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REVITALIZED WORDS FROM "THE PARROT'S EGG" AND
"THE BULL THAT CRASHES IN THE KRAAL":
AFRICAN CULT SERMONS¹

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"The Word was made flesh and dwelt
among us" (Revelation 19:12-13).

"Does one think in language? One
thinks rather in images. It is
Joyce's error--a rush of words,
without punctuation, that attempts
to express the interior language.
But people don't think like that"
(V. Nabokov).

An interesting emergence in many if not all of the so-called higher religions is the institution of preaching. No doubt sheer religious activity, the ritual act, must everywhere be brought into meaningful association with some exegetical body of knowledge. We have plenty of anthropological evidence of instruction and exhortation during periods of religious ceremony--more particularly perhaps during rituals of passage. But such a concentrated crucible of charismatic proclamation and ecclesiastical instruction as we see, for example, in Christian preaching would seem to be dependent upon a degree of priestly specialization and intellectualization of worship quite unusual in most anthropological data. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, however, as our scriptural text proclaims, the Word is primordial. And this original emphasis upon logos in worship has been further energized in Protestantism by Luther's injunction that "the Word and the Word alone is the vehicle of Grace."

Recently, as part of ongoing research into African Religious Movements (Fernandez 1964) I have been hearing some preaching--have even been preached at. In these movements--revitalistic in much of their attempt to create a new and more satisfying culture for their adherents--we find independently derived syncretisms of Christianity and traditional African religion. From any Christian perspective these syncretisms tend towards the ritualistic (Sundkler 1961:180-182), so entirely given over to kinesthetic expression in ritual, dance and song as to have given up that grappling with the "logos" which is so defining a feature of much of African missionary Christianity. It is true that the membership of these cults would adhere primarily to the precept that he who knows the power of the dance dwells in God, choosing to experience the supernatural in direct activity rather than to consider it through the vehicle of words.

Nevertheless in a good many African cultures, and certainly in the ones in which I have done work, there is position and prestige attached to rhetorical skills and oratorical powers (Fernandez 1966b). This emphasis has been syncretized within the cults with the Christian emphasis on preaching. The resulting sermons may not be as central and crucial to worship as they are in the Christian Church, nevertheless they cannot be ignored in the role they play in the member's religious experience. These sermons also provide an arena for verbal art--the artful use of words. Here we shall take an interest in some aspects of this artfulness. These sermons are testimonies to the Word becoming flesh, but we shall be really interested in how the flesh becomes word.

We shall examine sermons characteristic of two remarkable cult leaders: Ekang Engono, creative leader (Nima na Kombo) of the Asumege Ening Bwiti chapel, headquartered in 1960 at Kougoulou, Kango, Gabon; and William Richmond, minister and bishop (mfundisi, umbishopi) of the Church of God in Christ (CGC), headquartered in 1965 in Sydenham, Durban, South Africa. Both of these men preach in their vernacular, Ekang Engono in the Meke dialect of the Fang language and William Richmond in the Zulu proper of Zululand north of the Tugela. Neither of these men speak the dominant European languages of their country, French and English respectively, with any confidence and their sermons are entirely in the vernacular.² We are aware that a speech event is much more than that corpus which is the traditional material of linguistic analysis (Hymes 1964), and we shall be paying attention to more than the text itself. We shall first of all examine the contextual and metalinguistic settings for these sermons before discussing their referential, poetic and expressive functions. There are important differences in these two sermons which shall be the subject of our conclusion. I hope that we can work as much in the appreciative as in the analytic mode.

