Religious Movements in Central Africa: A Theoretical Study

WILLY DE CRAEMER
The University of Pennsylvania

JAN VANSINA
The University of Wisconsin

RENÉE C. FOX
The University of Pennsylvania

A shared sense of discovery and frustration prompts us to write this article. Independently, from our anthropological, historical and sociological research in Zaire1 over a period of many years, we have been impressed with the pivotal role of religion and magic in that society. The recurrence and development of religious movements in Zaire throughout its known history is an archetypical expression of that predominance. In our view, these movements are an integral dimension of the cultures common to most parts of Zaire and to contiguous areas in Central Africa.2 A systemic feature of these cultures is that they are conducive to the emergence and evolution of movements with distinctive symbols, rites, beliefs and values. In turn, these movements constantly enrich the underlying cultures from which they emanate.

Despite a flood of recent publications on Central African religious movements, their core features are still not adequately recognized. One group of writers treats the movements in a narrowly deterministic social structural framework. They attach paramount importance to political or economic factors, ignoring the workings of culture or reducing them to byproducts of other processes. Another group of authors deals exclusively with cultural components, but does so in a way that focuses on symbols

1 Zaire is the term used to designate the area of the Congo (Zaire) basin that became the Independent Congo State in 1885, the Belgian Congo in 1908, the independent Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1960, and the Republic of Zaire in 1967.

2 In this paper, Central Africa includes Zaire, the northern parts of Angola and Zambia, the People's Republic of the Congo, the Republic of Gabon and parts of the United Republic of the Cameroons and the Central African Republic. Central African common culture may in fact cover a wider area than is included here.
and reifies them as ultimate, unchanging, universal entities. Existing classifications of movements are based on the wrong criteria. They do not contribute to an understanding of the core features involved. Thus they tend to label particular African movements as “millenarian,” “cargo cult,” “witch-finding,” “Zionist,” “Ethiopian,” and the like. In so doing, they miss the most essential features of all Central African religious movements. By singling out characteristics prominent in some movements but actually present in many or all of them, they give the mistaken impression that these features are absent in movements not labeled as such. For example, even though witch-finding is a primary goal in so-called witch-finding movements, there are no Central African movements without this goal.

Our perspective on Zairois religious movements is based on extensive field research in urban and rural areas throughout the country (with the exception of the northeastern region). We also have learned from a wide network of Zairois colleagues and friends, and from our long immersion in the everyday life of Zaire. In addition, we have had privileged access to archival materials that have expanded the scope of our knowledge and understanding.3

RELIGION AND MAGIC

Religion, as we define it, is a system of symbols, beliefs, myths and rites experienced as profoundly significant or serious, primarily because it provides individuals, groups and societies with an orientation toward ultimate conditions of existence. Religion provides an individual and collective self-definition. It shapes man’s cosmology and related patterns of cognition and is a fundamental source of social solidarity. Some of the

3 The most useful single collection of data were the archives of the former province of Luluabourg (Kananga). Other archives were consulted in numerous local government posts and missionary centers throughout Zaire. We also conducted interviews with African informants about religious movements in different regions of the country. And we benefited from the similar research of other social scientists in Congo and Zambia, as well as Zaire. In these ways we gathered materials on some thirty movements. We found that other observers overrepresented the number of separate religious movements, because they failed to recognize that as a movement traveled from one area to another it often underwent alterations, including a name change. Our data encompass all religious movements known to exist in the southern half and the northwest quarter of Zaire; they are less complete for the northeast region. Relevant writings by the authors include: Willy De Craemer, Jamaa and Ecclesia: a Charismatic Movement in the Congolese Catholic Church (Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1974); Renée C. Fox, Willy De Craemer and Jean-Marie Ribeauvillier, “The Second Independence: A Case Study of the Kwilu Rebellion in the Congo,” Comparative Studies in Society and History, VIII:1 (Oct. 1965), pp. 78–109; Renée C. Fox, “Traditionality and Modernity in the 1964 Congo Rebellion” (1969), unpublished manuscript; Jan Vansina, “Les mouvements religieux kuba (Kasai) à l’époque coloniale,” Etudes d’Histoire africaine, II (1971), pp. 155–87; Jan Vansina, “Lukoshi/Lupambula: Histoire d’un culte religieux dans les régions du Kasai et du Kwango (1920–1970),” Etudes d’Histoire africaine, V (1973), pp. 51–97.
problems of meaning to which religion is addressed are transcultural in the sense that they are confronted and experienced by members of every society. Other problems of meaning are more culture-bound.

