

PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS OF BAKWERI MYSTICISM

by Magnus P. Mukoko-Mokeba, B.A.

Bakweris inhabit the south-western portion of the Federal Republic of Cameroon. They are part of what the sociologist E. W. Ardenner has described as "Coastal Bantus". In this article, we shall endeavour to examine and describe some of their philosophical concepts in order to understand the basis of their spiritual life.

Usage has rendered a number of words ambiguous and vague : This is particularly true of such words as "democracy", "communism" and "justice". Definitions of such words are apt to be arbitrary and my definition of philosophy claims no exception to arbitrariness. For the purpose of this article we shall define philosophy as the critical reflection on the justification of basic human beliefs and analysis of basic concepts in terms of which such beliefs are expressed.

This definition shares the above-mentioned ambiguity in a number of ways. But being descriptive, it neither demarcates philosophy from science nor from philosophical literature nor from what some refer to as tradition. Its adequacy lies, however, in its conformity to the problems that the following paragraphs will elucidate.

The learned and laity of our times are generally aware of the attempts that thoughtful men have made throughout all recorded history on such questions as : Are there many gods or only one or none ? Who made the world and why ? What is man and to what end does he exist ? Whence came the earliest knowledge of the arts ? Does the human being have a soul, and if a man dies does he live again ? In short, what is the purpose and meaning of life ? Whence came and whither go man and the universe ?

What the ancient Hebrews thought about these things is widely known through the teachings of missionaries ; and the determined attempts made by ancient Egyptians, Phoenicians, Babylonians, Persians as well as the ancient peoples of India and China at finding answers to these questions are known by the learned in our society.

But how few are those who are conscious of the fact that in the Federal Republic of Cameroon indigenous peoples have also given

much thought to all these questions for untold ages and have answered them in a manner that would do honour to the wisest seers and sages of all times.

Bakweris, like many other tribes in the Federal Republic of Cameroon, have no unjust idea of the Deity. This is clear from the words that they use in describing Him. They ascribe to God the attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and invisibility. They call Him the Protector, **Maeke** ; the Creator of all things, **Iwonde** ; the Guardian and Keeper of all things, **Motateli** ; the Law-Giver, the Governor, the Source of the Word, **Ovase** or **Lova**.

These significant appellations are not just used in religious ceremonies. They are part and parcel of every-day language, as for instance, in the common exchange of greetings. Among Bakweris, when one is asked " how are you, " **w'a okaneya**, it is not uncommon for the inquirer to receive the answer : " N'eki Maeke ", I give thanks to the Protector.

So deep is their belief in the omniscience and omnipotence of the Supreme Being that one has to understand the thought patterns of the Bakweris to appreciate the part that religious mysticism plays in their day to day affairs.

Bakweri cosmology splits the world into two orders of being, **Vaenya** and **Vawoo**. Literally, these words mean respectively, the living and the dead. But in the wider sense, **Vaenya**, the living, is used to embrace all physical or material things. All things that belong to the **Vaenya** order can be perceived by anyone ; they occupy definite locations in space. It is interesting, however, that Bakweris do not include air in this category.

Air is generally looked upon as a transitory element that forms a bridge between the order of **Vaenya** and that of **Vawoo** : that this element shares many of the characteristics of things in both orders did not escape the Bakweris in their cosmological speculations. For indeed there is a school of thought which believes that air, at least its fundamental life-giving element, pervades the entire universe. That element is believed to be the essential composition of the entities that belong to the **Vawoo** order. This concept, it should be noted, is not far removed from the Western theory of the " Ether of Space " nor is it very different from what Yogis call " **Prana** ".

The **Vawoo** order embraces all the invisible forces of nature. This includes the spirits of the dead and a large array of forces that have always puzzled human intelligence. While the Bakweris do not make watertight definitions and descriptions of the characteristics of elements in the **Vawoo** order, they do believe that the order exists and have thus devised methods by which contacts can be made and by which the forces of that order can be directed to, and manipulated for, man's benefit.

