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# SOME DEVELOPMENTS IN BEMBA RELIGIOUS HISTORY <sup>1)</sup>

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 North-eastern 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. <sup>2)</sup> 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.

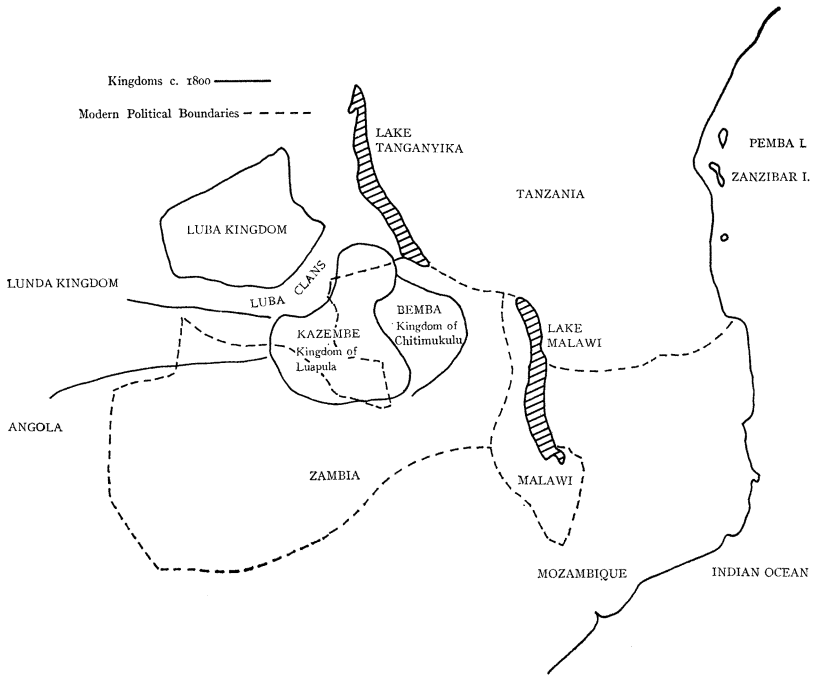
What is particularly interesting historically about the Bemba is that at least since the rise of the Luba-Lunda states, discernible adaptations and innovations have occurred within their religious system which have largely affected their religious practices and beliefs.

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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.

2) See **Map I.**

## MAP I



Kingdoms circa 1800  
Modern political boundaries

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

through contacts with other peoples. Intermittent raiding in the eighteenth century and territorial conquests in the nineteenth century brought the Bemba into contact with societies having different religious ideas and practices from their own. New peoples settling in Bemband created social problems of organization and political problems of land control and land usage. Likewise, religious crises grew out of the immigrant peoples' need to establish ritual relations with their new land while maintaining connexions with their previous religious institutions, and also out of the need for local religious institutions to accommodate the new religious ideas and practices diffused by this interaction of peoples.

These are large and bold assertions and novel ones, too, since little attention has previously been paid to Bemba religious history. On what sort of evidence are they based? Aside from the few reports and diaries of the well-known explorers and missionaries who were in the area in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,<sup>3)</sup> written documents from the region date back to around the beginning of the colonial period in the late nineteenth century. The systematic collection of oral histories in much of this region has, except in a few cases, not been undertaken.<sup>4)</sup> These limitations of the written and oral material have decidedly been the major factor in the emphasis of historians of this area on politics and trade in the nineteenth century, as pre-colonial history has been reconstructed.

Yet, while being particularly adaptable for the reconstruction of political histories, the oral material which has been collected in these few cases is less useful for the reconstruction of religious developments. Oral histories, while being generally maintained for purposes of political sanction or legitimacy,<sup>5)</sup> generally interpret religious developments in terms of their political importance and fail to credit

3) Lacerda, Father Pinto, Gamitto and Livingstone are the most well-known of the early explorers and missionaries who have written in this area.

4) See Vansina, J., *Kingdoms of the Savanna*, Madison 1966, 71. Andrew Roberts' *The political history of the Bemba (of North-eastern Zambia) to 1900*, (doctoral dissertation: University of Wisconsin 1966), which will soon be published, is my main source for this type of material. Ian Cunnison's various works on the Luapula peoples (*The Luapula Peoples of Northern Rhodesia*, Manchester 1959, *History on the Luapula*, Rhodes-Livingstone Paper 21, Capetown 1951, and *The reigns of the Kazembes*, *Northern Rhodesia Journal* 3 (2) 1956, 131-8) are equally important sources for that particular area. Vernon Brelsford has also published several pieces of traditional material on the Bemba, and I use them sparingly and where they seem reliable, in conjunction with Roberts' material.

5) This is discussed by Cunnison, *History on the Luapula*, 22.

those developments which occur independently of non-political motives with anything other than a political interpretation. Also, while in many cases oral histories in this area go back to the days of the ancestors in the Luba-Lunda homelands, for the Bemba they do so only in terms of a genealogical list of names of notable rulers and a few sparse remarks about their achievements.<sup>6)</sup> Traditions from over three or four generations ago seem to have lost all but the important genealogical details.

Consequently, much of the evidence presented in this article is based on linguistic and ethnographic sources, especially in the discussion of earlier events for which oral histories and written documents are not reliable or available. Historical use of linguistic data from this area has, with one general exception, not been undertaken previously. The general exception is, of course, Malcolm Guthrie's study of cognate words from languages in this area which led him to postulate it as the origin of the Bantu expansion.<sup>7)</sup> The historical interpretation of ethnographic data in this area has received even less attention than that of linguistic data.<sup>8)</sup> The evidence based on linguistic and ethnographic sources for this study, therefore, has been developed independently from some of the linguistic and ethnographic data which is available for this region.<sup>9)</sup>

In addition, certain methodological requirements are necessary for

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6) Ann Tweedie has attempted to reconstruct a political history of the Bemba based on their chiefly genealogies, and other traditions in the area, in *Towards a history of the Bemba*, in Stokes and Brown (eds.), *The Zambesian Past*, Manchester 1966, 197-215.

