ACTION AS THE WAY OF TRANSCENDENCE

THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BWAMI CULT
OF THE LEGA

BY

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There are a few really basic works in the field of African religions which have the power to alter permanently our understanding of the subject, works whose insights have provided unexpected new ways of seizing African realities. Everyone's list of these works must be a little different. Mine would include Evans-Pritchard's Nuer Religion, Marcel Griaule's Conversations with Ogotemmêli (and even more Griaule and Dieterlen's Le Renard Pâle), Bernard Maupoil's La Géomancie de l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves, and Victor Turner's Forest of Symbols. A few more monographs might be added, but not many. Each of these works has the merit of going deeply behind the surface of the religion they describe, to such a depth that scientific rigour itself ends up becoming a testimony to the spirit. Each work also opens up new methodologies.

To my way of thinking, there is a new book to add to this exclusive list, a work more radical in its implications than most already on it. The book has already been out a number of years, but apparently its importance has not been as widely appreciated as some of the other studies I have mentioned above, perhaps largely due to its unpretentious format. I have in mind Daniel Biebuyck's Lega culture: art, initiation, and moral philosophy among a Central African people. ¹ Unlike, say, Evans-Pritchard's work on Nuer religion, Biebuyck's report on Lega religion does not pursue every implication to its furthest conclusion, so there is still a little work for the reader to do. But in the final analysis Biebuyck's study may be even more important than Evans-Pritchard's.

To a large degree this importance of Biebuyck's research stems from his having been initiated into the major cultic group among the Lega,

the Bwami society. Anthropologists who have been fully initiated into religious associations in Africa are quite rare, and the information they alone can provide is thus all the more precious. We might expect from Biebuyck therefore elaborate esoteric secrets, complex mythic cosmogonies and symbolic classification systems, exciting insights into prayer, sacrifice, and the world of the spirits. In fact, we discover none of these things, but something far more astonishing and valuable: a religion without worship, without prayer or sacrifice, without the pursuit of ecstasy or the encounter with spiritual beings. If, as Aylward Shorter has recently stated, “Prayer is the central phenomenon of religion,” then the Bwami association is not religious at all, for it has no prayer. Or if, as Rudolf Otto declared in his pioneering examination of “the idea of the holy,” the irreducible core of all religion is the ecstatic revelation of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*, then the lack of this in Bwami disqualifies it as “religion.” Yet it is that our definitions fail to capture the religious essence, and not Bwami that is at fault. The spirituality of this cult cannot be denied. It crystallizes a specific type of religion which is in fact typically African, which our theories have failed to recognize, founded as they are at root on Christian theological categories.

Some background on Bwami and the Lega will make this clearer. The Lega number about a quarter of a million, scattered in small villages through a vast area of tropical rain forest in eastern Zaire. The Bwami institution, however, is shared with variations in detail with most of the neighboring cultures, including a number on the other side

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2 The Bwami is a version of the leopard “secret societies” which can be found from Zaire to Sierra Leone; these societies are usually especially strong in cultures like the Lega which lack centralized authority. The leopard cult preserves order, punishes malefactors, and possesses a tremendous moral authority for villagers, exercising functions often associated with the “priest of the earth” or the “divine king” of other cultures, or indeed serving as extensions of these authorities within the same society. Among the culturally allied neighbors of the Lega, the Bwami cult centers on their divine kings. (*Bwami* itself means “king.”) For further information on these societies, see such works as F. W. Butt-Thompson, *West African secret societies*. London : Macmillan 1929; Leo Frobenius, *Die Masken und Geheimbünde Afrikas*. Halle: 1899; G. W. Harley, *Masks as agents of social control in Northeast Liberia*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology 1950; P. E. Joset, *Les sociétés secrètes des hommes - léopards en Afrique noire*. Paris: 1956; K. L. Little, The role of the secret society in cultural specialization, *American Anthropologist* 51, 1949, 199-212; P. A. Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, 3 vols. London: Oxford University Press 1926.