Britain', in *Modern Theology,* 3:1 (1986), 35—67. Although the present article stresses the limitations of Marxism, and the falsity of a hybrid 'Christian Marxism', I still stand behind most of what is said in the earlier piece about the importance of Marxist *ecomomics,* and the Marxist analysis of the capitalist mode of production, especially in *Capital,* Chapter One. It should also be noted that the outlook I am advocating does not deny the validity of class struggle (however complex a matter that may be in practice). Indeed, social and ideological struggle of all kinds becomes more important once one abandons the notion that capitalist processes themselves will tend, in the long term, towards socialism.

31 See 'The Body by Love Possessed'. pp. 56—61.

32 See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus; Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. Robert Hurley et al. (Athlone, London, 1984).

33 Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming,* trans. Wlad Godzich (Manchester U.P. 1985).

34 See Samuel Weber, 'Afterward: Literature—just making it', in Lyotard and Thébaud, pp. 101—123.

35 See my article, 'An Essay Against Secular Order', *Journal of Religious Ethics,* Autumn, 1987.

# God Above and God Below

Adrian Edwards C S Sp

Religious syncretism is a currently fashionable topic, both among anthropologists and theologians. To the anthropologist, syncretism offers not only fascinating field material, but also important theoretical questions. Supposing two or more world religions are present in the same culture, as is the case with the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka. Will the internal logic of the world religion oblige its adherents to reinterpret the culture? Or will the common culture eventually obliterate the boundaries between the religions?[1] For theologians the boundary between Christian and merely Christian-influenced is both extremely difficult to draw and extremely necessary. Whom do we admit to the local council of churches? Where does liturgical inculturation end and repaganization begin? What about the survival of pagan attitudes-devotion, for



https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb01301.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

instance, to Mammon or Mars—to be found among the ultra-orthodox? Some contemporary theologians, for instance Robert Schreiter in his *Constructing Local Theologies,*[2] have found it possible to take a rather sympathetic view of syncretism, but this seems to go with a certain sociological naivety, since syncretism is usually the product of systems of domination in which there is a wide gap between the religions of the dominators and the dominated.

There is a story of a famous medical scientist who used to tell his students, 'These, gentlemen, are the symptoms of typhoid fever, but you will find all the cases are different.' The same surely applies to syncretism. We need to look at particular cases, before we generalize about syncretism. In this article, I am looking at two studies of syncretising religious situations published by anthropologists in this decade, Jon P. Kirby's *God, Shrines and Problem-Solving among the Anufo of Northern Ghana,*[3] and James W. Fernandez' *Bwiti,*[4] which deals with a new religion among the Fang of the Gabon. Jon Kirby, born in Canada, is, like myself, a Catholic missionary with a training in social anthropology. While his book is very clearly written, it has something of the methodological puritanism of the British school of social anthropology, and refrains from developing the philosophical and theological relevancies of his research. Professor Fernandez is a distinguished American anthropologist, whose *Bwiti,* published over twenty years after his main period of fieldwork among the Fang, has a reflective richness of texture, which indicates not only sympathy with the Fang as persons, but also an empathy with Fang aesthetics. Indeed, the criterion by which he judges Fang religion seems to be a Ruskinian faith in the unity of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

Fr Kirby's book deals with the Anufo, or Chakosi, whose origin goes back to the mid-eighteenth century, when a predatory kingdom developed, armed with muskets and using cavalry, for raiding and mercenary services. The subjects of the kingdom were of mixed ethnic origin, and were grouped in what anthropologists call estates, culturally distinctive and ranked status groups, which were not classes or castes in the strict sense. Military leadership was provided by the noble estate, but commoners and slaves went with them to war, while the Muslim estate provided spiritual support with prayers and talismans. The colonial occupation brought an end to raiding and the fleecing of the commoners by the nobles, and the community studied by Fr Kirby is now separated by international boundaries from an old Anufo centre. However, Anufo society even under the Ghanaian flag retains something of its own form. Present day 'nobles' are the descendants of household slaves of the warrior aristocracy, 'commoners' are those whom poverty excludes from political or ritual office, and the Muslims are largely recent converts.