7) Guthrie, M., Some aspects of the pre-history of the Bantu languages, *Jour. of Afr. Hist.* 3 (2) 1962, 273-82.

8) The only notable piece of historical work based in part on ethnographic "documents" from this area is Vansina, *The bells of kings*, *Jour. of Afr. Hist.* 10 (2) 1969.

9) Dictionaries and vocabularies of the languages in this area, where they are available, are obvious sources of linguistic data. Those used in this study are Avermaet, *Dictionnaire Kiluba-Français*, Tervuren 1954; de Clerq, *Dictionnaire Tshiluba-Français*. Leopoldville 1960; Coupez, A. *Esquisse de la Langue Holoholo*, Tervuren 1955; Doke, C. M., *English-Lamba Dictionary*, London 1935 and *English-Lala Dictionary*, London 1936; Scott, D.C., *Dictionary of the Man'yanja Language*, Edinburgh 1892; Torrend, J., *Dictionary of the Bantu-Botatwe Language*, London 1967; The White Fathers, *Bemba-English Dictionary*, London 1954 and Zambesi Mission, *English Cinyanja Dictionary*, Blantyre 1955. Another important source is Johnston, H.H., *Comparative Study of the Bantu and Semi-Bantu Languages*, Oxford 1919. Further, Malcolm Guthrie's unpublished Index of common Bantu starred forms, and reconstruction of cognate forms of words found in this area is an invaluable index of words with widespread distributions.

handling these sources. The methodology used to reconstruct historical developments from Linguistic sources is suggested by Sapir<sup>10)</sup> and Ehret,<sup>11)</sup> and from ethnographic sources, by Vansina.<sup>12)</sup> Since the methods of using linguistic sources are handled separately below, I shall not discuss them here. However, as the ethnographic methods are woven into the following discussion, perhaps it would be useful to first indicate what they are and outline how they are later applied.

Vansina writes that "ethnographic sources are artifacts, customs or beliefs held by a group of people which testify to earlier usage in the past."<sup>13)</sup> In this article we are dealing with ethnographic sources in the form of the customs or beliefs held by the Bemba and neighbouring peoples.

In one instance presented later, certain hereditary offices of priest-councillors about the court of the Bemba king, the Chitimukulu, are reserved for members of specific clans, described by Richards in 1951. Yet both Richards and Roberts point out that clan organization and leadership are of no political importance in Bembaland, except in the case of the royal clan to which all the Chitimukulu belong. This custom of reservation, then, appears to be a survival of an earlier feature of political organization which was of some importance.<sup>14)</sup>

At the same time, traditions of the Bemba royal burial priest, the Shimwalule, indicate that when Chitimukulu was establishing political control in Bembaland, he appointed a chief who was previously established on the plateau to a position of ritual importance surrounding his kingship, namely that of his burial priest.

By combining the evidence in this tradition with that inferred from the custom of reservation described above, by argument of extrapolation<sup>15)</sup> we can reach the hypothesis that earlier chiefs on the plateau who were members of different clans were incorporated into

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10) Sapir, Edward, Time perspective in aboriginal American culture, reprint in D. Mandelbaum, *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture, and Personality*, Berkeley, 1949, 389-462.

11) Ehret, Christopher, *History of the Southern Nilotes to 1600*, (Doctoral Dissertation; Northwestern Univ., 1969).

12) Vansina Jan, The use of ethnographic data as sources for history, in T.O. Ranger (ed.), *Emerging Themes in African History*, Nairobi, 1968.

13) *Ibid.*, 97.

14) See Vansina's discussion of the argument of survival, *ibid.*, 107-112.

15) *Ibid.*, 107 f.: see Vansina's argument of extrapolation which states "that where a feature forms part of a complex and is a necessary part of it, if another feature of the same complex is attested for an earlier period than the ethnographic present this one must have been present too."

ritual positions surrounding the kingship of the Chitimukulu as he consolidated political and religious power on the plateau.

At another point in the discussion, the geographical spread of the belief in possession by spirits and oral traditions combine to tell us something about the relative age of this belief in Bemba land. Evidence from the ethnographic present indicates that belief in spirit possession is known in both Bemba land and the Luapula Valley to the west. Yet oral traditions in the Luapula Valley relate that this belief was unknown to the earlier inhabitants of the valley until the late nineteenth century. Among these earlier inhabitants are the Shila whose traditions refer to the arrival of a group of Bemba under the leadership of a royal from Chitimukulu's kingdom. Lunda traditions in the valley confirm that these Bemba were settled in the valley when they arrived around 1740.

Since the belief in spirit possession was unknown to the earlier inhabitants of the valley and among these were Bemba who had left the plateau sometime after the Chitimukulu dynasty was established there, we can postulate that these Bemba did not know of the belief in spirit possession and that this belief was also unknown in Bemba land at the time. Stated positively, we can postulate that belief in possession by spirits became known in Bemba land some time after Chitimukulu's arrival there.

These are two of the significant uses made of ethnographic sources in this article. We now turn to the analysis of linguistic sources for evidence of Bemba religious history.

#### I. INDICATIONS FROM LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE OF DEVELOPMENTS IN BEMBA RELIGION

The religious system of the Bemba contains beliefs and practices which are common among Bantu peoples in central Africa. Thus the Bemba share with many other peoples belief in tutelary spirits who are thought to control all aspects of life, and belief in witchcraft and sorcery. They employ, as do many other societies, headmen and priests who must intercede with the spirits on behalf of the people and diviners and medicine men who act as religious specialists. But the broad similarities between the Bemba religious system and most other central African religions <sup>16)</sup> should not lead one to the assump-

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16) See Vansina, *Kingdoms*, 30-2.

tion that there have been no developments in Bemba religious history which are peculiar to it.

Some of these developments are reflected in the specific ways in which certain words are used in Bemba religion. It is not too unreasonable to think that words which are symbols of ideas should reflect various developments in an ideological system such as a religion. Bemba words with specific religious meanings lead to some insights about how certain ideas and beliefs came into use among the Bemba and how they have subsequently changed.

