

BROKEN SYMBOLS AND RELIGIOUS INNOVATION IN AFRICA:

An Evaluation of Theories of Religious Change

by

Jack Nelson

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Dr. Peter Rigby
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The following essay represents a search for heuristically useful theory to understand the forces of religious innovation in an African context. The search progresses by employing a model derived from studies in symbolic anthropology. That model is extended by integrating it with an intellectual model of paradigm change that has been suggested to account for religious conversion in Africa. The search is then furthered with greater contextual analysis of socio-economic changes in Africa that occurred in the process of articulation of modes of production, seeking to understand how these changes relate to alterations in ideologies and religious beliefs and practices. The conclusion will then explore the role of the former symbolic model as it relates to the latter historical-materialist understanding in an attempt to account for the variability of expression that occurs in African religious innovation.

Clifford Geertz, in an essay entitled, "Religion as a Cultural System", speaks of religion as (1966:4);

a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

Considerable emphasis is being placed, in a definition such as this, on the generative power of symbols in functioning to "synthesize a peoples' ethos". With notions of order prevailing as the ground of meaning, what is "intellectually

reasonable" and "emotionally convincing" is demanded from religion. It is in the symbolic element of religious expression that the capacity to achieve intellectual and emotional unity is located. At the same time to remain reasonable and convincing a certain correspondence between peoples' common sense view of the world as well as their scientific and aesthetic views must be maintained. However, this need not be a simple correspondence as religious claims generating credibility by the experience of symbolic ritual enactment offer what is held to be a wider view of reality within which other views are situated. Thus the religious view reserves judgement to correct and complete other views appealing to a wider conception of cosmic order. Religion is both shaped by common sense, scientific and aesthetic views, but in turn can shape a persons understanding of the capacity of such views (Geertz 1966:38-39).

The threat of chaos with the anxiety it provokes is noted, in Geertz's view, to be the driving force behind human conceptualizing on all levels including that of religious symbolic formation. Interpretation as it involves paradigm formation is an effort to counter this threat. However, Geertz delineates "three points where chaos--a tumult of events which lack not just interpretation but interpretability-- threatens to break in upon man: at the limits of his analytic capacity, at the limits of his powers of endurance, and at the limits of his moral insight" (1966:14). The first gives rise to the experience of "bafflement" as anomalies lead to the disintegration of intellectual paradigms. The second

point concerns the "problem of suffering" where intense suffering becomes intolerably meaningless. The last point addresses the experience of "ethical paradox" where a sense of moral coherence is lost when injustice prevails in human experience.

Using these three points as an outline, a study of religious innovation can proceed. The disintegration that occurs at these limits when they are reached will provoke reintegrating efforts that may assume alternative symbolic structures and/or threat eliminating actions. A number of other recent studies offer insight into these dynamics in the African context. To be noted, however, is the extent to which this contextualizing extends or calls into question Geertz's model. At issue is the relation of history to symbolic structures.

J Ford

I

In a series of insightful articles, Robin Horton has advanced a theory for understanding religious change in Africa. By comparing and contrasting "African Traditional Thought and Western Science" in an article by that title (1971a), and by delineating the nature of changes that have occurred in African traditional thought with the advent of western industrialism and world religions, e.g. Islam and Christianity, Horton develops his theory. African traditional thought is shown to serve a very similar function in traditional societies as science does in industrialized societies. That is, a "concern with explanation, prediction, and control of space-time events" is common to both (1971b:95). Though Horton has

borrowed this insight from J.D.Y. Peel's book, Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba (1968), he furthers it with specific comparisons. For example, both represent a "quest for unity underlying apparent diversity...for order underlying apparent disorder" while "seeking a causal contest wider than that provided by common sense" but at the same time granting that "common sense and theory have complementary roles in everyday life" (1971a:132,135,140). The major difference between the two thought systems with regard to these observations is that traditionalists utilize a personal theoretical idiom predisposing people to see a connection between social disturbance and individual affliction and identifying in spirits and divinities a causal connectedness. Western science, on the otherhand, uses an impersonal idiom with mechanistic causative theories (1971a:137).

Further parallels between the two systems of thought are noted in the common use of analogical methods in moving from the understood to yet to be clarified phenomenon and in the nature of model formation. The significant difference (and here Horton is unfairly comparing ideals with realities as he himself admits) is that traditional thought has "no developed awareness of alternatives to the established body of theoretical tenets; whereas in scientifically oriented cultures, such an awareness is highly developed" (1971a:153). An important consequence to the "closed" nature of traditional thought is that "any challenge to established tenets is a threat of chaos of the cosmic abyss, and therefore evokes intense anxiety" (1971a:154).

