



WITCHCRAFT: AN INTEGRAL PART OF INCULTURATION

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I was asked to write an article for the Petit Echo. Why not ask ourselves the bold question: what will Christianity be like one hundred years from now if we continue along the way we are following? We are hemmed in between two towering cliffs. The cliff facing us, the future, sends back an echo and we turn instinctively our heads, only to be staring at the cliff at our backs, the past. At the beginning of the 20th century there were already voices that opposed the future and the past, saying: "Where are we going if we continue to follow Bishop Dupont 'Motomoto'?"

The Echo of the Past

In 1900 the man who had opened up the country of the Bemba in 1898 to the Europeans and to Christianity, Bishop Joseph Dupont, went back to Europe for health reasons. When he came back four years later, the Mission had developed and had the beginnings of organisation. Bishop Dupont had to put up with the criticism of influential White Fathers who accused him of having sought popularity and of having exceeded the limits of the 'odious' (letter of 16-10-1904).

What was it that was so odious? The reading of the very first diary of Kayambi Mission and of the Quarterly Reports is most thrilling. We discover that Motomoto was at Kayambi for only a very short time before he passed himself off as a witchdoctor. It was on August 11, 1895, and he was attending a case of trial by poison. He challenged the wizards sitting around to gouge out one of his eyes, as they had boasted they could. Nothing happened, but the conclusion drawn by the spectators and the chiefs was clear: Motomoto enjoyed magical powers. The same evening the local chief and two of his counsellors came to ask Motomoto for a 'remedy'—understand here a magical remedy—against wizards and witches capable of casting evil spells. Dupont entered into the spirit of the thing: he read St John's Prologue over their heads, sprinkled them with Holy Water, and gave each one of them a medal of the Blessed Virgin Mary.



The pioneer missionaries saw witchcraft everywhere. They did not make any distinction between cultural practices, healing performances, funeral dances and rites, or dances and rites commemorating past events, etc. They were wont to point out that the people saw everything and interpreted everything in the light of magic, even the missionaries and their activities (Foulon 1907). Yet, the missionaries themselves were wont to give remedies against witchcraft (remedies necessarily magical in the eyes of the recipients), as clearly shown in Motomoto's attitude on August 11, 1898, referenced above. This was the first case, many others followed at an ever-increasing frequency. On February 19, 1896, on Ash Wednesday the missionaries distributed the blessed ashes to the neophytes and the pagans alike, including the local chief (a hard-boiled pagan). On December 1896 the missionaries blessed seeds in the presence of the chief and the people, using a handful of branches with leaves, which they dipped in the holy water stoop to sprinkle the seeds with. Some of the leaves fell off, and the people swooped on them, picked them up swiftly, and tore them into shreds, which they shared among themselves to bury them among their handful of seeds. On March 21, 1897, swarms of locusts swooped down on the fields of the mission at Kayambi. Motomoto rushed for his Latin Ritual and recited the exorcist prayer provided for such an occasion. He noted in his report: "In less than a quarter of an hour the locusts had vacated our fields without causing any damage, to the utter bewilderment of the villagers."

The diary dwells on the liturgical ceremonies and the religious feasts. In both cases the missionaries presented themselves as the celebrants of a new worship. In the eyes of the people, however, those 'bashimapepo' or ministers of religion were viewed against the only background they knew, their own. Now, in their view of the world, the power of the 'bashimapepo' went hand in hand with the other powers in Bemba society. If the missionaries ordered their workers to fell a huge tree, which was traditionally believed to be the dwelling place of a local spirit or 'ngulu', they showed they were more powerful than the 'ngulu' (incident recorded on 28-04-1896). The missionaries went hunting without any amulet (25-04-1896). They were wizards who could pick up the trail of a child lost in the bush (30-04-1896). But the missionaries were to be feared, for they could cause death with their baptism (23-04-1896) or by simple physical contact (01-05-1896). On July 30, 1896, they were accused in public of being 'baloshi', i.e. sorcerers casting evil spells on people. Finally in 1898 Bishop Dupont was made a 'mfumu'—a chief—by the dying Mwamba, and therefore a man with magical powers at his disposal.