In this situation, one would expect a rapid shift to Islam,

particularly since Christian missionary work in the area has lacked continuity and planning, and Islam is locally (though not in Ghana generally) the religion of status and wealth. However, only 14% of Anufo villagers are Muslim, and the traditional cults, which reflect the varied ethnic roots of the Anufo, have great vitality. Here we come to the great merit of Jon Kirby's book. We are shown how the 'pagan' religion of the Anufo is itself shifting in a more specifically monotheistic direction, partly from its own logic, partly from the demands the Anufo make upon it, and partly from the availability of Muslim ritual, itself reflecting the presence of Muslims in Anufo society.

The book's theme necessarily relates it to two major questions of Africanist studies, the nature of African belief in a supreme God, and the African concept of personality. Since the middle of the nineteenth century there has been controversy as to whether African religion can best be seen as a modified monotheism, or as a deism in which, creation over, the Creator does nothing more, or as a 'polydynamic' system, in which human life is influenced by a variety of spiritual powers. Writers on the African theory of personality have been specially interested in the belief, found not in all black Africa, but over a very large area of West Africa, in multiple, or perhaps multi-tiered, souls.[5] Jon Kirby shows us four levels in the Anufo perception of the human soul: the 'spark of life' by which God gives human existence; another level in which the ancestors as a group are present, perhaps one might say ancestry is present, functioning as a super-ego with regard to custom; the spirit of the actual ancestor reincarnated in one; and the spirit guardian, that is, the personalized destiny which the individual has asked for from God before birth. Clearly, we are dealing with a set of ideas which it is very difficult for Europeans to appreciate directly. Scholars such as Meyer Fortes and Robin Horton have proposed fascinating analogies with the ego, id and super-ego of psycho-analytic theory.[6] West African soul beliefs remind one also, surely, of some of the stock themes of modern fiction, the way in which individuals may find their ancestry either a burden or a challenge, the conflict between the calling of the individual and the demands of society, and the working out of the options of one generation in the lives of their descendants.

The same word, *nyeme,* is used by the Anufo for the spirit guardian, for the supreme God, and for the shrine built in honour of the spirit guardian, usually after appeals to other spirits, the ancestors, the spirits of the wilderness, or local spirits, have failed. We can learn from Jon Kirby that this is the deliberate and necessary mistake of Anufo religion, which provides its praxis with a way out of the impasse to which its theoria would lead it. For the God of the Anufo is astonishingly like the God of the old-fashioned Catholic textbooks of natural theology, all-good and all-powerful, giver of life and source of knowledge,

transcendent and unbribable. But, say the Anufo, He cannot be approached from the human end. For Him, there are no sacrifices. One might say, when you try and get hold of Him, He turns from being a Catholic God to a Barthian one. However, as Jon Kirby documents, He is often invoked in prayer, and He is seen as the power behind the lesser spirits. Furthermore, the identity of names enables the Anufo to claim both that *nyeme* is unapproachable and that He is responsive.

But this is not really a parallel with the Catholic doctrine of the intercession of the saints. The *nyeme* shrine is not really a mediator. Nor do the sacrifices to the ancestors really provide a link, however indirect, to God. The Anufo cheerfully told Jon Kirby that their sacrifices were 'lies'. Does this mean that the Anufo are not in 'good faith', that admirable if mysterious quality on whose account promoters of inter-faith dialogue draw so heavily? Or does it justify those anthropologists[7] who have argued that African rituals are dramas rather than sacraments, statements of how things are rather than actions intended to change them? Perhaps a more satisfactory parallel could be drawn from our own society, in the way we speak of some unsatisfactory economic or social situation: 'Well, it's not the ideal solution, but we just have to manage with it.' Even the way in which the *nyeme* shrine can, by identity of name and total distinction of nature, be affirmed, and denied, to be a manifestation of the divine, is somehow reminiscent of those political compromises which mean different things to the two sides. In international politics, as in Anufo religion, verbal consensus can paper over the gulfs of ideology.

But not for ever in either case. The Anufo seem to be gradually moving towards Islamisation, because of its strong monotheism, even though this sympathy for Islam may be combined with a certain distrust of local Muslims. Is this shift towards monotheism, either Muslim or Christian as local factors determine, universal in black Africa? James Fernandez argues in *Bwiti* that African religions can emerge which, though drawing heavily on Christian story and symbolism, are not monotheistic. But let us put the Fang into context.