The Bemba believe in a supreme, distant god, called *Lesa*, who is considered to be the creator of men. Since he can be worshipped by individuals, no cults, priests, or headmen are necessary to intercede with him. *Lesa* is thought of as being so distant that he is rarely involved in the embroilments of daily activity. Many peoples surrounding the Bemba area also speak of their supreme being as *Lesa*, while others farther away use a different name for him.<sup>17)</sup>

The worship of tutelary spirits, however, is the most significant personal religious commitment among the Bemba. Spirits of deceased persons in general are referred to as *(mi)pashi*.<sup>18)</sup> Chiefs and headmen act as intermediaries between the people and these ancestral spirits. More recently, as will be explained below, the Bemba have come to use the word *-pashi* to refer particularly to the ancestors of chiefs. Also, there are nature spirits which are believed to inhabit unusual natural objects, such as large trees, water-falls, and peculiar rocks. These are called *ngulu* by the Bemba and a few surrounding peoples.<sup>19)</sup> They are often referred to as "legendary human beings, and occasionally as chiefs, but they are not thought to belong to any tribe now inhabiting the plateau."<sup>20)</sup> Priests act as intermediaries for these spirits who are believed to affect the fertility of the land and the prosperity of hunters and fishermen.

The distribution of these Bemba terms for their god and spirits, presented on Map II, in conjunction with other linguistic material on the dialects in this area, suggest some historical assumptions about the relative periods in which they came into use in this region. All the people in the areas surrounding the Bemba and mentioned on

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17) See distribution of *Lesa* on Map II.

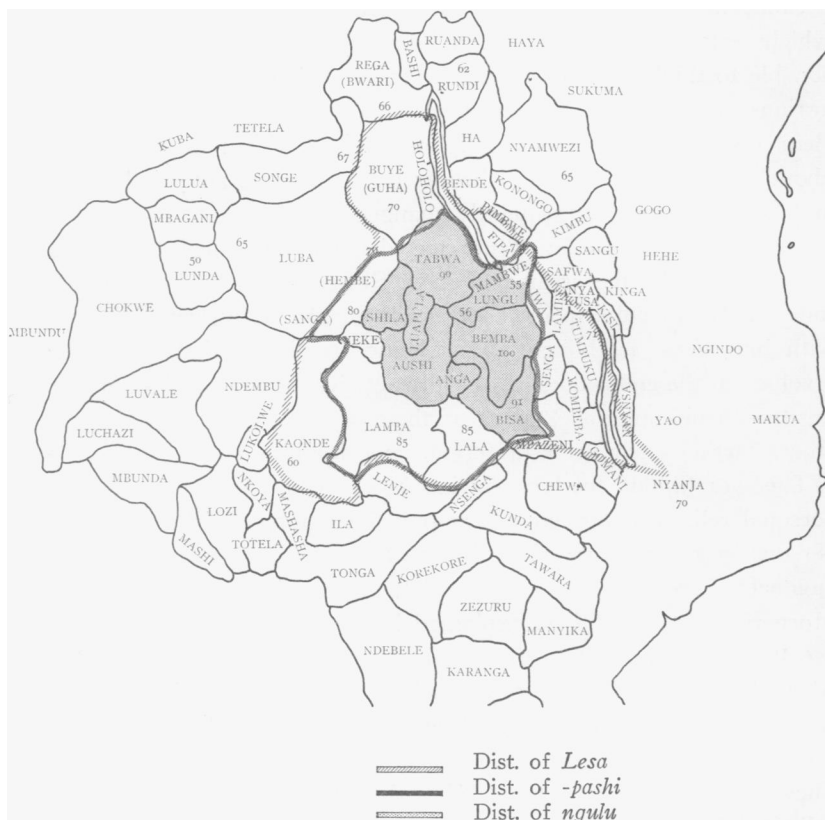
18) See distribution of *-pashi* on Map II.

19) See distribution of *ngulu* on Map II.

20) Roberts, A., *The Lumpa Church of Alice Lenshina and its antecedents*, mimeo. (unpublished), 3.



## MAP II



Map II speak dialects of Bantu. For a long time these dialects have gone through a process of differentiation, so that today there is mutual intelligibility only within small groups of them.

In limited areas this process of dialect differentiation can be reasonably outlined. This is exemplified by the amount of correspondence between basic vocabularies of the dialects in an area. Basic vocabulary correspondence between the dialects around Bembaland for which sources are available is presented in Table A. On Map III these amounts of correspondence are scored in relation to the Bemba dialect. An isogloss demarks the area in which there is eighty-five percent or more correspondence with Bemba. Within this area the dialects are mutually intelligible.

From this information we can postulate the three most recent periods in the process of dialect differentiation in this region. The difference in correspondence between the dialects within the isogloss represents the most recent period when they are beginning to differentiate from each other. The period previous to this is one in which all the dialects within the isogloss were the same and were part of one dialect in the process of differentiating from those outside the isogloss. The earliest of these most recent three periods is when the dialects both within and surrounding the isogloss were about the same.

By comparing these three periods represented by the isogloss on Map III with the distributions of the words *Lesá*, *-páshí*, and *ngulu*, on Map II, we can postulate the relative difference in time when these three words began to be used in this region. Suffice it to say that *Lesá*, *-páshí*, and *ngulu* are words with limited and solid distributions among Bantu dialects. This indicates initially that they have all come into use in recent periods of Bantu dialect differentiation.<sup>21</sup>) *Lesá* was being used before the dialects within the isogloss began to separate from those outside it. *-Páshí*, in its wider sense of ancestral spirits, generally seems to have come into use before the dialects within the isogloss began to separate. *Ngulu* seems to have emerged in some of the dialects inside the isogloss well after they had begun to differentiate in the most recent period. This leads to the conclusion that *ngulu* came into use at a more recent time than *Lesá* or *-páshí* among Bemba speakers.