Openness and developed awareness of alternatives diminishes the threat of absolute calamity "that a serious challenge to those tenets poses" (1971a:154). But in traditional thought this threat can increase the rigidity of the system of thought with protective measures developed to preserve it (1971a:162f).

With affinities to Geertz's model now evident in Horton's theory it is possible to trace how the experience of bafflement would have emerged in the contact between traditional Africa and the outside world. Horton describes it as an encounter between a microcosm and a macrocosm. The microcosm is the traditional villagers' worldview consisting of common sense experience as well as religious views including ancestral spirits, local deities and a vague notion of the Supreme Being along with the accompanying religious prescriptions and practices. These together form a relatively "closed" system of explanation-prediction-control while the personal idiom in which they are cast provides a spiritual grounding for communalism. Influence of a larger world-view penetrated not only the coast but much of the interior of Africa with the emergence of trading routes, and was followed by the imperialistic impact leading to colonialism as well as missionizing efforts. Horton speaks of a "shattered microcosm" resulting from the contact with the macrocosm that entailed a heightened consciousness of a larger worldview accompanied by new idioms of thought. In this anxiety provoking exposure, the African sought continuity between traditional cosmologies and the new worldview. Some vague macrocosmic conceptions were seen to be present in the

traditional cosmologies such as the obscure notion of a Supreme Being. Horton's contention is that Africans were able to adjust to the new consciousness by adapting their own cosmologies, giving greater prominence to such notions. The resulting inference is that "acceptance of Islam and Christianity (as macrocosmic belief systems with well developed conceptions of a Supreme Being) by the African 'convert' is due as much to development of the traditional cosmology in response to other features of the modern situation as it is to the activities of the missionaries" (1971b:103). Herein lie the roots of independent church movements in Africa as well. Missionary Christianity being rather intolerant of this continuity of traditional thought in the churches make it imperative that Africans initiate independent movements in order to be able to give full expression to the interpretive quest they experience. The erosion of the explanation-prediction-control function in modern Christianity resulting from the prominence given in western thought to scientific responses filling that function has further alienated many Africans from mission Christianity. Modern Christianity is, in Horton's terms, a religion of communion emphasizing the relational element. Explanation-prediction-control functions such as prophets and faith-healers engage in are not tolerated in modern Christian churches as they are in many African independent church movements (1971b:105). But Africans in industrialized centers of Africa increasingly exposed to Western materialism with its impersonal theoretical idiom will, in Horton's opinion, have to yield developing traditional cosmological adaptations and accept the "depersonal-

zation of the idiom of all theory. In Africa, as in the West, it seems likely that religion, if it survives, will do so as a way of communion, but not as a system of explanation, prediction, and control" (1971:107).

Reference can now be made back to Geertz's model. In developing an intellectual theory of religious change, Horton has dealt mostly with changes that occur when people reach the limits of their analytical capacities. A people confronted with a broader world-view adapt some of their ideas to fit into the intellectual religious scheme that is offered by the penetrating influence. Thus, the change occurs while preserving some continuity, absorbing the stress caused by the bafflement by maintaining ⁱⁿ some of the former ideas while accepting a new intellectual understanding.

Horton's contribution is helpful on one level but, as will be noted, the anxiety provoking elements that led to change in Africa were not just intellectual ideas. But before addressing those issues, a summary of some of the criticism that Horton's position has drawn will be helpful. W. van Binsbergen, who has had affinities in his own research with Horton's theory has nevertheless been able to perceive weaknesses in that view and make efforts to move beyond it. To van Binsbergen, the microcosm/macrocosm juxtaposition is a little too simple to be altogether correct. As he puts it, "Although there is considerable common-sense plausibility in the idea that lesser spirits administer the microcosm and greater spirits the macrocosm, one would require a full fledged theory of religious symbolism in order to arrive at a real systematic understanding of this

relationship" (1981:41). Further, Horton's theory represents another version of the classic correspondence theory of the social-scientific study of religion. Van Binsbergen suggests the need for a "dialectical view, in which, for instance, newly emerging religious ideas might constitute the negation rather than the reflexion of a penetrating macrocosm (which is) nowhere considered in the Hortonian scheme" (1981:40).