Mention has been made above of the belief that air forms a bridge between the two orders. It has also been stated that a certain indefinable element in air pervades the entire universe. This life-giving and life-sustaining element, Bakweris call **Muulu**. **Muulu** is needed by things in both orders and in man it is life itself ; it is the godliness in him and it gives him his individuality. Man is believed to need **Muulu** throughout his earthly existence and because of its imperishable and indestructible nature, when **Muulu** departs from man, and he attains the state that is called **Kpeli** or death, **Muulu** continues to live.

Bakweris believe that **Muulu**, the life-giving force of **Elinge** or soul affects man throughout his earthly existence in a number of ways. But this influence upon man cannot be described as control. It falls far short of that. Nor can it be equated with what some western philosophers describe as "dualistic interactionism" ; for this latter concept has a number of assumptions which would appear to the Bakweris as illogical, untenable or even pragmatic.

Upon death, **Muulu** or **Elinge** is believed to linger around for three days during which it bids farewell to all with whom the deceased had been acquainted in his earthly existence. This is why on the third day after death it is the custom to organise a small feast known as **Sassa**. The feast serves to bid the last farewell to the deceased. In feasting, partakers are expected to throw pieces of food around. These are eaten up by domestic animals and birds that may be present and through them the deceased participates in the feasting.

This form of participation is easily understandable and should occasion no surprise. In the transition that is called **Kpeli** or death, the spiritual essence departs from the body and becomes one with the life-giving force, **Muulu**, that permeates the entire universe — which includes men, animals and birds. Consequently, the deceased is believed to participate in the feasting through men, animals and birds present. But this farewell feast does not imply that no further contacts can be made with departed ones.

At the beginning of this exposition mention was made of the fact that Bakweries have a number of names for the Deity. One of these is **Ovase** which means the Source of the Word. If readers may permit a little diversion into its etymology, **Ovase** is a noun coined out of the Bakweri verb **l'ova**, meaning to speak, to say.

In its extended sense, **Ovase** means the One who commands, Who says everything ; the Source of the Word — **E mo a ovi yase, Ovase**. His word is Power ; it is Law ; it is a Command that can never be countermanded.

It is significant that this Bakweri concept of God as the Word through which and by which all things are made and unmade tallies

with the Christian version of it as expressed in the Fourth Gospel — the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ according to St. John. The Prologue to this Gospel begins as follows : " In the beginning was the Word ; and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. "

The belief in the Word, the belief in the magic power of the Word is so deeply imbedded in the minds of the Bakweris that foreigners who have not been initiated into their philosophy and cosmological concepts are often at a loss at understanding even the simplest of the numerous practices that make up Bakweri religious mysticism. Most of these practices have received the violent denunciation of Westerners and more particularly, Western Missionaries who share with their colonialist brethren the built in conviction that they represent a " superior culture." The natural corollary of this baseless conviction has been disrespect for all things Cameroonian and, by extension, all things African.

Bakweris know that man is unique because of his power over the Word. By this power, man is able to call forth and guide the life force. This is the meaning of life, this is existence : to receive the word ; to invoke it ; to share it with other beings, living or dead, human or divine.

Diverse are the uses to which the power of the Word can be put. The businessman discovers that he is unsuccessful and he decides to use the power of the Word to change his fortune. He obtains a bottle of wine and goes to the grave of an ancestor, pours the wine and asks for God's blessings through his ancestor in order that his fortune may change. Parents decide to give their daughter in marriage and they pour some wine or water, as the case may be, at the door of their house and in doing so, they conjure up the blessings of their ancestors in order that the marriage may be successful.

The **nganga** or healer, whom foreigners call " witch doctor " spits upon his herbs and by the power of the Word conjures up the blessings of the Supreme Being through the invocation of his ancestors in order that the herbs may effect a cure — and they do ! Those who point a mocking finger at the so-called " witch doctor " could have done the same to Christ were they present when He cured the man born blind by spitting on the ground, making clay with the spittle, and spreading the clay over the man's eyes before commanding him to go and wash in the pool of Siloe, John IX : 1-7. Yet this is exactly what Christians do to-day.