I shall discuss the *ngulu* spirits and their role in Bemba religious history later on in this article. At this point, however, it is important to note a correspondence between the linguistic evidence and the oral traditions in the Luapula Valley. As we have seen, linguistic evidence suggests that the use of the word *ngulu* and its application to nature spirits arose some time after differentiation had begun between Lala-

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21) The reverse of this argument would be that the limited and solid distributions of these words indicate that they are ancient; but this would contradict one of Sapir's basic arguments; viz., that words with widespread, broken distributions are ancient, and is most probably invalid. It should be stated here that I have found no evidence of borrowing for any of these words from outside the areas in which they appear on Map II. In fact, this spread further indicates that they have most likely emerged out of the Bemba group of dialects. The distributional argument of spill over applies here. A word is found over a whole dialect area and in parts of other dialect areas adjacent to the former. It must have originated in the central dialect area, given no evidence of outside borrowing.

TABLE A

Bemba	91	90	90	55	56	85	80	73	70	70	71	70	67	65	65	65	62	50	69
Bisa		81		62	52	80	74	78	60	67	55	62	56	68	66	—	—	43	
Tabwa	90	81		59	58	75	71	70	63	69	53	50	47	61	62	56	40	46	
Mambwe	55	62			93	60	43	83	52	52	—	40	38	46	65	43	38	40	
Lungu	56	52		93	58	58	50	86	38	55	40	40	48	52	63	55	35	35	
Lala-Lamba	85	80		60			63	72	45	43	52	49	45	55	52	45	40	37	
Luba Sanga	80	74		43	50	63	60	60	65	79	—	45	67	63	61	72	40	70	
Fipa	73	78		83	86	72	60	50	50	44	34	50	42	55	68	57	50	40	
Guha	70	63		52	38	45	65	44				86							
East Luba	70	67		52	55	43	79	44											
Tumbuka	71	55		—	40	52	—	34											
Cinyanja	70	62		40	40	49	45	50											
Luba Songe	67	56		38	48	45	67	42		86									
Bwari	66	68		46	52	55	63	55											
Nyamwezi	65	66		65	63	52	61	68											
Luba-Lulua	65	—		43	55	45	72	57											
Rundi	62	—		38	35	40	40	50											
Lunda	50	43		40	35	37	70	40											
Kaonde				40	35	37	70	40											



which *ngulu* appears equally testifies at least to its pre-Bemba existence.

So far as the word *-pashi* is concerned, we can make some additional linguistic deductions over and above those derived from examination of the isogloss. In reference to the distribution of *-pashi*, we can see that it extends into areas where people speak Lungu and Mambwe dialects. These dialects, while being on the periphery of a larger group of dialects with close vocabulary correspondence, are remarkably distinct from them. (see Table A) In the Bemba and Bisa dialects *-pashi* refers both to “ancestral spirits” and “spirits of chiefly ancestors”, yet in Lungu and Mambwe, it refers only to the latter. Furthermore, both Lungu and Mambwe have the word *-zimu* in their dialects, meaning “ancestral spirits”. This word does not appear in Bemba. This indicates that *-pashi* was borrowed into Lungu and Mambwe from Bemba at a time when it referred to “chiefly ancestral spirits”. This concept was probably not defined specifically in Lungu and Mambwe beliefs, since they lacked their own word for it before they borrowed *-pashi* from the Bemba.

We know that Bemba chiefs in the nineteenth century conquered areas inhabited by Lungu and Mambwe peoples and established political control over them. It was probably at this time that *-pashi* was borrowed. We also know that the Bemba developed a state religion centred around the ancestral spirits of the *bena ngandu* <sup>24)</sup> paramount, Chitimukulu. “The religion of the Bemba,” writes Andrew Roberts, “— their sense of the supernatural and their means of influencing its action among mortals — is essentially a political religion centered on their chiefs and the rituals of their chiefs. <sup>25)</sup> Elaborating on this theme, Audrey Richards has noted: “the worship of the dead chief’s spirits is the essential element of Bemba religion.” <sup>26)</sup>

The linguistic evidence here, however, implies rather more than merely that the Lungu and Mambwe picked up *-pashi*, in its sense of “spirits of chiefly ancestors”, from the Bemba in the nineteenth century. It also suggests a development within Bemba thinking itself, a development from a period when *-pashi* meant the ancestral spirits

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24) *bena ngandu* is the Bemba term for “people of the crocodile”, the clan of Bemba chiefs.

25) Roberts, *Lumpa Church*, 2.

26) Richards, Audrey, *The Bemba of North-eastern Rhodesia*, in E. Colson and M. Gluckman (eds.), *Seven Tribes of British Central Africa*, Manchester 1951, 168-9.

in a generalized way to a period in which it pre-eminently meant the spirits of chiefly ancestors. The fact that a new and different word to describe the chiefly ancestors did not appear among the Bemba, as it did among the Mambwe and Lungu, certainly does not indicate their relative unimportance. The reverse is true. Among the Bemba the chiefly ancestors came to embody the whole notion of the continued influence of ancestral spirits, so that the word *-pashi* came to refer above all to them.

This is a development which can be inferred from the linguistic evidence but not described on the basis of that evidence alone. We must now turn to the oral and ethnographic evidence which in this instance provides abundant supporting data. On this basis I shall try to describe the political and religious implications of the shift of emphasis from *-pashi* in the wider sense to *-pashi* in the narrower sense of chiefly ancestors. I shall also try to establish the impact of the rise of the royal cult on the *ngulu* spirit system; for if the *ngulu* idea may have been later in time than the generalized *-pashi* concept, it certainly pre-dated the cult of the dead *bena ngandu* chiefs.

## II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHIEFLY CULT

Vansina has noted that ancestor worship is prominent, not so much in the Bemba region, but rather among the patrilineal groups of Katanga. The Bemba, he suggests, worship "shades of recently deceased persons whom the worshipper has known during his life."<sup>27</sup>) Yet the most visible religious development among the Bemba has been the growth of a strong, central ancestral cult which is vitally linked to the emergence of the *bena ngandu* chiefs' hegemony on the Bemba plateau.