In our view, the constituent components of magic are the same as those of religion. However, in contradistinction to religion, magic is concerned with maximizing the attainment of specific goals of personal importance to the actor, through the patterned manipulation of rites, formulae and symbols. Although analytically distinguishable from one another, in practice religion and magic are often blended in ritual performance. The attitudes, rather than the behavior, of the individuals or groups engaged in such rites determine the mix of religiosity and magicality involved.

The differences between religion and magic set forth here are consonant with a set of distinctions made in Central African cultures. In this tradition, if the avowed goal is specific and self-oriented, the activity is considered anti-social magic. For example, in the cultural taxonomy of charms, charms to become wealthy, to steal or to achieve personal success in any form are socially disapproved, even though they abound. Those collective charms which are used to attain more diffuse and group-oriented goals are considered to be religious. An intermediary category of charms is specific in aim, but group-oriented; the charm that confers invulnerability on men in battle is religious for the community but often magical for the individual. Charms that insure fertility for women are religious for the individual who desires a child, providing that her desire coincides with that of the community. But if she wishes to have a child primarily as a way to achieve superiority over a rival wife then, and to that extent, the charms are considered magical.

ATTRIBUTES OF CENTRAL AFRICAN RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

A Central African religious movement exists when a collectivity not only accepts a new religious form but also transmits it to other individuals and groups. A new religious form usually consists of sets of existing rituals, symbols, beliefs and/or myths that have been reshuffled or recombined; only occasionally are completely new materials incorporated into it. A movement originates in a leader, a charismatic figure, whose inspiration stems from visions received in dreams or in a state of controlled possession. If the religious materials so introduced are to be recognized and accepted by others, they must be close enough to the fundamental components of classical Central African religion to be compatible with it.

The aim of all movements is to prevent misfortune and maximize good fortune. What gives a movement its dramatic power and its impetus for expansion are the belief and claim by the group in which it originated that the movement endows its members with special "force" and protection in
the face of adversity. This core focus and raison d'être of a religious move-
ment are also the most fundamental aspects of the Central African cosmic
view.

In this view, all experiences and goals that human beings consider de-
sirable and good are part of the natural order of things. Most important
among these positive values are health, fecundity, psychic security, har-
mony, power, status and wealth. Under ideal circumstances good prevails,
absolutely and exclusively. The Supreme Being, the Creator, who endows
all with life reigns distantly but beneficently over the universe and over
man. And the sphere between the living and the dead is filled with the
shades of ancestors and numerous kinds of spirits, whose intentions and
workings are good. One’s own thoughts, feelings and actions, as well as
those of the kin and members of the community on whom one’s identity,
well-being and very existence depend are as they ought to be: pure, posi-
tive and harmonious. Thus, “if matters were to take their natural course
. . . everyone [would] live out his natural span and . . . sink slowly from
senility into the grave . . . triumph [ing] over all . . . pitfalls . . . and achiev-
[ing] completion.”4

But this rarely happens. For the universe also throbs with malevolent
forces and presences that fall outside the natural order. All that is evil is
caused by them, through the malignant thoughts and feelings of significant
other persons.5 These psychic acts that produce harm may be unconscious
and inadvertent, or they may be the conscious intent of an individual who
uses ritualistic means to cause damage.6 In practice, this distinction is
often not made. Witchcraft or sorcery result from pride, envy, malice,
hostility and the like. Thoughts and feelings of a malefactor have the
capacity to cause harm, either directly or indirectly, through harnessing
the power of one of the spirits present in the cosmos. Illness, sterility,
failure, impoverishment, dissension, corruption, destruction, death—all
the negative, disappointing, tragic experiences of life—are caused by
witchcraft or sorcery.