Young men respect their elders ; they give alms to the poor and indulge in all sorts of " good works " for which they receive in return a payment in the words : " Lova a o namise " which mean, may God bless you. And they are satisfied and believe

that through the power of the Word they will receive the blessings of God. These are some of the positive uses of the power of the Word and the way that the Bakweris use and appreciate it in their day to day affairs. Of course, many other examples can be given but have been omitted because of space considerations.

But the power of the Word is like a two-edged sword. It can be used for good or for evil, for boon or for bane. This is where cursing and other witchological practices come in.¹

Sorcery, the ability to turn life's vital forces to evil ends, is known to use among other things, the power of the Word. One of the commonest uses of this power is by cursing. Cursing is done in two ways : first, the sorcerer may use actual words or, secondly he may use them in the form of thought. In both instances, the effect is the same. He may make an image and stick pins into it and by use of a concatenation of ceremonies, including awesome incantations, convert this image into a powerful weapon of destruction. This technique is generally known as "the power of the doll."

We shall not go into any detail on the uses of the power of the Word in the dark underside of Bakweri mysticism. That is outside the orbit of this article ; but suffice it to say that even the most Christo-centric of westerners who has lived among the Bakweris for any length of time knows that what is referred to as sorcery, witchcraft, voodoo or nyongo really "works". It would be just as foolish to dismiss these things as superstitions simply because the natives offer no scientific explanations for them as it would be to say that the law of gravity did not exist before Newton discovered it.

Yet, this is exactly the problem that anyone who seeks to understand the natives must face. Understanding cannot come when the inquirer has the built-in-feeling that he represents a "superior culture" ; for, the very idea of a superior culture is ridiculous. Any attempt at comparative evaluation of cultures presupposes and **ethnocentric** perspective. And those who frown upon and use derogatory epithets to describe such practices as libation ought to realise that cultural relativism stipulates, among other things, that all cultures must be viewed as adequate and meaningful adjustments which people have made to the imperatives of living.

There are definitely some Cameroonians, and Africans for that matter, who are so plagued by the alien mentality they have ac-

(1) Some insight in the technique and practice of witchcraft among African people can be found in Dr. Margaret J. Field's work, **The Search for Security** Faber & Faber, 1960 or in Geoffrey Parrinder's **Witchcraft**, Pelican Books, 1958.

quired in the course of their sojourn in distant lands that they would prefer not to discuss these practices at all. But in this our age when it rests upon our shoulders to dovetail what is good in our society with the good things that we have learnt from our colonial masters, we cannot afford to be apathetic or ashamed to examine all aspects of our national life in order to select the best from it. This short exposition on Bakweri philosophical concepts serves, therefore, to give a basic explanation to those who wish to be informed rather than titillated on Bakweri religious mysticism.



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FONDEMENT PHILOSOPHIQUE DU MYSTICISME BAKWERI

Résumé

Les Bakweri sont des « Bantou côtiers » qui habitent le sud-ouest de la République Fédérale du Cameroun. L'article a pour objet l'examen et la description de quelques concepts philosophiques qui sont à la base de la vie spirituelle de cette ethnie.

Comme beaucoup d'autres mots, le terme de « philosophie » a fini par revêtir une acception ambiguë dans l'usage courant. L'auteur reconnaît d'avance que la définition qu'il propose de ce mot est tout aussi sujet à l'arbitraire. Il faut donc comprendre par « philosophie » dans

cet article : une réflexion critique des justifications apportées sur les croyances essentielles de l'homme et l'analyse des concepts fondamentaux qui servent à exprimer ces croyances ».

Cette définition, purement descriptive, ne fait le départ ni de la philosophie avec la science, ni de la philosophie avec la tradition. Son principal mérite est de circonscrire entièrement les problèmes discutés dans le présent article.

