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THE concepts of "consensus" and "symbol," like the proverb to non-literate peoples, appear to be for many students of human behavior work horses of theoretical discourse. Like the proverb, however, these concepts are ambiguous and almost always carry more weight than is analytically useful. Symbols surround us and when, for example, White argues that "all culture depends upon the symbol" (1944:235) we readily assent to their importance if we do not quite still grasp their meaning.² As for consensus, we see its consequences clearly enough. But, beyond the raising of hands or some other significant statement of allegiance and cohesion, do we really understand what is taking place in act of consensus? In fact, culture is not something of which everyone carries an equal burden, and the study of symbolic consensus can demonstrate the disparate portions which culture-carriers appropriate or are assigned, and the dynamic consequences that proceed therefrom.

In an attempt to contribute to the understanding of these two terms and their relationship, I propose to employ them in discussing the religious ritual of an African reformative cult. I shall avoid such rubrics as "common value attitudes," or "shared frame of reference," or "collective representations." In examining certain features of the cult, I shall keep in mind Sapir's argument that communication is identical with the cultural process and his catch phrase—"the essence of culture is understanding" (1931:78). I shall, in part, dispute and, in part, qualify Park's long-standing contention that "communication operates primarily as an integrating and socializing principle." (1938:195). The distinction between signals, signs, and symbols will be integral to the discussion.

The reformative cult in question, Bwiti, appears among the Fang peoples of northern Gabon and the Spanish African territory, Rio Muni. It is a minority movement and not more than 10 per cent of the population are involved. When first in evidence at the turn of the century and until the Second World War the cult represented a reworking of the Fang ancestral cult, *bieri*. This was accomplished by the borrowing, almost entirely within the African tradition, of elements of ritual and belief from the ancestor cults of adjacent Northwestern Bantu peoples whom the Fang had been historically displacing in southwestern migration. There is a similarity of features in the ancestral cults of all the Gabonese Bantu but sufficient difference in detail as to provoke attention and elicit comparison. In the eyes of Fang reformativists the cult life of the southern Gabonese peoples, most notably the Metsogo and the Baloumbo, was more elaborate and more dramatic. In the context of the increasing frustration and religious

limitations of colonial controls, it was more effective in establishing contact with ancestral forces, themselves increasingly distant and increasingly compromised by lower and higher powers: witchcraft on the one hand, and God and the saints of Catholic Christianity on the other. It is only in the last 20 years, however, that a direct coming-to-terms with missionary Christianity has been attempted. But syncretism in this phase has been rapid. Many Christian elements have been incorporated. A Christian calendar has been adopted.

As is typical in almost all the African religious movements, fission is frequent and has produced polymorphism: (Veciana 1957:11) a variety of sub-cults. There are five main sub-cults of Bwiti among the Fang. The data here is taken from the principal sub-cult—*Dissoumba* of *Asumege Ening*, which separated from the parent tradition in the late 1930's and by 1960 was the major cult. It is found primarily in Gabon.

It is useful in categorizing African religious movements to think of two continuums on a bi-axial coordinate system (Fernandez 1964). On one continuum we mark the tendency toward nativism or the return to African tradition, on the one hand, and separatism or the acceptance of imported, usually Christian, elements on the other. The second continuum marks realism-rationalism, that is the instrumental search for satisfaction on the one pole as against the elaboration of a projective system, the search for expressive satisfactions on the other. At the present time, Bwiti, as a reformative movement compared with other African religious movements, occupies a median position, on both continuums. It is more nativistic than Kimbanguisme (Raymaekers; 1959); less nativistic than the Shembe movement in South Africa (Sundkler 1961); more instrumental than either of these two movements but much more concerned with expressive satisfactions than the National Church of Nigeria and the Cameroons (Parinder 1953) or any of the "rebel" churches described for Uganda by Welbourn (1961). The *Asumege Ening* branch of the Bwiti cult with which we are concerned here is more nativistic and more expressive than all but one of the other Bwiti sub-cults. It frequently re-introduces by-gone Fang rituals and it has elaborated a complex cosmology and liturgy with which it is preoccupied.

