BWITI IN REFLECTION: ON THE FUGUE OF GENDER

BY

RICHARD P. WERBNER

(University of Manchester, U.K.)

Ebogo says: "Mopasema beba, mopasema beba ndembe." That means twins. "Mopasema beba, mopasema beba ndembe"—twins over and over again without change. And that is sister and brother. And that is wife and husband, and that is child and mother. But still one dies alone and one is sick alone—from the sermon book of Ekang Engono (1982: 518-19).

Introduction

In a series of essays culminating in a powerful ethnography of the religion of Bwiti among the Fang of Gabon, James Fernandez has advanced a model of ritual, its sequencing and its tropes (1974; 1977; 1982; 1984; 1986). I want to take up his argument by seeing how it applies to movement and the unfolding of body imagery in the all-night vigil of Bwiti and, particularly, in its ascetic ordeal.

The all-night vigil follows three movements or sequences of distinct scenes. Each such scene, itself a segment or course of events, is culturally framed and labelled by reference to space and movement to and from or within the forest and the chapel. The scenes are a) meeting places of origin or birth (njimba), b) trails (minkin), c) paths (zen), and d) pools (yombo). Each of these scenes is repeated, but in counter-versions.

The sequence of scenes is recursive. Repetition in the action qualifies its progression, and reciprocally, the progression qualifies the repetition. The repetition occurs, on the one hand, within a movement during repeated returns to an earlier scene, usually in three such returns, and, on the other hand, between movements by a mode of mirroring. Mirroring is the replaying of a movement in reverse; that is, from scene c, to scene b, to scene a against the earlier order of scenes a, b, c. Like the repetition, the progression is within and between movements, and it unfolds dialectically
relative to the climax. It proceeds through opposition between two scenes or two movements such as a, c, and through mediation by a third scene or movement such as b between a and c. The processual form of the whole vigil, like each component sequence, is contrapuntal. It is, as it were, a fugue, following what I call, and explain later, the logic of hierarchical dualism.

The all-night vigil of Bwiti affirms death in the other world over life in this world; or rather, such death is made out to be the commencement of true life. It is felt to be a way of confronting death and stepping beyond it in renewed contact with the dead. The visionary leader of the chapel that James Fernandez came to know best told him,

My ability to tolerate all the pretty irritations of this world comes from knowing death... Before Banzie [Angels, initiates in Bwiti] have traveled fully the path of birth and death, they are constantly irritated and in a state of anger at the things of this world. But knowing death gives tranquillity (1982: 495).

In this chapel the all-night vigil is referred to as 'the preparation for death’ (1982: 486).

A major concern is the willful confusion by the body of the spirit. What the all-night vigil devalues, above all, is sexuality. This world is seen, heard, and felt to be the outcome of successive sins. Each sin is a violation, in heat and anger, of the body of another. The other world into which Fang strive to be released cannot be attained unless they free themselves of the willful sexuality that binds them to the sinful earth. Their bodies float, they say; they are lightened by the power of the alakaloid drug they take during the first part of the vigil; and under the stimulating influence of the narcotic they are aware of themselves seeing clearly what, for blacks in their everyday condition of despair, is otherwise obscured.

Some actively mortify their flesh during the vigil. Their bodies are pounded by virtuous dancing, especially when they enact the willfulness of sin. Their ascetic ordeal of spirit and flesh is imaged by analogy to food preparation and consumption. Sufferers of the ordeal are willful, mortal consumers of food; they have to be turned into willless food fit for divine consumption. Their ordeal is analogous to the pulverizing of food in the mortar by the pestle. The wielder of the pestle is the Mother of God, and the mortar is the chapel, which is also her body. After consuming the narcotic powder and pounding their bodies in dance, the active members of Bwiti crumble clay, representing their spiritual fundaments, in