In their histories, the *bena ngandu* trace their ancestry back to 'Koola' or 'Buluba'. Roberts has summarized his interpretation of the arrival of the *bena ngandu* in Bemband as follows:

For some time before the sixteenth century, shifting cultivators, similar in culture to the Bemba of today, may have been moving into what is now eastern Zambia from the Congo basin, to the west and north-west. These peoples... were organised in chiefdoms, albeit small ones. At a late stage in these migrations, in the seventeenth century there arrived a group of the crocodile clan, probably from one of the Luba states bordering the Lunda empire of Mwata Yamvo in what is now western Katanga. These migrants settled in the middle of the great plateau to the south of Lake

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27) Vansina, *Kingdoms* 31.

Tanganyika. Here they subdued and replaced the earlier chiefs, but they took over some of the customs of their subjects, and together with them formed the tribe since known as the Bemba.<sup>28)</sup>

Much has been made of the *bena ngandu* chiefs' connection with the Luba-Lunda states, and a majority of the arguments seem to favor a Luba origin; but as Roberts points out in this regard: "So far from being an intrusive alien minority, like most such elites, the crocodile clan chiefs seem to have been part of a cultural majority which settled in the area over a prolonged period of time and absorbed or expelled the remnants of earlier peoples."<sup>29)</sup>

It is not clear how the first *bena ngandu* chiefs initially acquired the political control of Lubemba, their first area of settlement. Oral traditions refer to their military prowess, but it seems possible that not much resistance was encountered from the sparse and scattered population of the infertile Bemba plateau.

At any rate, the *bena ngandu* chiefs initially established themselves as rulers over what is now Lubemba and Chilinda, on either side of the Chambezi River.<sup>30)</sup> Lubemba became the territory of Chitimumkulu, the *bena ngandu* leader who brought the group from 'Koola'. Chilinda became the territory of his brother, Nkweto. Whether the *bena ngandu* chiefs were accepted by the people living on the plateau because of their military prowess or their new political ideas is unclear,<sup>31)</sup> but they did establish larger political units than had previously existed.

Whatever political relationship the *bena ngandu* chiefs forged with the existing chiefs on the plateau, many of the religious powers which these men exerted as the ritual leaders in their small territories were incorporated into a much larger system in which the ancestral spirits of the *bena ngandu* chiefs became the ritual focus of the territory. Previous to the arrival of the *bena ngandu*, religious systems on the plateau were localized either in small territorial units, in which hereditary chiefs interceded with their ancestral spirits on behalf of the people who lived in their territory,<sup>32)</sup> or around certain remarkable natural features in which the spirits called *ngulu* were believed to reside. *Ngulu* spirits were believed to control the fertility of the land

28) Roberts, A., The history of the Bemba, in R. Oliver (ed.), *The Middle Age of African History*, Oxford 1967, 66.

29) Roberts, *Political history*, 30.

30) Tweddie, Ann, *op. cit.*, 199.

31) See Vansina's discussion, *Kingdoms*, 97.

32) Richards, The Bemba of North-eastern Rhodesia, 171.



and the abundance of game in their local areas. They were attended by hereditary priests who offered sacrifices on behalf of the chiefs and people who lived in the areas under the influence of the *ngulu* spirits. 33)

As the *bena ngandu* chiefs established their new, larger, territorial units in Lubemba and Chilinda, they seem gradually to have eclipsed the religious powers of earlier chiefs living within these territories. This process of establishing ritual control over the land seems to have taken place as the ancestors of previous chiefs were forgotten and the people living within the territories began to honour the ancestral spirits of the *bena ngandu* chiefs.

We may suggest two alternative models for this process. On the one hand we can attempt to extrapolate back from what we know of more recent expansions of *bena ngandu* power. Today in the oldest parts of Bemba land the ancestral spirits honoured before the *bena ngandu* established their power are no longer observed or remembered. In contrast to this, in the territories which Bemba chiefs have conquered more recently, the ritual powers of the previous political authorities are still remembered and honoured by the Bemba rulers themselves. As Andrew Roberts points out, because these pre-Bemba chiefs are still remembered by the people who inhabit the conquered areas, it is necessary for the conquerors to recognize their ritual powers over the resources of their territories.

It may be necessary for a great chief such as Mwamba (established circa 1800) to make offerings to the ancestors of some Bisa headmen; such men may have been chiefs who in their day ruled over large areas of Mwamba's present country, and they still have power to affect its fertility and prosperity. 34)

We may suppose that this reflects the first stage of a process of accommodation leading to assimilation and that within Bemba land itself there were originally such concessions made to the previous political and spiritual authorities. On the other hand, it is possible that on the plateau the whole process was hastened and simplified. If Vansina is correct in saying that in the Bemba region ancestral belief focuses only on the spirits of recently departed persons, it may be that the people of the plateau had a less coherent structure of

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33) Richards, *Land, Labour, and Diet in Northern Rhodesia*, London 1939, 241; see also, Roberts, *Political history*, 25.

34) Roberts, *ibid.*, 30.



ancestral observance before the arrival of the *bena ngandu* than did peoples conquered later.<sup>35)</sup> It may have been possible to move straight to a new and single system. At any rate, there is no doubt that the *bena ngandu* did accommodate previous chiefs within the new system, and we can outline the manner in which this took place.

It may be assumed that in the period following their acquisition of political control over Lubemba and Chilinda, the *bena ngandu* chiefs felt not only the need to consolidate their political hold, but also to establish ritual relations with their new land. In reserving succession to the recently established chiefships for the chiefly lineages of their own clan, the *bena ngandu* chiefs were faced with the problem of having to legitimize their political control over the land through the ritual powers held by chiefs of other clans already established on the plateau. They apparently attempted to incorporate the ritual powers of these chiefs by giving them offices surrounding the paramountcy of Chitimukulu or connected with the guardianship of special shrines or with the possession of specific ritual duties. Some of these earlier chiefs became part of a group of hereditary priest-councillors known as *bakabilo*. Other *bakabilo* were recruited from the ranks of Chitimukulu's followers to Lubemba, especially those of *bena ngandu* chiefly lineages who had been excluded from chiefly offices because of matrilineal succession.<sup>36)</sup> Other earlier chiefs were installed as priests at important *bena ngandu* shrines, while not actually being reckoned as *bakabilo*.