Bishop Dupont's personality played an essential role in the events that marked the beginning of the Mission. He was from the agricultural region of Vendée in France, and he had personal experience of what 'popular religion' (religion as understood and lived by the commoners in France) meant. No wonder that, once in Africa, he was naturally inclined to meet the Africans on their own ground, using the ritual, the liturgy, the para-liturgical



practices, the medals, the blessings, etc., as proven gadgets of popular religion. No wonder that the pioneer missionaries made great use of the Roman Ritual. How far were they prepared to go to replace pagan rites with Christian rites? A text written at that time (1899–1900) is found in the Quarterly Reports of the White Fathers, No. 91, 1901, pp. 100–101 (English Translation in the Lusaka Archives, CT 33). It is a letter of Fr Foulon in which he wrote: “The people make their gardens by lopping trees and piling up the branches on the emplacement chosen for their gardens. At the proper time the witch-doctor sets fire to the heap of dry branches, but not before having performed certain rites and intoned certain incantations. What do the people do when there is no witch-doctor available? There is no problem there, *we shall take the place of the witch-doctors and bless the fire by invoking Lesa. Indeed the following Sunday we proceeded with the ceremony of the blessing of the fire according to the Roman Ritual in the presence of the whole congregation. Everybody came to help himself or herself to the blazing fire and rushed to kindle the pile of branches on his or her own patch. The ashes serve as fertiliser in which the seeds of millet are thrown. This is the way that Christian customs will little by little take root in the country.*”

Apparently this attitude did not meet with the approval of all the missionaries. One boasted in a letter to Bishop Dupont in 1904 that those attempts at replacing pagan rituals by Christian rituals had stopped, and Bishop Dupont felt deeply frustrated. The following year (1905) he issued liturgical regulations applicable in his Vicariate, pointing out that he was only carrying out his duty as a bishop. In 1908 the Council of the Vicariate codified the line to follow in this matter. Only the solemn blessing of the ashes on Ash Wednesday and the solemn blessing of the palms on Palm Sunday were allowed in the new ritual in use in the Vicariate. The Council, however, did not forbid the other blessings recorded in the Roman Ritual, but on condition they would be used privately (blessing of the seeds, blessing of a house, etc.). The White Fathers in the Nyasa Vicariate had taken a step backwards. But for was essential, the accent was still on Christian formation and instruction of the neophytes and on the role of the catechists in the pastoral field.

The question we asked at the beginning of this article could be worded this way: “What will Christianity look like in one hundred years from now *if we follow in the footsteps of our predecessors, who were at first fully conscious of the mentality of the people and tried to integrate it in their pastoral ministry, but who after a while ignored it completely and built for them an alien church?*”



The Future

When we face the problem of witchcraft—the problem of evil and death—the ‘Christian overcoat’ (as an old Bemba wise man called it once) we wear so ostentatiously to cover everything slips off our priestly shoulders as smoothly as from the shoulders of the ordinary Christians. We stand naked before this phenomenon, because we are confronted with what is essential: to join Christ in his mystery of death and resurrection. Our ready-made ideas and concepts, whether Christian or non-Christian, do not tally anymore because they do not correspond to our expectation.

We must be sure of what we are talking about when we broach the topic of witchcraft. In modern scientific English the word ‘witchcraft’ is synonymous with evil. A witch-doctor is a murderer of the soul as well as of the body. English further distinguishes between ‘wizardry’ (magic power) and ‘sorcery’ (the art, use or practice of magic with evil spirits). Let us take the word ‘witchcraft’ in its generic meaning, covering wizardry as well as sorcery, i.e. **the mentality accepting the existence of a magic world with its beliefs, rites, interdicts, and customs, and the practical consequences of this acceptance for the people who share this mentality.** This definition is more in accordance with the Bemba reality.