Bwiti, like revitalization movements in general (Wallace 1956:265), and reformative movements in particular, is characterized in its leadership by a deliberate, organized, conscious effort to construct a more satisfying culture. Leaders of the cult give evidence of this, for they sometimes visit Catholic or Protestant services or other cults with the express intention of discovering materials suitable for the further elaboration of their own cult life. *Asumege Ening* in Fang means "beginning of life," and cult leaders frequently detail their responsibilities in the idiom of reconstruction. They are aware that they are rebuilding in a new way something which has been destroyed. Not all the members of the cult, it is to be remarked, take this "promethean" view of their responsibilities to the culture of the cult, and what remains to be seen below is the extent to which they are "conscious" of reconstructive revitalization. We must also keep in mind for the purposes of the ensuing discussion that this conscious search results in a rapid turnover of beliefs and liturgical elements. The dynamic of

the symbol system is intensive; this is not unusual for revitalization movements, though unusual for religion in general which tends in its "church" as opposed to its "sect" form, to be fairly conservative in this respect.

The observations on the behavior of cult members in respect to their symbol system detailed here are based on participation in the life of two cult houses (*aba eboka*): six months were spent in a peripheral, recently founded *Asamege* *Ening* house in Sougoudzap, Wolou-Ntem, northern Gabon; and three months were spent in a founding house in Kougouletou, Kango, central Gabon. The latter was a point of origination for most but not all of the practices of the former. There were eleven members in the Sougoudzap cult house, six men and five women. At Kougouletou, 42 participants, 18 men and 24 women, danced the religion that calls the ancestors back from the deep forest, steps over death and discovers God (*Zame ye Melege*) and his sister (*Nyingungwan Melege*). Direct inquiry as to the meaning of cult symbolism was not pursued throughout this period but in both cases at a quiescent period of cult life. Observations in periods of turmoil complement this more intensive research. Twenty full members of the cult with whom the ethnographer had established fairly confidential relationships were queried extensively, and it is the views of these 20 that we refer to here below. They represented all echelons of the cult.³

On the face of it, consensus prevailed in both of these cult houses, for all participants who were queried emphatically subscribed to the efficacy of the ritual involved. All informants believed that participation in the night-long ritual led to a state of *nlem-mvoro* (one-heartedness), uniting all members of the cult. It seems appropriate to take this achievement of *nlem mvoro* as the achievement of consensus. Informants frequently characterized this state as one in which *bot ba wogan* (people understand each other). Since this common understanding is obtained by ritual means, that is, apparently, by the ritual manipulation of symbols, and is itself achieved by a particular ritual, we may wish to call *nlem mvoro* symbolic consensus. In any case, the state of *nlem mvoro* indicates a high degree of social solidarity among cult participants. The degree to which understanding prevails among the membership in any logico-meaningful sense remains to be examined.

The achievement of this state, it must be pointed out, is remarkable both from the perspective of the Fang as well as that of the ethnographer. This is so because the growth of economic individualism and the abandonment of old ceremonial institutions has meant a great increase, in contemporary Fang life, of mutual distrust and suspicion unalleviated by the traditional forms of ritual reintegration. This has been especially the case within the kin group (*mwogabot*—village of patrilineally related people) where the traditional high expectation of solidarity has been most painfully disbursed.⁴ Cult members boast of the achievement of *nlem mvoro* as one of the great virtues of Bwiti. Naturally enough, Fang outside the cult, recognizing their own contemporary problems in fraternal interrelationships, are frankly skeptical that anything approaching "one heart" can any longer be obtained in Fang affairs. If we regard the penetration of "one heartedness" into social relationships outside the specific ceremonial

context, a two-to-three-day period occurring several times a month, we find some reason for this skepticism. The members of Bwiti (*banzie*) themselves recognize that the ritual achievement of *nlem mvoro* is not pervasive in their interrelationships outside the ceremonial period. But they explain that it is the building up of "bad-heartedness" (*nlem abe*) in between times that provides one important reason for holding the Bwiti ceremonies again. In any case we are not concerned with the state of consensus outside the ceremonial context. Within it, participants maintain, it is effectively achieved.