What's in a Word

We may mention to begin with that the styles of these two men are distinctly different and this fact is neatly reflected in the praise names by which they are known to their followers and by which they often refer to themselves. The Bwiti name of Ekang Engono is Akikos Zambi Avanga³--"The Parrot's Egg/God Who Prepares." William Richmond is known as Hlabisahlanguana which may be translated "The Bull Who Crashes in the Kraal" if we may be permitted to employ onomatopoeic alliteration to represent a similar device among the Zulu.⁴ In the case of the sermons of Ekang Engono, the apposite quality of his name is seen in the fact that the sermons are esoteric, condensed, involuted, replete with many calculated hidden meanings, all delivered with brevity and in a calm, emotionally unfluctuating voice. In studying them we find represented in a nutshell--or a parrot's eggshell as it were--many of the principle thematic concerns and organizing values of cult life. The sermons of William Richmond on the other hand are episodes of stormy rhetoric buoyed along with an emotional vigor which runs the gamut from angry and unintelligible shouts to confidential and almost inaudible whispers. There are subtleties in the content but they are not bound into a condensed form. The sermons ramble, punctuated with songs and the repetitiousness

which the Zulu value. The listener is to be overwhelmed as the cattle in the kraal are cowed by the bull who crashes against them with his horns.

We can go further into the associations of these two names-- the images they conjure up--for these have relevance in a contextual way to our materials. In Bwiti mythology it was the African Gray parrot, kos, who brought the word to man--kos za bege bot bafia. The African Gray is a proficient talker recognized not only by the Fang. He nests high in the Adzap tree--closest of all living beings to heaven, for the Adzap is the tallest tree in the equatorial forest. His red tail feathers, according to Bwiti legend, were dipped in the blood of the beaten Christ. He knew the crucifixion first hand. He is impressive at dusk as he whirrs home over head in rapid and direct flight from his far feeding places just as the ancestor spirits begin to flock home out of the deep forest to their villages and the Bwiti cult house. The parrot is a holy bird to the Bwitist, and it is imaginatively appropriate that the leader of the cult, he who holds out the promise of relating the members to the ancestors and to the heavenly supernaturals, should by extension embody the similar promise contained in the parrot's egg.

As for the "Bull that Crashes in the Kraal," by the kraal we mean specifically the cattle pen, isibaya, within the Zulu hamlet, that circle of beehive huts which is often altogether called a kraal in South Africa (properly--umuzi). The gravity of this image to the Zulu as to most cattle-keeping people is manifest. The isibaya occupies a central place in Zulu domestic life for all activity revolves around it. The occasionally restless movements of the cattle within it at night are solace to the ears of the kraalhead--unumuzane--and bring to him a contented and restful sleep. The absence of any animal which has escaped the evening ingathering of the herdboys renders him, on the contrary, wakeful and concerned. His position and self respect among his fellows is bound up in the kraal and its herd. But not only are the animals there the chief currency in the brideprice and hence the chief means by which the family line is extended and strengthened, they are also a source of esthetic pleasure and a constant topic of conversation. Lienhardt (1961:15) has pointed out for the Dinka how cattle imagery extends itself into all phases of Dinka talk as relevant metaphor for much of their experience outside that held directly with cattle. This is certainly the case with the Zulu and specifically the case with the name of Hlabisahlangana.⁵ For William Richmond's power to move and gather together his milling followers, for his ability to conjure up and recreate again a meaningful vital center to their universe, and for his reassertion of the virile and patriarchal qualities of the Zulu male,⁶ he is appropriately called Hlabisahlangana, rather than simply father or pastor. In the term Hlabisahlangana are bound up pastoral images as appropriate to the Zulu notion of spiritual guardianship as the term pastor is to the Judeo-Christian. It is a metaphor of considerable imaginative power.

By taking time to examine the associations bound up in the names of our two preachers, we emphasize that verbal art must be examined, if its impact is to be adequately appreciated, on the level of the imagery it elicits in the mind of the listener. Verbal art is often a matter of similes and metaphors which condense within themselves

associations somehow apt and appropriate to the condition of the creator and listener. These associations imaginatively reinvigorate and elaborate a model of the universe which promises to enable the worshipper to cope more effectively with experience if only by re-shaping it.