A critical insight that needs to be added here is what Horton seems to miss by his reduction of religion to communion. With his clear bias for the intellectual capacity of explanation-prediction-control rendered by western science he seems to fail to note the capacity inherent in religious communion as a force that creates a context of control. Out of this community solidarity, explanation as well as prediction can emerge. Horton has noted, as was mentioned already, the African's predisposition to see a connection between social disturbances and individual affliction emerging from the personal idiom of African thought. But Horton fails to note how a maintenance of a continuity with this idiom can in some respects yield an understanding that the western scientific idiom misses. When van Binsbergen complains that the "Intellectual Theory has little to say on the organizational dimension of religious innovation," he is addressing this weakness in Horton's approach. In van Binsbergen's words, "for a religious innovation to establish itself, it needs not only to satisfy the intellectual requirements such as posed by individual minds reflecting on the changing world order with which they are confronted. In addition,

the new ideas and rituals have to surround themselves by new and viable forms of religious organization" (1981:38). The issue at stake here needs to be stated more clearly. The shattered microcosm, inasmuch as Horton's categories are useful, is not merely the breakdown of an intellectual paradigm, but a social transformation as well. This much Horton would certainly concur with. But the reformulation of a belief system has to be seen concomitantly with the reorganization of the social organization of the religious community. That organization with the control it provides may contribute as much to the revised belief system as that belief system does to the organization. In Horton's view the reformulation of African beliefs predisposed them to accept Islamic and Christian missionary-led organizations. However, this was followed by cases of reorganization by Africans in independent movements expressing more accurately the struggles and quests they experience. When Horton speaks of the explanation-prediction-control function of western thought, it needs to be noted that the explanation in terms of the impersonal idiom of western theorizing is what leads to prediction and control. African independent religious movements might better be understood if the emphasis was placed on control through the cohesion of religious organization with a very personal idiom prevailing. The control of the social organization can then both yield and be re-enforced by explanations and predictions. The resilience of the personal idiom of belief has wider implications than Horton recognizes. In surrendering that personal idiom, the

African is forced to concede to the justification given for his domination.

Peter Rigby's study, entitled "Pastors and Pastoralist: The Differential Penetration of Christianity among East African Cattle Herders" (1981), advances an explanation as to why the Maasai did not respond to the teaching of the missionaries. Though Rigby is addressing another context than that of Horton's research, his findings call into question some of Horton's conclusions. For the Maasai, the encounter with the "macrocosm" (a term Rigby does not employ) did not predispose "conversion". Rigby's analysis offers a twofold reason for this. First, the Maasai held a cosmological view that was perceived by these people as "being one with pastoralist economic and political praxis...a relatively 'nonalienated' form of ideological praxis...(which can) be related dialectically to the relative absence of exploitative relations in these social formations" (1981:106). With clear insight into the value of what they enjoyed, the Maasai were able to recognize the threat posed by mission Christianity that in too many respects allied with colonial administration and even, in the case of the Maasai, endorsed efforts by colonialists to disrupt Maasai life believing that such changes would facilitate conversion. What we have in this situation is in Horton's scheme, a microcosm that does not shatter, having a certain resilience that perpetuates the dialectically related cosmological view and the socio-economic and political practices. It appears that Horton's model only works in contexts where it is possible to disrupt social

conditions as well or where development of certain "non-alienating" cosmologies has been precluded historically.¹

These issues move us to a different level in our examination of religious change.

II

Geertz's understanding of intellectual bafflement as a breakdown point of symbolic structures may serve as the sole factor in religious change in some contexts but the shortcomings in Horton's view call into question whether it is the foremost mechanism of change in African religious innovation. It is interesting that van Binsbergen, in developing a theory, begins to leave behind his affinities to Horton's model when he investigates "Religious Change and the Problem of Evil in Western Zambia" (1981: chapter 4).

Geertz's distinction between the limits of human endurance and the limits of human moral insight, is an assumption that separates natural evil from moral evil in a manner that is not always present in religion and especially not in African traditional religion. It is therefore necessary to combine much of the analysis of these two points. The personal idiom utilized in traditional thought holds together ecological concerns with communal ones. Natural misfortunes are given personal explanations which it is the task of the diviner to reveal, be they divinities, irate ancestral spirits, or sorcery. Evans-Pritchard, in studying the Azande, noted that these people seek an answer to a question western materialism so often

uncannily leaves unanswered: "Why?" Not content to merely understand how misfortune happens or how to deal with it, asking, "Why?", demands a personalized answer (taken from M.G. Marwick 1973:62). What van Binsbergen notes in studies done on Zambian affliction cults is that a fundamental change occurs in the understanding of evil among these people with the rise of these cults. Misfortune is still attributed to spiritual causes but the formerly identifiable local culprit spirits are now foreign and increasingly impersonal. This, together with an accentuated individualism to the point of being "cults of egotism" making "no attempt to redress social conditions", is the innovative feature of affliction cults in van Binsbergen's analysis (1981:160). By tracing historically the advent of these cults and noting other parallel socio-economic and political developments that accompanied this religious innovation, van Binsbergen has contributed to a theory of African religious innovation utilizing the concept of the articulation of modes of production. Understanding gained from this historical development is then found to be applicable to other innovative religious movements.