The Bemba-speaking people use two different words to refer to witchcraft. One is ‘*inghanga*’, which means diviner, magician, healer, or witch-hunter. The other is ‘*muloshi*’, which means a sorcerer, a person who casts evil spells. Any human being, man or woman, chief or commoner, diviner or minister of cult, can be suspected and accused of being a sorcerer, whether he or she is conscious or unconscious of his or her evil power or ‘*bwanga*’. In society we must preserve and defend ourselves against those people, and in case of evil suddenly befalling society, we must ferret them out and neutralise them. The work of hunting the sorcerers and neutralising them is the work of the ‘*inghanga*’, the expert in ‘*bwanga*’ or evil power, or the work of people who share similar privileges, like the ‘*mucapi*’ or professional witch-hunter whose specialty is to clean entire villages of sorcerers. This work against the sorcerers is normally carried out under the control of the ‘*imfumu*’, the chief, who is the vital link with the ancestors.

When the word witchdoctor is used in the context of the Bemba language and background, reference is made to any and to all the various types of people with magic power invoked above. Witchcraft is then looked upon as a system of thought regarding life and the evils therein, more particularly death. Witchcraft is the traditional system of social control over the eventual manipulators of magic power and magic practices (‘*ifya-bwanga*’) for selfish



aims with anti-social goals in view. *That is what we ought to integrate in the Good News.* We have failed so far to turn witchcraft to our own advantage in preaching the Gospel.

The aim of preaching the Gospel, is it not to lift up the people towards Christ in his mystery of death and resurrection? Is it not to bring Christians and non-Christians together in this mystery in the hard reality of their daily life? Witchcraft and the beliefs attached thereto are a mystery of suffering and death. Why not bring the people face to face with the death and resurrection of Christ against the background of witchcraft? Against this background faith is no longer submission to authority and unconditional acceptance of a doctrine, but immersion (baptism) in Christ's death, the source of life. The Church's teaching and authority, whether they are personified in the priest, in the catechist, or in lay people with a position of responsibility are no longer sufficient to convince people. The people must be sensitized deep down in their mentality. To obtain this result their attitude towards evil, suffering and death is of a capital importance in the understanding of this mentality. This result can be achieved only through the knowledge of witchcraft.

Conversion

We live at a time when various religious beliefs and doctrines endeavour to meet for a better understanding of one another. Ought we not, first and foremost, to acknowledge the existence of this mentality—not to say philosophy—revealed by witchcraft, and which is deeply anchored in the people who believe in witchcraft? Ought we not to be on the same wavelength as the people we want to convert are? In other words, ought we not to make an effort to meet these people on their own ground? In answer to the question we asked at the beginning of this article, ought we not to admit that we cannot continue to think and act as we are doing in relation to witchcraft?

Some among the priests are scared of witchcraft, others ignore it as a secondary problem and adopt a policy of *laissez faire*, others wage war against it in collaboration with the government and the police and by so doing alienate the populations. In another group of priests, who probably form the majority, there are two tendencies. There are the ministers of religion who are for liturgical worship in the form of ceremonies, rites and sacraments (Catholics) or in the form of preaching the Word of God (Protestants). There are the ministers of religion who are more for social action, for running courses and seminars, for waging campaigns for a just cause (justice and peace, for example), and for whom worship is of secondary importance (even non-existent), and ethics everything. All these approaches to religion seem to ignore the fact that a whole section of mankind is still living in the grips of



deep-seated fear caused by their belief in witchcraft. Witchcraft is a test, for the Christians and for us.

If we are to enter into close communication with this mentality in which witchcraft still holds a prominent position, it is with a view to going further than the illusory and ephemeral security it offers without breaking contact with it. It is with a view to preaching Christ and his liberating power as the only alternative to reach the roots of this mentality, the only chance to give evangelisation a new lease of life.