The pre-colonial Fang were an energetic, egalitarian, people characterised by their fondness for migrations—Fang villages were usually moved after a period of up to fifteen years. Migration and trading trips were group activities, and the lay-out of both villages and households was highly structured. Forceful personalities were admired, but, as often in Africa, forcefulness, if overdone, brought suspicions of wizardry. Their myths spoke of a genealogy of high gods, Nkwa, Sokome and Mbongwe, who in different ways prepared for the creation of the world, and Mebege who actually created it through the agency of a spider. He also created the two earth-dwelling representatives of divinity, Zame, the male principle, and Nyingwan, the female principle, who in

turn produced human beings. Fernandez stresses, however, that, before the encounter with the Christian missions, divinity was a subject of myth rather than an object of ritual, and describes the two main forms of traditional ritual, the Soo-Ndong Mba rite of village purification, and the ancestor cult, which included a rite of initiation to the cult, in which the initiates, most often young married men, had to 'die' and come to life again, with the help of indigenous drugs. This initiation was not simply a promotion in status, but also marked, in intention, a rejection of selfish individualism for the common good.

What became of this society and its religion under colonial rule? While James Fernandez is not so severe on French colonial rule as some French writers have been, he notes both the unpopularity of such measures as the *corvée,* and a more pervasive growth of mutual disillusionment between the Fang and the French. The decline of traditional cults, the loss of the old pattern of village lay-out, felt tensions between men and women, disconcerting fluctuations in the economy, and, worst of all, a very high (over 30%) rate of sterility among women, produced among the Fang a feeling that they needed a new 'path', and so Bwiti came into being.

Bwiti was originally the ancestor cult of the Metsogo, southern neighbours of the Fang, and spread into Fang country during the twenties and thirties, arousing the alarm of administrators and missionaries by such practises as the taking of the *eboga* drug. By the later forties, the most general criticism, made by the African elite as well as by the Europeans, was that it discouraged hard work, a charge to which one Benzie (follower of Bwiti) made the rather splendid reply, 'We dig the wells that provide the waters of eternal life, not the wells that slake the thirst of District Chiefs.' As this suggests, Bwiti had acquired a considerable amount of Christian idiom, although James Fernandez argues, I think rightly, that it is not a Christian movement. Bwiti also split into a number of branches, and there was a good deal of switching between them. Its support varied numerically from area to area, between 6% and 13% of the total population, as against 70 to 80% of adherence (including purely nominal adhesion) to mission Christianity.

To understand what Bwiti is, we need to understand what Bwiti is not. It is not a messianic sect, nor is it concerned with curing specific diseases, nor does it try to detect, and then to exorcize, witches. It seeks primarily a shift of consciousness. James Fernandez, having quoted a Bwiti prayer, 'O Father God, we are in a state of despair and misfortune', contrasts 'that despairing sense of disarray, misfortune and disorder' with 'the promise of escape from the state of despairing sinfulness and the achievement of a state of grace (*abora*)—essentially a state of satisfaction in one's situation and confidence in one's enterprises', which Bwiti promises to its adherents. He further describes

the major shift proposed by Bwiti to its adherents as being from despair to grace and from corporeality to spirituality. With this go other shifts, from turbulence to tranquillity, from sexual indulgence to sexual purity, and from sloth to industry.[8]

Is Bwiti, then, an other-worldly moralistic cult, offering its devotees nice feelings in this world and bliss in the next? Not entirely, for there is a promise of good health and fertility consequent on the change of consciousness, and, more positively, an attempt to tackle the malaise in the relations between the sexes, not so much through exhortation as by symbolic complementarity in ritual, a feature uncharacteristic of the old Fang religion. At the conclusion of the weekly night-long *engosie* ritual, there is a tug of war between men and women, followed by a 'jocular bout of aggressive backslapping between the sexes'. This is not merely good, clean fun, rather it is an enacted parable of how the apparent oppositions between men and women both conceal and generate a fundamental unity. Another such symbol of complementarity is the danced entrance of the women to the Bwiti chapel during the *engosie*. In front are the older women, dressed entirely in white, followed by the younger women in red and white. The older women are grouped round the senior woman of the chapel, who carries in her hand a red pebble, supposedly sent down by Nyingwan, female principle of the world, on a moonbeam. In Bwiti, this symbolizes menstruation. The women in white are there in their own right as experienced in childbirth, and as symbolic moonbeams, to introduce the younger women to 'the good luck of the womb'. And the women are seen as bringing back to the men the insemination which the men have given them, a point often made by seizing a male dance leader and keeping him prisoner, an act promising fertility for all.