Without entering deeply into discussion of the concept of the articulation of modes of production, van Binsbergen utilizes a minimal definition:

A mode of production is a model that stipulates a specific arrangement according to which the productive forces (means of production, resources, labour and knowledge) existing at a particular time and place, are subjected to specific relations of production such as define forms of expropriation and control between the various classes of people involved in the production process...While the

basic social problem of meeting the material requirements of human life has to be solved by any society, different modes of production represent different solutions, within the range of variation that a particular level of development of the productive forces allows for... Meanwhile, in most societies more than one mode of production coexists with other modes. Modes of production can be said to be articulated ('linked') to one another if surpluses generated in one mode are expropriated so as to serve the reproduction of another dominant mode (1981:43).

Historical development in Zambia, with parallels in much of Africa, is then shown to have involved the emergence of three new modes of production in the last few centuries. A domestic mode of production, basically agricultural with elders dominating younger generations and men holding a dominance over women, was first articulated with a tributary mode of production. The tributary mode of production involved the formation of tribute extracting chieftainships that expropriated surplus value from the domestic mode of production. With this development came a further articulation with a mercantile capital mode of production as trading routes were established connecting local communities with distant trading centers. Finally, the colonial onslaught introduced the industrial capital mode of production articulating with a deeply effected but still surviving domestic mode of production. (van Binsbergen 1981: 43-44).

Van Binsbergen has added another dimension to discussion of religious change in Africa by shifting to this historical-materialist perspective. As with Rigby's study, attention is focussed on the alienating influence of certain modes of production. To account for variation in religious innovation, however, van Binsbergen utilizes the notion of superstructural-

reconstruction. With the articulation of modes of production causing infrastructural changes that threaten the reproduction of a mode of production and ^{leads to a} alienating class formation, other superstructures are required to justify these changes.² Geertz's definition of religion, given at the beginning of this essay, corresponds to what is meant by a superstructure here.³ The infrastructure is the articulated modes of production within a social formation.⁴ Superstructural reconstruction is demanded not as a result of contact with other superstructures as Horton would advocate, but to overcome the alienating influence of infrastructural changes. Van Binsbergen notes that this reconstruction has taken three forms in Zambian religious innovations (1981:57). He refers to these three as a correspondence, a dialectical correspondence, and a dialectical compensation.

Correspondence involves acquiescence or even a positive support for the infrastructural change. Examples of this are the chieftain cults that emerged with the tributary mode of production and much of missionary Christianity that endorsed the "civilizing" influence of capitalism.

Considerable attention is devoted in van Binsbergen's study to the category of a dialectically corresponding religious response. Here he notes a symbolic ambivalence as the response attempts to encompass the articulation experience. The result is "an ambivalence at the level of consciousness that impedes the emergence of class consciousness" (1981:58). The foremost example of this is the cults of affliction and some prophetic

cults. What van Binsbergen has noted with the affliction cults in Zambia is that their emergence involving alien attribution of evil and increasing individualism with "entrepreneurial attitudes" came at the time of an increase in the alien influence and enterpreneuring that was represented in the articulation between tributary social formations and mercantile trade. The change that occurred with the beginnings of industrial capital penetration on the socio-economic and political level was accompanied by further changes in affliction cults with the rise of prophetic leaders and regional identification of cults concomitant with increased individual aspirations and the establishment of colonial urban centers (1981:44). Significant here is that this religious innovation is not seen as a part of the ideological superstructure of any one mode of production alone but that, in offering escape from the "alien evils", they serve to aid in the acceptance of the social-structural changes occurring in the articulation process with a certain symbolic ambivalence. The increasing impersonal idiom of these cults recalls Horton's contention that the personal idiom of the microcosm (corresponding to the domestic mode of production) will become increasingly impersonal under the influence of the macrocosm (identifiable here as the capitalist mode of production). Van Binsbergen suggests a clever ideological intent here. In his words, "The pattern of diffusion of these cults and their association with alienness suggests that traders had a direct hand in their proliferation and spread. If this is true, then part of their inspiration may have derived from the need of

entrepreneurs to adopt and develop such a new conception of suffering as could free them from the evil connotations with which they used to be surrounded" (1981:163). This was an alternative to witchcraft with attenuated attention given to malice and guilt underlying suffering.