Savants et profanes de notre époque sont généralement au courant des tentatives faites à travers l'histoire pour élucider des points d'interrogations tels que : Existe-t-il plusieurs dieux, un seul ou aucun ? Qui a créé le monde et dans quel dessein ? Qui est l'homme et pourquoi existe-t-il ? L'être humain possède-t-il une âme et à sa mort connaît-il une autre vie ? Quel est le but et la signification de la vie ? D'où viennent et où vont l'homme et l'univers ?

Les missionnaires nous ont appris les réponses qu'ont apportées les Hébreux à ces différentes interrogations. Un cercle plus restreint de gens connaissent aussi la pensée des anciens à ce sujet, qu'il s'agisse des Egyptiens, des Phéniciens, des Babyloniens, des Perses ou des habitants de la Chine et de l'Inde anciennes.

Mais il faut constater également que très peu sont malheureusement ceux qui savent que les hommes d'Afrique, et du Cameroun en particulier, ont apporté une contribution à ce grand mouvement de la pensée humaine qui les place parmi les plus perspicaces et les plus sages de tous les temps.

L'idée de dieu chez les Bakweri forme un ensemble logique. Ils reconnaissent à dieu les attributs de l'omniscience, de l'omnipotence et de l'invisibilité. Il a pour nom « le Protecteur », **Maeke**, « le Créateur de toute chose », **Iwonde** ; « le Gardien et le Conservateur de toutes les choses », **Motateli** ; « Celui qui distribue la loi, le Gouverneur, la source du verbe », **Ovase** ou **Lova**.

Ces diverses appellations sont étroitement imbriquées dans le langage courant, par exemple dans l'échange de salutations. Lorsqu'on demande à un Bakweri : « Comment vas-tu ? », **wa okaney**, il est assez habituel de l'entendre répondre : **M'eki Maeke**, « je remercie le Protecteur ».

Le mysticisme religieux joue un rôle important dans la vie quotidienne des Bakweri du fait que la croyance en un Etre Suprême, omniscient et omnipotent, est fortement ancrée en eux.

La cosmologie Bakweri partage le monde en deux catégories d'êtres : **Vaenya** et **Vawoo**, c'est-à-dire les vivants et les morts. Dans son sens le plus large, **Vaenya**, les vivants, englobe à la fois les êtres animés et les choses, ce que l'on voit et que l'on peut localiser dans l'espace. L'air n'est pas inclus dans cette catégorie. Il est cependant considéré comme un élément intermédiaire qui réunit les vivants et les morts. Les Bakweri ne sont pas sans savoir que l'air comporte des caractéristiques propres aux deux types de catégories fondamentales. Ils croient aussi que l'air baigne

l'univers d'une substance dispensatrice de vie. Cette substance est peut-être ce que les occidentaux dénomment l'éther ou l'espace, et les Yogi, le « prana ».

Quant au **Vawoo**, il comprend toutes les forces invisibles de la nature, les esprits des morts et un ensemble de forces qui ont toujours constitué un mystère pour l'esprit humain. Les Bakweri croient en l'existence de ces forces et se sont assurés les moyens d'établir un contact entre elles et les hommes, de manière à leur donner des ordres et à les utiliser au profit de l'homme.

Cet élément indéfinissable qui anime toute création, mentionné plus haut, est connu sous le nom de **Muulu**. Habitant l'homme, le **Muulu** devient le souffle de vie, engendre le sentiment de piété en lui et lui donne son individualité. Cet élément est indestructible et lorsqu'il quitte l'homme, celui-ci parvient à l'état appelé **Kpeli** ou la mort. Cependant le **Muulu** survit à cette mort. C'est cette force vitale qui anime l'âme dans les êtres humains, l'âme ou **Elinge**. **L'Elinge** détermine l'homme de diverses manières, mais il ne le possède pas entièrement. L'influence exercée sur la personne humaine n'est pas absolument identique à ce que certains philosophes occidentaux appellent « une interaction dualiste », car cette dernière idée est basée sur des postulats pragmatiques et insoutenables.