But the aim of fruitful reconciliation between men and women is only part of a yet wider project of reconciliation between 'God above' (the Biblical God of missionary teaching) and 'God below' (not a single person, so much as the totality of the traditional cults, particularly the ancestor cult). Even the God above is seen in Bwiti very much in the context of Fang mythology. The two children of Mebege the Creator, the male Zame and the female Nyingwan, are now, in some versions at least, joined by a third sibling, Nlona, a Satan figure and father of witchcraft, who constantly endeavours to create antagonism between men and women. But Fang mythology is then caught up in the Biblical history of salvation. In one account Adam and Eve are created by Zame and Nyingwan working together, in another they are incarnations of Zame and Nyingwan. The fall, caused by Nlona's tempting, is seen as a loss of that harmony between men and women that Bwiti seeks to restore. Their sin was one of incest, which is atoned for when they are reincarnated as Jesus and Mary.[9]

Here we come to the difficult question of Bwiti Christology. James Fernandez considers that the history of salvation is mythologized rather than Fang mythology biblicized. When Banzie (adherents of Bwiti) say that Jesus is the second Adam and Mary the second Eve, they are stressing a genealogical continuity under external changes, rather than a redemptive transformation. However, James Fernandez recognizes that in Bwiti liturgies Christ, often referred to as He who sees God or the Child of Man, has become much more central. 'It is his humanity that is featured, for in his self-sacrifice he showed men how "to suffer", how to face the state of despair (*engongol*) which is a constant preoccupation of Bwiti—He saves Bwiti by showing them how to tread the path of birth and death in order to reach God.' Despite all this, James Fernandez insists that Bwiti is not Christocentric, since communication with the ancestors remains the central object of Bwiti. Banzie told James Fernandez that 'all men search for God, but most men commit the sin of searching too far for him. God is first of all close by in the presence of the ancestral dead'. If there is a central deity in Bwiti, it is Nyingwan, 'sister of God and universal matrix and source of knowledge'.[10] James Fernandez knows Bwiti and the Fang and I do not, but his own excellent documentation of the Bwiti *engosie* makes it clear that the Bwiti Christ is a saviour not merely in the sense of one who has pioneered a path which others can follow, but also in the sense of one who has brought out of prison the souls of the Fang ancestors. This seems to be a reminiscence of missionary sermons on I Peter 3: 18—19, but it also suggests, as does much else in the book, that the Banzie accept much in the missionary critique of Fang culture, but are searching for a redemption which would operate retrospectively, as indeed theologians tell us redemption does.

But what exactly is this redemption? Banzie look forward to joining their ancestors, but their idea of the afterlife seems influenced by Christian teaching. However, there is another aspect to Fang views of the afterlife—namely, the belief that Africans are reborn as Europeans, a belief which indeed is widespread down the western equatorial coast of Africa, and which may have originated in a pre-colonial association of spirits with light colouring. For Banzie, Europeans are those who 'have paid the earth', that is, have paid God for the earth God gave them, whereas Africans have not done so, and remain 'earthy'.[11] But this assertion has as corollary another one, that mission Christianity is inappropriate for Africans, who can, however, learn to 'pay the earth' through Bwiti. What the Banzie are implicitly saying is that redemption, even that gained by He who sees God, has to be mediated through forms appropriate to each culture, and that salvation has to be a collective salvation, which reaches back in time.