The most important of these incorporated chiefs seems to have been of the latter type. This was the first Shimwalule, the hereditary undertaker or burial priest of the Chitimukulu or other important *bena ngandu* chiefs. Because of his access to the most eminent *bena ngandu* ancestral spirits,<sup>37)</sup> besides burying the chiefs, the Shimwalule had the other important ritual functions of installing new chiefs and praying for rain.<sup>38)</sup> Traditions which Brelsford has collected on the Shimwalule relate that when Chitimukulu was fighting among

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35) Although there were chiefs in some parts of the plateau before Chitimukulu's arrival, the people living there may have had a quite fragmented social structure, perhaps because of the absence of corporate clan organizations. This would have contributed towards a shallow social memory.

36) Richards, Audrey, Social mechanisms for the transfer of political rights in some African tribes, *JRAI*, 90 (2) 1960, 183.

37) Brelsford, V., *Aspects of Bemba Chieftainship*, Rhodes-Livingstone Communication 2, 1944, 3.

38) *Ibid.*

the Bisa before he settled along the Kalunga River, he promised a particular Bisa headman named Kabotwe that he would be "provided for" if he became the royal undertaker for the *bena ngandu* chiefs. Upon Chiti's death, Kabotwe went to Mwalule, a richly wooded grove on the Kalunga River, upstream and on the opposite side to where Chiti had made his capitol. Thereupon he called for Chiti's body to be brought to him, which was done by Chiti's followers. Kabotwe then buried him in a special burial hut which he had made. Subsequently he was richly rewarded for his services. Since that time the office of Shimwalule has been localized at Mwalule and has become a coveted position with a long history of "murders and intrigues on the part of envious claimants."<sup>39)</sup>

While Roberts and Richards have collected traditions from some *bakabilo*, the office of Shimwalule is the only position held by a non-*bena ngandu* chief for which there is a detailed history of the title.<sup>40)</sup> Yet it is reasonable to assume from other ethnographic evidence that a good many *bakabilo* have emerged because of this process of consolidating the powers of earlier chiefs of other clans around *bena ngandu* chiefs. Audrey Richards has remarked that:

Clan heads do not exist (among the Bemba) except in so far as the *bakabilo* or hereditary priests and councillors of the paramount chief are appealed to occasionally as the oldest or most eminent members of their respective clans. In ceremonial life, the clan is still an important unit. Certain hereditary offices about the chief's court or connected with the guardianship of shrines must be held by members of specific clans.<sup>41)</sup>

It would appear then that as earlier chiefs were assimilated by the Chitimukulu dynasty, the political leadership which preceded *bena ngandu* rule on the plateau was undermined and the ritual power held by previous chiefs was transferred from their own group affiliations to those of the *bena ngandu*. As this occurred, ritual or religious power in Bembaland became associated with the control of *bena ngandu* chiefly relics and the access to the *bena ngandu* chiefly ancestral spirits. Taken as a whole, the *bakabilo* and other hereditary priests of the Chitimukulu dynasty comprised a "cult" which performed the specific ritual duties required to legitimize the political overlordship of the *bena ngandu* chiefs on the Bemba plateau.<sup>42)</sup>

<sup>39)</sup> Brelsford, V., Shimwalule: a study of a Bemba chief and priest, *Afr. Studies*, 1942, 207-233.

<sup>40)</sup> Roberts, personal communication, 19.2.1970.

<sup>41)</sup> Richards, The Bemba of Northeastern Rhodesia, 178.

<sup>42)</sup> Richards, A., Keeping the king divine, *Proceedings of the R.A.I.*, 1968, 26.

### III. THE NGULU SYSTEM

As this new nexus of religious power crystallized around the ancestral spirits of *bená ngandu* chiefs, other religious systems on the plateau were undoubtedly affected by it. We have seen how earlier chiefs and their ritual powers over the land were incorporated into the *bená ngandu* ancestral cult. But what of the *ngulu* nature spirits? Were these assimilated in much the same way?

This does not seem to have been the case. While the evidence suggests that the *ngulu* spirit system was initially accommodated by the *bená ngandu* chiefs, it does not suggest that it was incorporated into the royal ancestral cult. Quite to the contrary, it appears that as the ancestral cult of the dead *bená ngandu* chiefs consolidated ritual power on the plateau, the *ngulu* spirit system also increased its vitality as an alternative to the state religion.

A precise picture of how this development occurred is difficult to reconstruct, but a general outline can be suggested from the available information. Like any other chiefs the *bená ngandu* rulers must have been expected to propitiate the nature spirits in whose locality they established their political power. To neglect *ngulu* spirits was believed to cause incalculable disaster in terms of drought, famine, and plague. We can infer that this responsibility to the *ngulu* spirits was assumed by the Chitimukulu, possibly in the initial accommodations made to the spiritual authorities of his new land. As Audrey Richards writes:

Chitimukulu is responsible for sacrifices carried out at sites of dead chiefs' last villages and at certain haunted waterfalls or unusual natural phenomenon in his territory.<sup>43</sup>)

Yet the *ngulu* spirit system was not sustained by the propitiations of *bená ngandu* chiefs. In fact, it seems that the *bakabílo* may have eventually regarded *ngulu* spiritual powers as inimical to their own aspirations to control religious power on the plateau. Andrew Roberts suggests that the *bakabílo* attempted to suppress the *ngulu* spirit system in the older parts of Bembaland, although it is not clear by what means.