The third possible reconstruction that van Binsbergen notes is a dialectical compensation taking the form of protest movements. In this kind of response, revolutionary potential is evident as a class consciousness is made manifest within the religious idiom. With variation in other contexts, the example van Binsbergen studies is that of the Lumpa movement in Zambia led by the prophetess Alice Lenshina beginning in 1955 and growing rapidly in just a few years to include some sixty-five thousand people. What made the movement revolutionary was its symbolic revival calling for the reformation of the pre-articulation domestic community. Thus, there was a counter-acting of the articulation of modes of production and the beginnings of infrastructural change challenging the alienating peasantization and proletarianization that occur with articulation. As it presented a serious challenge to the interests of an emerging ruling class in Zambia, the Lumpa movement was rather brutally crushed in 1964. But similar expressions of dialectical compensation can be found in other independent churches and prophetic movements (1981:58 and chapter 8).

The nature of the effects of economic exploitation, with the accompanying alienating influence of the articulation process, as labour becomes increasingly commoditized in the formation

of peasantry and proletarian populations (not to mention the slave trade) has confronted African populations with an evil that certainly fits Geertz's notion of a breakdown of symbolic structures at the limits of a peoples endurance of suffering altering these peoples responses to natural evils. Van Binsbergen found in Zambian people that during the period of accelerated change between the two world wars when an unprecedented amount of ^{oppressed the people} misfortune in the form of epidemics of smallpox and influenza, locust plagues, together with economic depression, ~~oppressed the people,~~ that there was considerable breakdown of interpretations given for evil. Traditional understandings including witchcraft were considered inadequate to deal with the problems. Eschatological interpretations introduced by Watchtower movements offered incentive for endurance by promising that the suffering would not last long and would be followed by the inauguration of bliss. But these, though they achieved initial success, began to decline when their unfulfilled prophecies became evident. Affliction cults dealt with evil on a very individual level leaving behind the communal concerns of earlier interpretations of suffering. Hardships were experienced within an extremely individualist frame of reference (1981:171).

III

The concern with moral evil as encountered in ethical situation reveals changes reflecting quests for interpretation

that are perhaps best exemplified in studies that have been done on the phenomenon of sorcery. Socio-economic changes have effected changes in this practice as well. Dominique Zahan, postulates that, "Sorcery exists only in terms of an ideal society, communal in form, which by its very structure excludes the principle of the individual, of the isolated man." Substantiation for this given in the form of noting that to escape sorcery, African societies must resort to "disintegration and dispersion of traditional kinship, in other words, the rupture of ancestral social cohesion and the modification of modes of thought concerning society" (1979:101). Consideration of this opinion is given only to illustrate how a diametrically opposite view can perhaps better delineate the practice of sorcery. Sorcery can be viewed as a means of rupturing ancestral social cohesion as well, and a practice that becomes exacerbated before it disappears.

M. G. Marwick's study entitled "The Sociology of Sorcery in a Central African Tribe" (1967), entailing interpretation of data collected among the Chewa people of present day Zambia, points to the disintegrative function of sorcery. Beliefs in sorcery are viewed as a means of formulating tense relationships involving competition for leadership or property. These relationships are always personal ones in which all facets of personalities are exposed (1967:125-126). "Chewa beliefs in sorcery are... catalytic to the normal process of matrilineage segmentation in that they are a means by which redundant, insupportable

relationships, which through being close and personal cannot be quietly contracted out of, are dramatically blasted away" (1967:113). This understanding can be extended by questioning what Marwick calls "the normal process" and identifying the predisposing mechanisms of lineage segmentation.

With insight into the changing nature of pre-colonial African societies, especially with the rise of the tributary mode of production articulating via trade routes with mercantile capital, van Binsbergen has advanced another version of the understanding of sorcery practice. Early African societies having been deeply egalitarian were faced with a serious rupture when chieftainships emerged. A connection is noted between the institution of chieftainships and the "manipulative use of sorcery" as a means of curtailing envious subjects. The articulation with mercantile capital provided for an accumulation of individual wealth by chiefs. With "insufficient ideological justification of high status", the personal advancement of chiefs at communal expense, was protected by the terror of witchcraft. Chiefs as well as trade assumed witchcraft connotations (1981:162).