Rather serious methodological problems are raised when we speak about the associations of words--the images evoked by them--for, though we question our informants about them, a good deal that is resonant remains implicit. And we may too easily fall back upon the sovereignty of empathy and intuition, particularly if we are working on the resonance between images and attempting to build a cultural configuration (Metraux 1953:354-355). I would like to say that I am not sure that all the images I have suggested as associations for the two names are active in the average Bwitist or CGC member. Some I am sure are, and I am sure that for some members these names are more laden with imagination than for others. But that during the sermons a succession of images are flashing through the minds of the membership we cannot doubt. Providing we are reasonably tentative, our responsibility is to say what these images might be by pointing up other contexts to which the words in question may refer. One confronts the fact here that the old-style multi-aspect ethnography is more useful in this task than a highly focused hypothesis testing job of fieldwork. This is because the ethnographer in broadscale pursuits in many different aspects of culture is more likely to encounter the various contexts in which the keywords of verbal art appear and which are evoked by them and give them their currency.

What's To Be Done with the Words

We have called these two movements, both Bwiti and the CGC, revitalistic. The membership to some degree, but particularly the leadership, is motivated by a sense of disparity between the impulses of their condition and the challenges of the larger world around them. And hence they have set about in a conscious way to create a new and more satisfying cultural universe in which to live and a new and more adequate character for the individuals who are to live in it. But there is a substantial difference in how these two groups conceive revitalization is to take place, and these conceptions affect the style of preaching. Mainly, Bwiti lays emphasis upon reconstructing the universe, and the CGC upon change in character.

We have only to note the immediate consequences of the verbal action on the membership. In Bwiti the membership is quiescent throughout the short sermon, rising to continue the ritual action at its conclusion. Immediate impact upon them is rarely evident, though the sermon may be discussed the following day and its contents may be used in judgement of intra-cult quarrels. The quiescent reaction of the membership is in keeping with the subdued style of the sermon. Salvation in Bwiti is best assured by imitating in terrestrial ritual, with as much harmony and mimetic exactitude as possible, the ideal patterns of the shades in their ceaseless heavenly activity. Ritual is frequently introduced into this cult by the leaders with the explanation that a recent vision has shown them that such things were done in heaven. The sermon, likewise, is taken in large part as intelligence

brought to the Nima Na Kombo from the land of the shades. Before the sermon Ekang Engono has spent several hours in a grave pit under the altar where, in a somnolent lightly drugged state (the drug is the alkaloid eboka--Tabernenthes eboka), he communes with the hereafter. The sermon, in short, is a continuation in another, verbal, medium of that reflection of the beyond which the entire liturgy represents. Hence we have high stylization, we might well say ritualization, in the sermon. For the Words are projected out into the chapel as if they had an existence of their own. The Nima Na Kombo stands virtually motionless.⁷

In the Church of God in Christ salvation is primarily the product of the activity of the Holy Spirit (umoya oyingcwele) which enters the worshipper's body in the process of worship to overcome the evil spirits and influences that are active there. Worship provides an arena in which the Holy Spirit can be invoked and act. The climax of worship comes in the early hours of the morning in the laying on of hands. At this time the cult leaders and particularly William Richmond pass on their abundance of Holy Spirit to the needy membership. (The flow of electricity is the simile by which this process is explained.)⁸ But the build up of the Holy Spirit and its transfer begins before the actual laying on of hands. It begins with the sermon. Here the preacher is expected to demonstrate his possession of the Holy Spirit both in the power of his words to move the membership and in the energistic displays of enthusiasm which accompany their emission. He shouts and jumps to make his points and partially to communicate that the Holy Spirit is within him. In very contrast to the Bwiti Sermon the visually responsive members frequently will interject sounds of assent to the justice and conviction of the preacher's words. Not unusually, various members will be struck into a state of possession simply by the power of the words. Hlabisahlanguana takes some pride when a member is so struck. Thus the words themselves are a vehicle of the Holy Spirit projected into the membership by the preacher. For this reason he may feel it necessary to energize his words by displays of physical vigor.

