I withdraw. I was speaking over my tongue. I did not speak under my tongue (i.e., I did not speak seriously). So go and kill the game that is male, kill the game that is female. Speak words which find favour with the chiefs and please the wise men'

And so the child regains peace and rest.

These examples show us the respect and honour that are due to parents and elders.

Mutual aid. One of the typical aspects of the clan-life is mutual aid. If a member of the clan goes short of anything, the other members of the clan have to help him, giving money for the dowry or marriage portion, for example, and giving the cloth and other things necessary for the funeral of a member of the clan.

*The common estate*⁵: Each clan has property in common where each member of the clan cultivates his field, fishes, hunts, gathers fruit and raises animals.

(b) *Ancestors and the clan.* Not only the living, but also the dead are members of the clan. After death the relationship between spirits and living members of the family is not lost; on the contrary, it becomes stronger. The spirits keep all their rights over living people and they can exercise them more easily than they did on earth: they can curse, punish or bless living people. Even the common estate of the clan belongs strictly to the ancestors: fish, game, palm grove, everything in the estate is theirs. They allow living members to use it, but if the living members are disobedient, the ancestors may destroy the prosperity of the estate, making the earth barren, withdrawing the rain or keeping away game. Then the living people beg forgiveness.

When a member of the clan is short of anything, he asks it of the other members of the family, living or dead. When the whole clan needs anything, for example, the prosperity of the earth or escape from some calamity, they very often have recourse to the ancestors. These prayers are either spontaneous or the result of a punishment.

Here are a few prayers to the ancestors (as said, by the elder of the clan, on the occasion of the feast of ancestors): 'You, the ancients who have left us in the clan, look at the reason which brings us here. When you were still alive, you told me: "Stay in the clan and the clan will help you. Take great care of human wealth". But look at us here! The

⁵I speak of the common estate as far as the main boundaries are concerned. Inside these boundaries there may be found other divisions. Among the ba-Kongo property is a complicated thing. See *Karl Laman* who gave a chapter to Ownership (among the Kongo), in his book: 'The Kongo'. *Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia*. VIII. T.II, Chap. 6. Upsala 1957.

land is sick, the sky is sick. We are told: Consult the *nkisi* (the fetishes). And we do so. We are told again: "Once more to the *nkisi*". We go to the soothsayer and he tells us to go and bury our ancestors. That is why we come . . . In the clan in which we live, death was sleeping, but now it sleeps no longer. The young men of the village are leaving, we the old men, are going too. And the women have children and the children go away. What fate is this? The clan you left weak are becoming strong. Their *bankulu* give them fruitfulness. But you go back into the savannah, and are searching out our young people to take them away' . . .

Here is another prayer which accompanies the offering to the ancestors:

'We make this offering to you in order that you may eat the *matondo*, mushrooms of love, and love us. It was you who commanded me (the elder) to celebrate this feast. And we celebrated it, we men and women. Old and young, we were all there. May all of you be present here as well. The work of burying is not yet finished. We also shall die, but dying is not yet finished. Now that you are glorified, however, you who have gone, give us who live in the savannah fruitfulness . . . Open your treasure-chest to us . . . May you be well where you are. Wherever I go, let me be well'.

This interaction between the living members of the clan and the dead ancestors is what is generally denoted in the West by the term 'ancestor-worship'. In reality ancestor-worship is but the normal relationship between the members of the same clan, the relationship between major and minor. Ancestors live in the world of the *bankulu*; they can punish or help the living in the same way as earthly parents can. And living men can offend their ancestors or obtain their blessing.

Dead ancestors are not worshipped as the supreme being, for the only supreme being is *Nzambi*.

(c) *Nzambi and man*. *Nzambi* is the creator of man. Man is therefore related to *Nzambi* as creature to creator. A legend tells us: 'In the beginning *Nzambi* made a man and a woman. The woman is called "She who violates what is forbidden". The man's name is *Ya Ndosimau*. And the woman bore a child to this first man. Thereupon *Nzambi* told them something they must not do: "If the child happens to die, don't bury him. Place him in the corner of the house and cover him with wood for burning. Three days later, he will rise again". The men did not believe this. Then the child died. They buried it. Then *Nzambi* came and said: "I told you: Don't bury the child. And you buried it. This is why all

your descendants will be subject to sickness. They will die because you have violated my order". So if they had not buried this child, things would happen differently; we should have died only as the moon dies, and when we died, we should have risen again'.

Nzambi's activity also appears in the birth of the child: 'It was *Nzambi* who fashioned the body out of the foetus in the mother's womb and made the blood wherein the soul resides. If *Nzambi* had not covered us with a leaf (i.e., the skin), we should never have been born'. The *mfumu kutu* comes from *Nzambi*. It comes from him when it enters the child, and when the man dies, it returns far away to *Nzambi*.

Man, therefore, is *Nzambi's* subject. He depends on *Nzambi* for everything, as is expressed in the wise saying: 'All of us, we are *Nzambi's* subjects, he created us, and we shall go to him after death'. *Nzambi* possesses us, he eats us (i.e., he does with us what he wills). *Nzambi* is always present; he controls all our activities. Nothing can happen without his permission. *Nzambi* wants men to help each other, and to respect their parents. He has his laws and punishes people who violate them. Death comes from *Nzambi*, as is expressed in the following wise saying: 'The high road, men didn't make it. The road to death, *Nzambi* made it. It is gently sloping'.

Such a conception of the world contains ideas and aspirations which must make us reflect. The Church whose wish has always been not to destroy, but to respect and to baptize the elements of value in the pre-existent culture among the people to be evangelized, is certainly ready to welcome such African elements. The elements we have described as contained in the Kongo conception of the world might help to root the Gospel in Africa, provided only that they are appropriately interpreted, corrected, completed and baptized. In order to achieve such positive results, it would be necessary greatly to enlarge the scope of research, for the ba-Kongo are only one tribe among dozens and dozens of others.

NOTE. The material of this article was gathered, partly from published sociological and anthropological work (especially *Etudes Bakongo*, by Van Wing) and partly from the author's own researches on the spot. The translations of African expressions and prayers are the author's.