I interviewed one priest 'Kamima', in Ituna chiefdom, who named twenty-odd spirits associated with particular places in the oldest parts of Bembaland; it is not clear if they are really human spirits, they are not connected with particular dead people; but at least some can possess people or appear to them in dreams. Since I did not hear of any such spirits actually in Lubemba itself — the chiefdom of Chitimukulu — and since 'Kamima's'

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43) Richards, *Social mechanisms*, 182.

spirits are all located near the Ituna/Lubemba border; it is possible that these spirits characterize 'non-Bemba' cults which have been suppressed by the bakabilo of Chitimukulu, the chief officers of chiefly ritual who all live within Lubemba.<sup>44)</sup>

We can postulate that to whatever degree the *ngulu* spirit system was accommodated by the *bena ngandu* chiefs, it was reckoned as of peripheral importance to the state religious system. It is important now to ask by what means the *ngulu* spirit system retained its vitality as the royal ancestral cult was centralizing ritual power on the plateau.

It seems reasonable to assume that the vitality of a peripheral belief system in a society varies in relation both to the degree of conflict and anxiety experienced by the people to which it appeals and the degree to which the main belief system in the society is capable of coping with these anxieties. It may have been that the *ngulu* spirit system was sustained by its attraction to people on the plateau who for some reason were denied full participation in the state religion. Or, the *ngulu* spirit system may have appealed to those who could not find "relief from their afflictions" through the rituals and medicines of the *bena ngandu* cult.<sup>45)</sup> Yet it also seems true that the vitality of a peripheral ritual system depends on its ability to innovate in response to the ritual needs of the society it serves. The *ngulu* spirit system appears to have innovated in this respect, possibly in two different ways. First, it may have incorporated elements of other pre-Chitimukulu religious systems on the plateau which were either suppressed by or excluded from the royal cult system. Previous ancestral spirits which were important to the people on the plateau before Chitimukulu's arrival may have been deified in the *ngulu* spirit system as they were excluded from the *bena ngandu* pantheon of dead chiefs. Andrew Roberts makes this suggestion as follows:

There is also the possibility that certain pre-Chitimukulu chiefs are remembered, even if only unwittingly, in the names of various spirits associated with specific places in the older parts of Bemba land.<sup>46)</sup>

Second, the *ngulu* spirit system was able to incorporate new religious beliefs and practices which were either introduced to the Bemba through contacts with other peoples or were invented by the Bemba

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44) Roberts, personal communication, 10.11.1969.

45) These two reasons are suggested by I. M. Lewis for the "continuing vitality of spirit possession cults in the impress of Islam", *Islam in Tropical Africa*, London 1966, 64-5.

46) Roberts, *Political history*, 90.

themselves some time after the royal ancestral cult established ritual dominance on the plateau. This process is most visible in the development of beliefs about spirit possession and spirit mediumship among the Bemba.

The original *ngulu* priests were not mediums. They acted as intermediaries between the spirits and the people but were not possessed by the spirits. In fact, it seems that the idea that men or women could be possessed by spirits was unknown to the Bemba until after the Chitimukulu dynasty had established itself in Bemba land. This emerges, for example, from the history of the movement of a Bemba chiefly family under the leadership of Nkuba, which left Bemba land some time after Chitimukulu's settlement there. This Bemba group settled in the Luapula Valley where, their oral traditions relate, they gave the idea of chiefs to the chiefless Bwilile who were already living there. When Kazembe's Lunda peoples settled in the Luapula Valley around 1740, they established control over the Bemba and the Bwilile, who by this time had begun to converge.<sup>47)</sup> The evidence is that not one of these three groups knew the concept of possession by spirits. Cunnison writes that:

Most of the spirits of the Luapula seem to be stationary and do not enter men. This is another way of saying that Bwilile, Shila, and Lunda, the earliest inhabitants of the valley, do not know the custom of being possessed by spirits.<sup>48)</sup>

In short, it seems plain that the Bemba came to know the custom of spirit possession only after the *bena ngandu* chiefly ancestral spirits were established as the central focus of Bemba religion. Yet how the idea of possession by spirits came into prominence among the Bemba is a question for future investigation. Spirit possession beliefs among the Bemba and nearby peoples have received little previous historical consideration, and we cannot deduce the origins of such belief in Bemba land from currently available linguistic and ethnographic material. Stefaniszyn's work among the Ambo,<sup>49)</sup> and Colson's and Garbett's studies of the Tonga and the Korekore,

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47) Cunnison argues that it was probably at this time that traditions became extremely important in the Luapula Valley as charters for land and water rights. Those who recognized the rights of Nkuba's family by conquest identified themselves separately from the Bwilile, who in turn maintained their own traditions legitimizing their own territorial claims. The former became known as 'Shila'.

48) Cunnison, *op. cit.*, 223.

49) Stefaniszyn, B., *Social and Ritual Life of the Ambo of Northern Rhodesia*, London 1964.

respectively, <sup>50</sup>) suggest that there are different types of spirit mediumship among the Central Bantu and give evidence of the borrowing of different types of spirit mediumship from one society to another. But for the Bemba, these problems will have to be worked out on the evidence provided by future research.

One thing that requires investigation is the fact that there are at least two types of spirit possession in Bemba land. In one type people are visited by *ngulu* in dreams and are known as *bakasesema*, 'prophets'. These make prophecies and find medicines. In the more vigorous type people are actually believed to be the vehicles of spirits who are possessing them. These are called *mfumu sha mipashi*, 'chiefs of spirits'. Beside making prophecies and finding medicines, these go into trances, dance, and make witchcraft accusations.

It is possible that these types of spirit possession represent a sequence wherein the more complex is an elaboration of the simpler one. Yet, one or both types may have been borrowed from neighbouring peoples.

Since it is precisely the *ngulu* nature spirits which are now believed to possess people in Bemba land, we may reasonably infer that belief in possession by *ngulu* spirits developed in response to the ritual needs of the Bemba people after the establishment of the Bemba royal cult and was an important factor in the continuing vitality of the *ngulu* spirit system as an alternative to the ritual system of the *benangandu* chiefs.