p. 171.
5 The case of one’s own malignant thoughts and feelings is explained as the
result of evil actions by others who have twisted one’s personality. The notion of
“responsibility” as it occurs in West European languages does not closely fit any
Central African semantic field.
6 In the anthropological literature, two major distinctions have been made be-
tween witchcraft and sorcery: witchcraft is defined as relying purely on internal
psychic power to harm, sorcery as making use of objects to do so. The second
distinction made is that witchcraft is an unconscious action, sorcery a conscious
one. In some instances, the two sets of distinctions have been intermingled. The
first is derived from the Azande case, as set forth by E.E. Evans-Pritchard. Mary
Douglas contends that it is difficult to maintain when discussing widely different cul-
tures. See M. Douglas, *Introduction, Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations* (Lon-
don: Tavistock, ASA Monographs no. 9, 1970), pp. xxvii–xxix. However, for most
of the culture area with which we are concerned the first distinction does hold.
Here not only are good and evil seen as polar opposites, but the dispelling of all evil is believed possible and by this means the normal state of affairs, the existence of all that is good, can be brought to pass. Yet, along with this dichotomous conception of good and evil and utopian credulity, there exists a notion of an ambiguous zone between good and evil that lies at the heart of the existential anxiety, distrust and vigilance that also characterize this cosmic view. Evil may come from any place at any time, through the medium of many different categories of people. It can result from one’s own actions, particularly from failure to live up to an important obligation or from violation of a taboo. Although the members of one’s family and clan, both living and dead, are a primordial source of security and well-being, they are also the persons most able and likely to cause one harm. “Behind the smiling face may lurk the hating heart.” This is particularly true of relatives, on the one hand, whose very closeness may generate the kind of rancor that emanates in witchcraft and sorcery, and of strangers, on the other, whose danger lies in the fact that they are unknown and thus may wield occult powers not subject to the community’s ordinary means of detection and control. In any case, the ambiguity of the region between good and evil lies not only in the discrepancy that may exist between the “mask” and the “intelligence inside it,” but also in the rapidity with which good may turn to evil. A person totally free of evil thoughts and feelings today may be completely possessed by them tomorrow, and the chameleon-like shift may be outside his intent or power to check.

In each successive community that embraces a religious movement, a group will assume responsibility for it. This group will either replicate the structure already built around the original leader, or local “lieutenants” will emerge and extend the charismatic authority. Visions from the dreams or states of possession of these lieutenants, or from other inspired “rank and file” members (both men and women) may be legitimately incorporated into the movement. Thus, as movements spread and develop in different locales, they undergo certain modifications. Such progressive transformations and the sense of renewal and reinforcement that they bring partly account for the fact that many movements last twenty-five years or longer, even though their millennial promises may not yet have been fulfilled.

We have thus far identified as essential characteristics of a Central African religious movement: the new organization of extant, largely tra-

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8 Closeness of kinship implies dense, multiplex and ambivalent relationships. They often give rise to great tension which, in Central African culture, may be expressed in witchcraft accusations or suspicions.
9 The quoted phrases come from a Pende proverb: “The mask is blind, but there is an intelligence inside it.”
ditional rituals, symbols, beliefs, and myths around the diffuse, collectivity-oriented goals associated with the "fortune-misfortune complex" of the larger culture. This new organization is inspired by the "giftedness" of a charismatic leader, is accepted by a collectivity and spreads from one community to another. The constellation of symbols, beliefs, myths and rites involved usually comes together in the notion and form of a collective charm. This is an object, made under inspiration by an individual for the community, that embodies the most powerful symbols of the movement.

The spread of individual charms, used by particular persons for specific purposes does not constitute a movement; nor does the elaboration of a new religious form in a given community if it does not travel beyond it or become accepted by other communities. A movement, then, must be "collective," and it must "move." We underscore these attributes, because both in the documentation we have examined and in the literature, certain religious phenomena that turn around individual charms and that are physically and sociologically stationary are misidentified as movements.

Our analysis of religious movements begins with an examination of the common Central African culture of which they are an expression. It then presents the essential cultural and social characteristics of such a movement in paradigmatic form, and goes on to discuss them in greater detail. A section is devoted to the dynamic aspects of such movements: their innovation, development and diffusion. Finally, some general theoretical and methodological considerations are presented.