But why exactly is missionary Christianity unsuited to the Fang? The missionaries are not accused of dishonesty or insincerity; rather,

Christianity appears to the Banzie as a religion of the word (which, of course, it is) whereas the Fang learn by the eyes, and the initiation ceremony includes the taking of the drug *eboga* in sufficient quantities to produce visions of the next world. James Fernandez stresses that this taking of *eboga* is very carefully controlled, and, though *eboga* may be subsequently taken in small quantities as a stimulant, Bwiti is not characterized by drug addiction.[12] Nevertheless, it is surely here, in the desire for sight rather than faith, that Bwiti is most definitely non-Christian, even if, as I have argued, much of the liturgy is Christocentric. Perhaps it would not be altogether unfair to compare Bwiti with some of the sects of the early Christian period, which it resembles in a variety of ways, ranging from the emphasis on knowing to the attempt to give women a significant role in liturgy. It was indeed a great pity that there was no second-century James Fernandez around to study Gnosticism.

But James Fernandez does not offer any theological assessment of Bwiti. His approach is, as said earlier, Ruskinian, because he is concerned to show that Bwiti is a coherent system at the level of aesthetic experience and apt metaphor, rather than at that of institutions or conceptual thought. This is very well illustrated by the analysis of chapel architecture, by which the chapel is earthed in ritual space and mythical time, and by the study of Bwiti preaching, neither catechetical nor hortatory, but rather weaving a web of metaphors by which the different aspects of the world will be linked.[13] Perhaps this is the real lesson of Bwiti for a wider world, that the aesthetic and the metaphorical modes of religious communication are as necessary as the theological and the organizational.

How does this relate to what Jon Kirby had to tell us about the Anufo? The two religions seems to represent the empirical and rational strands of African religious consciousness, and Kirby's book seems to support Robin Horton's thesis that African religious thought is a kind of proto-scientific thought, which, with widening social boundaries, tends towards monotheism.[14] But, while Horton has stressed the impact of macrocosmic force on microcosmic societies, there is also, as James Fernandez has shown, the possibility that the microcosmic society may seek to interpret the macrocosm in its own terms, through perception rather than ideology. Our knowledge of the world is lop-sided unless we try both to analyse and to perceive its diversity and its unity.

1 For an intriguing discussion of this point in the Sinhalese case see R.L. Stirrat, 'The Shrine of St Sebastian at Mirisgama'. *Man* NS Vol 16 (1981), pp. 183—200.

2 Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies,* SCM, 1985, pp 151—158.

3 Collectanea Instituti Anthropos, Dietrich Reimer Verlag, Berlin, 1986, pp 368, DM 85.

4 Princeton University Press, Princeton and Guildford, 1981, limited paperback edition, pp xxiv and 731, £19.

5 *La Notion de Personne en Afrique Noire* (edited by Germaine Dieterlen, Centre

Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, 1973) has many essays on the African understanding of the self.

6 See the second edition of Meyer Fortes' *Oedipus and Job*, with an additional essay by Robin Horton (Cambridge University Press, 1984).

7 Notably J.H.M. Beattie. See his 'On understanding ritual', in Bryan Wilson, *Rationality*, Blackwell, 1970.

8 Fernandez, op. cit, pp. 304, 309.

9 Robert Schreiter's statement (Schreiter, op. cit, p. 96) that 'Many African cultures do not have a story of the Fall' is true, but then many African cultures do not have myths of human origins. The majority of African myths of human origins seem to have some story of a fall.

10 Fernandez, op. cit, p 341.

11 Fernandez, op. cit, p 305.

12 Fernandez, op. cit, p 474—5.

13 See chapter 19 in Fernandez for the Bwiti practice and theory of preaching. All the forms of Bwiti studied by James Fernandez were evidently influenced by Catholicism. Some Protestant catechists had gone over to Bwiti, and one wonders what 'Protestant' Bwiti is like. Presumably it would have much more stress on the Bible, as distinct from Bible stories.

14 Robin Horton, 'African Traditional Thought and Western Science', *Africa* 37 (1967), 50—71, 155—8, and 'On the Rationality of Conversion', *Africa* 45 (1975), 219—235, 373—397).

# Back to the Ark

Susan Dowell

The alarming resurgence of biblical speculation by the nuclear war-lords of the West in the last few years has drawn peace-movement Christians to sober biblical scholarship. *New Blackfriars* writers[1] have pioneered the reclamation of 'the most symbolically-rich eschatological language of the Bible, from Isaiah to Revelation, ... captured by abstentionist sects and a politically hostile movement' and made 'virtually unavailable to Christians who do not share those views about politics and God's action in the world'.



https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb01301.x Published online by Cambridge University Press