It may remain impossible to develop a generalized understanding of sorcery as understanding of the practice itself has undergone considerable change among those that believe in it. Still, understanding of this phenomenon in Africa seems to emerge best at the juncture of individual achievement and strong social cohesion ideologies. The recurrent close association of "envy, disaster, property, and witchcraft" gives further clues to the nature of the subject (E. Ardener 1970:149).

It is in the jealously egalitarian societies that incidence of sorcery is greatest. But the source of this jealousy needs to be identified. In a changing society it is more apt to come from outside influences; as with the penetration of capital enabling individuals to realize an accumulation of wealth. That the understanding of sorcery by these people can also change has been noted in some studies. Marwick points out that sorcery used to serve a very conservative function; "an effective means of dramatizing social norms...(by providing) in the person of the mystical evil-doer, a symbol of all that is held to be anti-social and illegitimate." This conservative function identifying sorcery with the victimizer can change when "indigenous values are threatened by intrusive ones, and indigenous social relationships are displaced by new ones or at least fundamentally altered by new conditions... (In this new situation) the moral aspect of sorcery sometimes has reference to the victim in that his misfortune may be retrospectively attributed to his own foolishness or failings" (1967:124).⁵

The tension between the incompatible values of "achievement as evil egotism" and "achievement as rendering life its ultimate meaning", which is not at all unique to Africa, is evident ~~however~~, in the practice of sorcery (van Binsbergen 1981:165). The accelerated change caused by capital penetration into Africa needs to be examined further for clues to the exacerbated increase in sorcery as it is capitalism that so distinctly promotes the later view.⁶ During the colonial period individual achievers participating more clearly in the capitalist exploitation

ran the risks of being branded as witches. This may explain why witchcraft-eradication campaigns, widespread in some parts of Africa, are most often initiated by migrant labourers and persons pursuing modern careers (van Binsbergen 1981:165).

E. Ardener, in a study done in West Cameroon, indicates a similar pattern to what van Binsbergen suggests. The situation Ardener studies entails tremendous change wrought by the articulation of modes of production with changing responses on the part of the peoples effected. Refusal to articulate was reinforced by sorcery threats against individual achievers. Articulation began when it could be done through communal, cash-crop efforts and was accompanied by witchcraft eradication movements which in turn made it safe for individual achievers (1970:149).

A complete study of sorcery in Africa would have to develop as a history of changing beliefs. Early forms of the terrorizing practice were exacerbated by increased jealousies resulting from increased potential for the accumulation of wealth occurring with the articulation of modes of production. This accentuated form of the practice reflects the conflicts of an unintegrated synthesis of two or more ideologies. Like affliction cults, this form of sorcery belief is^a dialectically corresponding superstructural reconstruction that remains ambivalent and can serve the ideological interests of both individual achievers as well as those who seek to preserve the egalitarianism of the traditional societies. The rise of witchcraft eradication movements seems to be a more definite move toward an acquiescence

to the capitalist mode of production with its accompanying impersonal ideological idiom. Refusal to participate in the competitive struggle is given a morally evil connotation. Relationships become increasingly impersonal and segmented. In Marwick's words, this allows "tensions to be isolated and compartmentalized, and expressed in forms very different from those of a society small enough in scale to be dominated by the idea of personal influence" (1967:126). Sorcery may cease in an industrialized capitalist society, with the moral evils embedded in the competitive struggle assuming new forms of injustice, but among peasantry, where articulation continues, it is likely to remain.

It is necessary now to sum up this discussion of findings regarding what Geertz spoke of as a breakdown of symbolic structures at the limits of a peoples' endurance of suffering and at the limits of their experience of moral insight. The usefulness of the concept of superstructural-reconstruction, in the context of change resulting from the articulation of modes of production, becomes apparent as it encompasses not only the symbolizing process but also the underlying infrastructural sources of change. New contexts of suffering and moral evil are brought into focuss. Alienation resulting from the commoditization of labour and widespread inequity, in the distribution of material goods, confronted the African with new experiences of suffering. This historical-materialist perspective also yields insight into the ideological intent that can be embedded in reconstructed interpretations given to these sufferings.

It is a return to a more personal idiom attributing much of human suffering to human injustice and identifying behind the alien and impersonal economic transactions the exploitive intentions in relations of production. In-as-much as this provides an objectivating interpretation, it offers a position from which the nature and effectiveness of religious responses to suffering can be assessed.