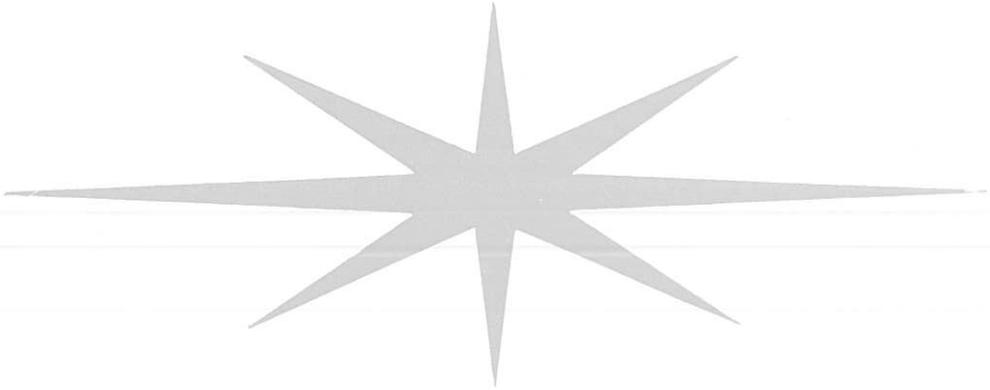
L'un des noms que les Bakweri donnent à dieu est **Ovase**, source du verbe, celui dont la parole contient tout et s'impose d'elle-même : **E mo a ovi yase, Ovase**. Son verbe est pouvoir, elle fait force de loi ; c'est un ordre qu'il est au pouvoir de personne de circonvenir. Cette conception de dieu en tant que verbe créateur se retrouve dans l'évangile chrétien tel que l'a transcrit Saint Jean : « Au commencement était le Verbe ; le Verbe était avec Dieu, et le Verbe était Dieu ».

Les Bakweri croient fortement au pouvoir du Verbe qui joue un rôle important dans les diverses pratiques qui constituent leur spiritualité religieuse. L'étranger a rarement pénétré le sens de ces rites, ce qui le conduit souvent à les dénoncer comme pernicieux.

N'importe qui peut utiliser le pouvoir du Verbe en vue de modifier le cours de son destin, au moyen de pratiques connues sous le nom de libation. Le **Nganga** ou guérisseur, que les étrangers appellent « le médecin-sorcier », utilise le pouvoir du Verbe pour soigner de la même manière que le Christ guérissait les patients, tel que le rapporte St. Jean, IX : 1-7. Maints Bakweri s'adonnent aux « bonnes œuvres » secourant les pauvres et rendant visite aux malades ; on les remercie par les mots : « **Lova a o namise** » qui correspond à « Que le ciel te bénisse ». Ils sont convaincus que par le moyen de ces paroles, du Verbe, la bénédiction de dieu leur sera effectivement dispensée ; cela leur suffit pour être contents et heureux. On peut multiplier encore ces exemples qui montrent combien le pouvoir du Verbe se manifeste quotidiennement dans la vie du Bakweri.

Mais ce pouvoir du Verbe est une lame à double tranchant, il s'utilise pour le bien comme pour le mal. C'est ici qu'interviennent la malédiction et les pratiques de la sorcellerie. Il ne s'agit pas de discuter ici des dessous obscurs du mysticisme Bakweri. Mais les étrangers qui ont vécu chez ce peuple peuvent rapporter le témoignage de certains faits qui dépassent l'entendement humain.

Cette connaissance mystérieuse et ce pouvoir inexplicable dont jouissent certains des Bakweri ont pu rester ignorés ou décriés jusqu'à présent. Mais puisqu'aujourd'hui notre devoir est d'examiner les différents aspects de notre vie nationale pour en recueillir l'essence et la combiner aux apports positifs du monde moderne, notre approche doit exclure tout préjugé.



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