SOME DEVELOPMENTS IN BEMBA RELIGIOUS HISTORY\textsuperscript{1})

BY

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INTRODUCTION

During the Luba-Lunda period of central African history, new kingdoms and societies emerged in the area now known as Northeastern Zambia to the east of the Luba homeland. One of the most durable of these was the Bemba kingdom of Chitimukulu on the great plateau to the south of Lake Tanganyika. Another was the kingdom of Kazembe in the nearby Luapula Valley.\textsuperscript{2}) Today, the Bemba are part of the African nation of Zambia, yet they retain to a large extent a distinct cultural identity which is strongly associated with their own traditions as a separate African state. These traditions are fascinating stories of the kings, wars, and conquests which shaped their political kingdom in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet the history of this state is also the history of the society which developed within it. And beside the importance of political developments and their contribution to the growth of this society, there have also been important developments in their social organization, culture, and religion.

What is particularly interesting historically about the Bemba is that at least since the rise of the Luba-Lunda states, discernible adaptations and innovations have occurred within their religious system which have largely affected their religious practices and beliefs.

\textsuperscript{1}) In this article, written and oral material is combined with linguistic and ethnographic data to describe some developments in the religious history of the Bemba of North-eastern Zambia, but these developments are often described in hypothetical terms because of the limited evidence available. The purpose of the article is first, to add to the existing histories of the politics and trade of these people, a historical dimension of religion which should bring about comparative insights and contribute to the general knowledge of the area; second, to test the effectiveness of combining various types of evidence for reconstructing the history of a society whose traditions have been transmitted orally; and third, to suggest dimensions which further research can explore in this or other African societies whose religions have received little historical consideration by scholars.

\textsuperscript{2}) See Map I.
Not the least of these has had to do with the growth of a strong, central ancestral cult around the Bemba paramount chief Chitimukulu which provided ritual sanctions for his political legitimacy. Yet the history of the religious system of the Bemba is not limited to a history of religious response to political needs. Besides changing social and economic conditions, religious responses among these people were also stimulated by crises brought on by internal religious requirements and external religious pressures. Previous religious institutions were forced to cope with the expanding ritual dominance of the central ancestral cult if they were to survive. Some of these institutions accommodated the expanding cult, others were eclipsed by it, and in areas away from the political centres, still others continued to exert their traditional powers.

At the same time, new religious ideas were diffused into Bembaland