IV

In concluding it will be useful to note further the intent of Geertz's treatment of religion as a cultural system. In his words, "the Problem of Meaning...is a matter of affirming, or at least recognizing, the inescapability of ignorance, pain, and injustice on the human plane while simultaneously denying that these irrationalities are characteristic of the world as a whole." The critical question that follows is: "How is it that this denial comes to be believed? and how is it that the religious man moves from a troubled perception of experienced disorder to a more or less settled conviction of fundamental order?" (1966:24).

Emerging into focus is a question that has not been dealt with directly in this essay and remains beyond the scope of this study but nevertheless is very relevant to it. That is the question of the relation of religion to ideology. This issue, however, need not arrest all investigation if, as Wyatt MacGaffey notes, it is recognized that, "The value of this definition (of religion that Geertz offers) is precisely

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(see notes)

that it applies as well to ideology as to belief, and indeed also to both social science and, at a certain level, natural science" (1981:231). Thus, when Geertz speaks of "affirming, or at least recognizing, the inescapability of ignorance, pain, and injustice on the human plane", the potential for ideological abuse is obvious. The question is whether religious cultural systems offer merely a restoration of intellectual and emotional equilibrium, while failing to deal with the sources of conflict that creates the disequilibrium, or whether such symbolic systems are a recognition of necessity and a projection of the potentiality for change. Geertz does note that religions afflict as much as they comfort; creating disequilibrium that can demand the redress of personal or social evils (1966:18). But this is not a point that he develops. It is a point, however, that is pivotal, in assessing religious change, in a context such as Africa.

Horton's theory of religious change focuses on the re-establishment of intellectual equilibrium and is a useful model for describing a part of the process of religious change in Africa. He fails, however, to address the ideological intent embedded in the alleged "value free" and impersonal idiom of western scientific thought. Western education it, must be remembered, was introduced into Africa in order that Africans could better cooperate in serving western interests.

The foremost value of a historical-materialist theory of religious change is that it unmasks the ideological interests that religious innovation can serve. Van Binsbergen's developing

theory is a very helpful contribution toward understanding this dynamic in an African context. He is convinced, that in the concept of the articulation of modes of production, he has located the foremost mechanism both predisposing and precipitating religious change. This articulation of pre-capitalist modes of production to to capitalism is "the major historical process having taken place in Africa over the last few centuries, and the necessary background for case studies of social, political or religious change" (1981:257). However, to the effectiveness of this problematic as a critique needs to be added theoretical insight that can account for the variability in genesis and expression of the emerging symbols. Religious symbolic structures persist in being able to occupy a position of relative autonomy. It is this capacity ~~that~~ of the symbolic that has stimulated van Binsbergen's study so much. In his words:

What is so fascinating in religion, African and otherwise, is not that it is a true reflexion of processes of material production, but that it tries (in vain?) to transcend these processes, thus displaying something of unique value; not, I should say, a spark of the divine, but at least courage on a truly human scale (1981:70).

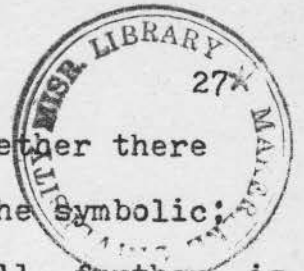
*Palor
conscience?*

In this regard van Binsbergen speaks of the need for a marxist theory of symbols with, perhaps, cross-fertilization with theories such as those of symbolic anthropologists. Developing this essay with an outline from symbolic anthropology is an attempt to recognize the overlapping concerns of these two problematics.

It seems to this author, at this point, that such a theory

would have to consider not only the symbolizing process as a concealing process, masking exploitative relationships, but would also have to consider the position symbols occupy in revealing and reconstructing new possibilities. Paul Ricoeur speaks of this dual potential of symbolized expression.⁷ The former critique he speaks of as a "hermeneutics of suspicion". As in a historical materialist critique, the hermeneutical task in this regard is to unmask the distortions that symbols can perpetuate (and in doing so, heighten class consciousness). However, to do justice to the symbolic function, Ricoeur is of the opinion that another direction of interpretation of symbols must be granted legitimacy. In the second approach, there is an effort away from reductionistic thought toward a "recollection of meaning". Here there is a progressive move to develop the full intentionality of the symbol. The aim is descriptive, not explanatory. There is a "truth" recognized in symbols as they signify fulfillment. Though Ricoeur does not claim the key to any absolute knowledge here, nevertheless, the eschatological directiveness of symbols is, in his opinion, a very real part of symbolic experience (Nelson:1982).