The state of *nlem mvoro* is ritually obtained in the following manner. Cult ritual commences at six in the evening and concludes at six in the morning. Dancing is continuous after 9:00 p.m. when preliminary ceremonies have purified the chapel, except for a lull at midnight and at 3:00 a.m. when prayers are addressed directly to the ancestors and to God. An alkaloid intoxicant, *eboga* (*Tabernanthes eboka*), is taken in moderate amounts to achieve an ecstatic state, though alienation is rarely so complete as to produce possession. In fact, and this is an anomaly in African religious movements, possession is regarded as impeding proper ritual development—it is considered unaesthetic. Nevertheless, the intoxicant is taken, to translate directly from the Fang, "in order to make the body light and to enable the soul to fly." The spiritual world—*man ye ezi ayat*—does not, in this cult, come to possess the worshipper. It is, rather, the worshipper who must leave himself in order to make contact with the unseen.

The ritual—its Christian influences will be noted⁵—is two-phased. From six until midnight the members of Bwiti dance creation and birth: the creation of the world and the creation of man, as well as the birth of Adam and the birth of Christ are all thematically developed in the song and dance but are not systematically distinguished. These themes are not, in other words, presented serially but simultaneously. Hence, analysis must consider levels of meaning at any given moment of the ritual. Members of the cult, as we shall point out, differ in the extent to which they appreciate and achieve logicoaesthetic integration of these various levels of meaning.

After midnight we witness dancing representing death and destruction: the destruction of man's hopes in a benign world, the death of Christ, the expulsion from paradise, the flight from the savannah into the rain forest (a symbolic recreation of the actual Fang migration experience), and the passage from day into night. It is also after midnight that the membership establishes reunion—*eamba*—with the ancestor spirits which have been attracted into the cult house from the deep forest. It is in this reunion that the distinction between the living and the dead, and more important for us here, the distinction between the individual living cult members, is obliterated. All become *nlem mvoro*—one heart.

One particular ritual symbolizes this achievement. In the early hours of the morning the membership, carrying small pitch torches, line up in single file, closely compressed. In company to the subdued strumming of the native harp, *ngombi*, they file out of the chapel into the village, thence into the forest following a network of narrow cleared paths. They go out, it is said, in search for those lingering ancestors who have not responded to the dramatic invitations

extended to them from the cult house previously in the evening. After brief circulation in the forest they return to the cult house, maintaining the prescribed decorum. Here the leader, separating the harp player from the line, begins to turn it into a tighter and tighter circle. Shortly, all members are folded into a solid mass with torches held high above their heads where the individual flames unite in a single fire. They intone a low sign of satisfaction. "One-heartedness" is achieved.

This ritual is profoundly significant to the membership and, we repeat, all of the members among whom intensive research was carried forth testified to its efficacy. It does something for them which they find satisfying. It accomplishes for them a change of state—a cessation of felt deprivation and anxiety if one wishes—even if this only be temporary.

At this point, however, the data from extensive discussion with the 20 cult members in question reminds us of the fact of variation in the individual interpretation of commonly experienced phenomena. The field notes of any anthropologist regularly betray this fact of variation and we are quite accustomed to it though it may constitute an inconvenience in the face of such unitary terms as society and culture and a difficult-to-suppress tendency to think in terms of the group mind. It is a fact of field work that bears closer scrutiny than we have heretofore given it. In any case the individual data from the 20 members of Bwiti call into question the nature of the consensus that seems to have been so clearly established among them.