I could not find in the Church of God in Christ any recognition or concern with a universal order nor much interest in the life of the spirits and deities in the hereafter. In its way the CGC is a very pragmatic cult with a strong concern with maladies and misfortunes of everyday life. In Bwiti, on the other hand, we do find an interest in the procedures of heaven and in universal order. The Bwitist, one may say, is bound to reproduce heaven on earth in an attempt at harmony in the universe. The primary preoccupation of the CGC is the conjuring up of such sufficient power out of the void as will be capable of counteracting illnesses and misfortunes. The sermons are a portion of that conjuring--an adumbration of that power later to be layed on directly, a manifest of its presence and reality.

However we are to account for this difference in approach--the Fang are Sudanic in origin and may inherit that cultural concern for cosmologies as is demonstrated for Sudanic peoples by Griaule and his followers--it has its inevitable impact upon the way words are used and as to whether their function is to be primarily referential or expressive, directive or poetic.

Words about Words

It seems fair to argue that art lies in the relationship between artist and critic and that the originator is influenced in important ways by those he originates to. In point of fact, art is usually defined by clients and critics and not by artists themselves. In respect to verbal art, in any case, one is bound to consider the critical vocabulary by which it is assessed, for this metalinguistic material is bound to give us some hint as to the guidelines within which the verbal artist is working. We will examine here, together with their implications, some of the terms that one would commonly hear in the two cult houses in response to the sermons.

In the Bwiti cult and in accordance with a traditional Fang preference for a measure of tranquility (mvwaa) and self-control in the rhetorical situation (see footnote 7), we find an impressive impassivity in the preacher Ekang Engono. But this impassivity belies and, indeed, gives dramatic tension to the great weight of his words. The sermons of Ekang Engono are admired by the membership as "nkobo akunge" the skillful or clever speech (sometimes nkobo akyenge--the miraculous speech). They are said to be at once awesome (nseme) because they body forth the unseen, pleasurable (mbung) because the Nima Na Kombo plays with words (a vwin bifia), and difficult (njuk) because one word has many meanings--eyole evore ve a kane meyile. We may say that the critical response of the members of Bwiti at once reflects and promotes a concentration on subtlety in the use of words. This is not the emphasis in the sermons in the CGC. Unlike the members of Bwiti, the followers of William Richmond do not seem to be especially attentive to intricacy of statement.

The sermons of Hlabisahlanguana are most commonly admired as iciko which we note applies not only to a person gifted in speech but also in singing. The word comes from the ideophone ciko which is expressive of a swinging motion and hence implies critical approval of fluency and rhythm in speech accompanied by emotional gesture. We notice here that the substance of what is said is not in question. The term igagu is also applied to William Richmond and similarly refers to one who is expert at music or speaking. The ideophone which is the source here is gagu--the stressing of salient points in speaking or singing. It may imply the capacity to select the salient points of one's communication and hence it can be a critique of content. But basically the term is complimentary of speech which follows the well known stress patterns characteristic of the musical qualities of Zulu. It is a critical term more appropriately applied to recitations, but William Richmond's sermons are lengthy enough to be remarked as igagu.

Other critical terms which conform to the tendency to admire William Richmond for form and style rather than for content are umfutho, usinga and iphimbo. The word umfutho is derived from the word for bellows and means literally puffing, spitting. In relation to speech it has the derived meaning of having drive and force in one's words. The association is with the blowing out through the bellows. The contrasting term ilula is applied to a talk of no force which, light in weight and impression upon the listener, is lacking in personality. The consequence of umfutho in speech is usinga--a state of overpowering impulse or inspiration in the listener (intshumayelo yakhe ivusa usinga). We have noted that occasionally William