A theory of religious symbolism in a changing society would need to encompass this disclosive, eschatological dimension of symbols and the restoration of meaning that occurs with it. Certainly there are parallels here with the eschatological vision of historical-materialists but it would also enable one to investigate the contribution that millenarian beliefs make to revolutionary praxis. If symbols serve a disclosing function



they predispose transformation. One has to ask whether there can be transformation without such employment of the symbolic; and how do religious symbols contribute here? Still, further, is the need to investigate how such^a transformation symbol can be expl^oited, capitalizing on the concealing potentials of that same symbol and ^{using it} ^ to serve a disguising function, neutralizing praxis. Any eschatological vision is fraught with the dangers of being abused as a disguise. The final concern, is whether a development of a theory of symbols along the lines of this "conflict of interpretations", as Ricouer speaks of it, neutralizes and diffuses praxis or contributes to an objectivating, that can be useful to such praxis, as it discloses the role of symbolism in religious innovation.

How is it that denials of the irrationalities of ignorance, pain, and injustice come to be believed? The mystification of the situation is oneresponse and perhaps the more common one. Insight into the conflict laden context and affirmation of new possibilities, with mobilization of efforts toward their realization, is an alternative response. This latter response is not, however, to use Geertz's phrase, "asettled conviction of fundamental order". It is rather, the formulation and maintenance of a dynamic tension. To speak of this as a symbolic function, or in investigating how this potential emerges out of religious symbolism, requires a^{more} ^ expanded theory of symbolism than what Geertz employs. Not only the equilibrium creating capacity of symbols but their capacity to maintain a dynamic tension, perpetuating a disequilibrium, needs to be noted. It is in the religious symbolic formulation of this dialectic that hope can be created.

NOTES

- 1) Reference is being made here to the rise of chieftainships with their accompanying cults that were forms of alienating social structure as will be developed later in this essay.
- 2). The reproduction of a mode of production occurs on three levels: "Materially (so that the necessary productive forces are available), demographically (in order to have human personnel), organizationally and ideologically" (van Binsbergen 1981:43). Without this reproduction a mode of reproduction will not survive.
- 3) Geertz's description is close enough to serve our purposes here as it applies equally well to ideological and religious symbolic systems. "The superstructure defines a society's central concerns, major institutions, and basic norms and values...(it is) the central repository of meaning for the members of society. It offers them an explanatory framework" (van Binsbergen 1981:273).
- 4) Van Binsbergen defines an infrastructure as "the organization of the production upon which the participants' lives depend, and particularly such differential distribution of power and resources as dominate the relations of production" (1981:273).
- 5) In Marwick's study sample, half of the alleged sorcerers had anti-social traits before the suspicion and "about 60% of believed victims or their close associates had been considered guilty of a misdemeanour directly related to the attack made on them". Also indicated was "that modern objects of competition, such as cattle, money and other property, crop up in over half the cases of accusations" (1967:124).
- 6) That sorcery is conspicuously rare among East African pastoralists who resisted the penetration of capitalism is a further clue (Rigby 1981:103). Still, another clue, that may be evident, is the connection between the commoditization of labour and belief in zombies, a prominent aspect of sorcery, as E. Ardener indirectly suggests (1970:148).
- 7) Ricouer initially develops his hermeneutical theory in, Freud and Philosophy (1970). Further developments and applications appear in Conflict of Interpretations (1974).

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Nelson, Jack:

"Borden Symbolic"



(74) [Fall 82]

2/1/2-4: Does this symbol mean and religious symbolism exerts "pressure"?

1/3 - 2/2: If "order" is the "isomorphism" behind meaning, then "chaos" is "breaking". But not necessarily otherwise?

[How does one "get it" "anxiety"? "ambivalent unity"??]

3/2/1. Good ds - "the relation of history to symbolic structures".

2/2-3: Good. "anxiety-provoking elements" as part "intellectual ideas".

8/2/1. Good analysis of Barba's ^{view} ~~idea~~ of signs - "explanation"?

[Walt of Fernandez?]. ex-in Barba (ed)].

19/3/1: The issue is "purposeful" exchange value over use value? (Look at Tausky?)

[H] Good - the bringing together of Auden's study, Van der Berg, etc.

22/2/1: The calling theirs. - good. Develop in "comparative study" ^{perhaps?} → 25/3

23/31: How does one go from practice - of the
relation of religion to ideology [Althusser? -
look also at Foucault?]

25/11/96: Look at the material on "false consciousness"
also, Foucault, S. in Modes, in (ed).

26/1-2: Look surely "meaning" in "evolutionary
direction" is based on teleological ideas
developed and in which words of philosophy?



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