While all cult members recognized that the commonality of one heart was a remarkable consequence of cult ritual, only half of these informants recognized that the particular ritual described above symbolized the creation of *nlem mporo*. Moreover, it appears that the cult in the eyes of the members queried had a number of manifest functions and that these members differ in assigning priorities to, or even recognizing, these various functions. Of the 20 cult members, seven said that the main purpose of the ritual was to find and establish proper relationship with the Christian God who lies behind death and of whom the Fang had no traditional knowledge. Eight said that the main purpose of the cult was to reestablish contact with the abandoned ancestors and regain their tutelary blessing. The remaining three informants declared the purpose of the cult ritual to be various: guaranteeing the well being and tranquility (*mwuaa*) of the village, demonstrating to the European the validity of an African religion, and curing the individual illnesses of the worshippers.

A careful consultation with cult members turns up, therefore, considerable variance in the rationale of their participation. It should not be presumed, of course, that members have but one reason for participation. In fact, prolonged discussion with the individual informant almost always turned up a number of objectives to be reached through cult ritual. And though the individual may give priority to one, he will usually concede the validity of another's reasons for participation. What we find, ideologically, in the cult, then, is a congeries of purposes. Individuals select among these purposes apparently those that most suit their temperaments and most speak to their condition.

If we should ask how it is that cooperative participation continues in cult ritual despite a lack of consensus at this level, the obvious answer is that a cult rationale or charter is rarely explicitly stated, or if stated is phrased in such general terms as not to offend or exclude the particular purposes of various individuals. Secondly, and this is particularly true for the older cult house at Kougoulen, the participants rarely discuss or debate the rationale and are content that it should be taken for granted. Only cult leaders concern themselves with such matters, in competition with other cult leaders for membership—and in discussion with the ethnographer. In the Kougoulen cult we may even speak of a patterned avoidance of such ideological issues. Of such issues it is said: "We speak here with one voice," (*nkin da*) and the inquiry is then referred to the leader of the cult. It may even be argued that this patterned avoidance is a greater guarantee of integration and ongoing participation in cult life than the occasional expressions of egalitarian tolerance one gets from participants when they are confronted, usually by the ethnographer, with evidence of other, differing rationales.

These facts bring to mind Malinowski's concise definition of an institution as a group of people united by a purpose into an organization capable of achieving that purpose, (1944:39 ff.). Malinowski also speaks of the institutional charter as a set of ideas validating the purpose to be achieved. Integration in the cult is high, if we mean by that the degree to which participants fulfill their ritual role expectations and claim to derive satisfaction in so doing. Yet it is difficult to say that they are by consensus united around any given purpose or even that the articulation of a purpose in the form of the charter is felt necessary to the majority of participants. Perhaps one should speak of the purpose as a feeling of satisfaction offered through social solidarity, but a feeling is not a purpose until articulated to be so and it is only the ethnographer and not the Fang who could make such a statement. In short, Malinowski's definition of an institution in terms of a purpose seems too greatly to intellectualize the nature of integration that obtains within the institutions discussed here. The difficulty to which we shall return arises from the fact that we are dealing with two different kinds of integration—social and cultural.

The same ideological variability accompanying ritual behavior is, as we have already indicated, evident in respect to the ritual symbols involved. It is well accepted that a common system of symbols interpreted in a common way is a prime requisite for an integrated social system. It may be said that confidence in the appropriateness of one's own behavior, and security in the interpretation of others' behavior is obtained, in part, according to the symbols which accompany that behavior. In checking with informants we again find, however, considerable variation as to the interpretation of the key symbols involved. We are led to observe that in respect to this syncretistic social system, though common symbols are indeed necessary for integration, interpretation of these symbols in a common way is not a prime requisite.

One of the key symbols, for example, is the native harp (Fig. 1) (*ngombi*)—the central instrument in cult activity and the symbol which is borne out into