History in the Luapula Valley provides an example of this process continuing to operate around the beginning of the colonial period. I would argue here that the *ngulu* spirit system responded to earlier Bemba ritual needs in similar ways. As Bemba religious history is reconstructed for the pre-colonial period, some such earlier examples should emerge.

In the early part of the present century, many peoples, among them Bemba, Lungu and Mambwe, were emigrating to the Luapula Valley. <sup>51</sup>) As they settled in areas under Kazembe's political control — and by this time administered from a distance by the British and Belgians — as was the custom, they were informed of the various tutelary spirits by earlier residents of the valley. For the most part these spirits were either those of the first chiefs of the land or of

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<sup>50</sup>) See these chapters in J. Beattie and J. Middleton (eds.), *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa*, London, 1969; Colson, pp. 69-103; Garbett, pp. 104-27.

<sup>51</sup>) Cunison, *Luapula Peoples*, 43.

*ngulu* shrines, neither of which were believed to possess people.<sup>52</sup>) Yet these spirits were obviously foreign to the immigrating tribesmen whose spiritual connexions were with their previous homelands. Thus, as in the case of Chitimukulu's *bena ngandu* more than two centuries earlier, the immigrant peoples lacked the necessary ritual mechanisms and religious authority to sanction the use of their new land's spiritual resources.

*Ngulu* spirit mediums from their own homelands, however, began to wander from the plateau to the new settlements of their tribesmen in the valley. There these mediums entreated their people to honor the stationary *ngulu* spirits of their new land, often acting as ritual intermediaries themselves for this purpose. "In this way," writes Cunnison, "later immigrants partake in the ritual of the land."<sup>53</sup>) It is in this way, too, that Bemba belief in possession by *ngulu* spirits helped to maintain tribal connexions outside of their tribal homelands throughout the colonial period.

Yet in addition to maintaining tribal connexions during the colonial period, *ngulu* spirit possession also became an important expression for popular religious adaptations. In fact, even though British arrogation of power decreased the wealth of the Chitimukulu and deprived the *bakabilo* of their main source of tribute, the *ngulu* spirit system has shown more vitality against colonial power than the royal Bemba cult. And in this manner the adaptation of the *ngulu* spirit system in the popular arena probably deprived the royal cult of any room to innovate on behalf of the people under colonial oppression.

Such a response is seen in the Lenshina Movement which arose in Bembaland in the spring of 1955, and eventually spread throughout most of Zambia and parts of Malawi. Lenshina proclaimed her eschatological message from the Copperbelt to Lake Tanganyika, baptizing her followers into her Lumpa Church and promising redemption to those who surrendered their magic charms. Her appeal was based on a universal call for the worship of God and Jesus Christ and no racial discrimination. The practice of her religion combined elements of Christianity and traditional spiritual belief.

Whether Lenshina intentionally appealed as an *ngulu* spirit medium at any time is uncertain, but to many of her followers and her enemies her Lumpa Church appeared to have connexions with the

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52) *Ibid.*, 223.

53) *Ibid.*, 225.



*ngulu* spirit system. Her enemies, largely Christian catechists and devotees, probably tried to discredit her movement by emphasizing her atavistic appeal which they claimed was enhanced by *ngulu* spirit mediumship.<sup>54</sup>) Colonial and missionary officials encouraged these attempts to denigrate Lenshina since they regarded her movement as regressive and heathen, and potentially disruptive. Yet many of her followers seem to have made the connection between Lenshina and the *ngulu* spirit system for more spiritual reasons. Like the *ngulu* spirit system, Lenshina's movement was syncretistic, and operated as an alternative to both the old and the new state religious systems. In this manner, it too was peripheral to the main beliefs in society. It seems that in its capacity to function as an alternative, offering relief to people for whom mission Christianity and Bemba royal cult rituals were insufficient, Lenshina's movement was associated in many people's minds with the *ngulu* spirit system, which seems to have become, by this time, an institutionalized alternative cult. As Dorothy Lehmann writes:

These *ngulu* prophesy and heal, that is, they have the power to find out under whose authority is the spirit who troubles the sick person. When this is established, the sick person is initiated, and on joining the society of the *ngulu* — 'it is a kind of church', one of our informants said — his sickness will stop.<sup>55</sup>)

Lenshina did nothing to dispel reports of this connexion.

After only three or four years the Lumpa Church began to lose its widespread appeal. It remained strong only in Bembaland where its more rigorous adherents also continued to resist colonial administration, and in time, even the African politicians of the United National Independence Party. By mid-1964, this resistance had broken into open violence, and as a result of over several hundred people being killed, the Lumpa Church was banned.

#### FURTHER REMARKS

Developments in Bemba religious history as described in this article are of the most general sort. Indeed, many other societies have gone through a process of state formation and have doubtless experienced similar changes in their ancestral and nature spirit beliefs. What is interesting about the Bemba case, however, is that some of the dimen-

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54) Taylor, J. V. and Lehmann, D. A., *Christians of the Copperbelt*, London 1961, 252.

55) *Ibid.*, 253.



sions of these changes are apparent, and furthermore, that they become apparent through the combination of various sorts of evidence.

Linguistic evidence points out first, the relative ages of the main Bemba concepts of God and spirits, and second, the fact that two peripheral dialects to the Bemba group borrowed the Bemba word for ancestral spirits at a time when it had come also to refer to chiefly ancestral spirits. As systematic collection of linguistic data in this area continues, undoubtedly many more historical insights and, indeed, explanations are to be gained from this type of evidence.

Oral traditions supplement the linguistic evidence concerning the latter development in ancestral spirit belief by describing the incorporation of earlier chiefs into the royal Bemba ancestral cult and the centralization of ritual power around the *bena ngandu* chiefly ancestors. Oral traditions also indicate that the belief in being possessed by spirits was unknown to the Bemba until after the *bena ngandu* chiefs were settled on the plateau.

But meanwhile this article can point out some of the areas in Bemba religious history in which fuller investigation and better types of evidence are needed. It also can stand to emphasize the incipience of historical study of African religious systems as a whole. Methods and ideas which are found relevant in this study could facilitate similar research among other peoples.