COMMON CENTRAL AFRICAN CULTURE

To say that there is a common Central African culture means that certain constellations held to have overriding importance are shared by all the peoples of the area, whatever other differences may exist among them.10 These constellations have to do with religion but do not include all the details of each religion. They consist of sets of basic symbols, beliefs, values and patterns of ritual which are central to religion. Although the differences between Central African religions are striking, certain constellations are common to all of them. For example, in some societies ancestors feature prominently in the religious system, whereas in others greater importance is attached to nature spirits. Yet both ancestors and nature spirits play similar roles with respect to the overall fortune-misfortune complex. Like illustrations could be given for symbols, rituals and values. Even minor symbols, small details in ritual and nuances of belief

may coincide.\textsuperscript{11} These details support the plausibility of a common culture.\textsuperscript{12} Available historical data strongly suggest that this culture developed over a period of several thousand years. Among the various forces involved in the process social factors figured prominently.

In precolonial times, the main factors were the exchange of women, communication through trade or warfare, occasional migrations and the presence of endemic diseases. Women are the primary socializers of their children. In this capacity they introduced elements from the culture of their community of origin into their community of marriage. Sometimes this was done intentionally, sometimes not. It is a well-documented fact that a significant number of interethnic marriages occurred.\textsuperscript{13}

As for trade, we are certain that by the nineteenth century the whole Zaire basin belonged to only three or four trading networks. Traders spread cultural elements over wide areas, and various kinds of charms were among the objects traded. Charms to protect traders presupposed understanding and acceptance of their meaning by both the traders and the alien communities concerned. Otherwise the traders would not have been protected by their own charms.\textsuperscript{14}

The impact of migrations is self-explanatory. Warfare is also a form of contact and communication between people. In precolonial Central African societies war entailed not only movements of warriors but also of their kin and in this respect produced a mini-migration. Prisoners and slaves brought new cultural elements into their captors' communities. What is more, war magic, which was (and still is) an essential dimension of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Common to Central Africa is the notion that some harmful substance is hidden in the body of the witch that will give him (her) his (her) powers. The location of this substance varies. It can be in the stomach, liver, knee or in the calf of the leg. Common to the peoples of the Equatorial forest, from Gabon to Ituri, is the belief that it is hidden in the stomach (called everywhere likundu, or a related word).
\item \textsuperscript{12} They cannot be explained by "independent invention" but presuppose diffusion. The semantics involved support this contention: some words are common Bantu, as the famous *-dög-, "to bewitch" and its derivates. See M. Guthrie, \textit{Comparative Bantu} (London: Gregg, 1970), vol. 3, C.S. 644.
\item \textsuperscript{13} The matrilineal belt offers a rare opportunity to follow the spread of women, because their clan names traveled with them. Similar names are found from the Atlantic Ocean to the Kasai and from the Lualaba to the Luangwa—conclusive proof of a thorough exchange of women among the communities of the whole area. See Jan Vansina, \"Probing the Past of the Lower Kwilu Peoples,\" \textit{Paideuma}, \textbf{XIX-XX} (1973–74), pp. 345–9; Ian Cunnison, \textit{The Luapula Peoples of Northern Rhodesia} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), pp. 62, 158. The situation was probably identical in patrilineal areas. Some evidence of this was found by G. Hulstaert, \textit{Les Mongo: Aperçu général} (Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1961), Archives d'Ethnographie, no. 5, pp. 16–17.
\item \textsuperscript{14} For an historical example of the exchange of charms between traders, see Jan Vansina, \textit{The Tio Kingdom of the Middle Congo, 1880–1892} (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 263. This was done between trading partners for mutual protection. L. Frobenius, \textit{Im Schatten des Kongo Staates} (Berlin, 1907), p. 122 tells how Bamputu traders who had been robbed by Bambala put up a charm in the Bambala village. This caused panic and the Bambala not only returned the stolen goods but paid to have the traders' charm removed.
\end{itemize}
classical African warfare, often led to confrontation and even escalation of charms and countercharms. Borrowing of an enemy's charm was common practice.

The adaptation of agricultural systems to the environment contributed to the endemic character of certain diseases in Central Africa, notably malaria, sleeping sickness and dysentery. Anxiety about the ravages of disease fostered the development of medical charms and their exchange both within and between communities.

The culture common to Central Africa that existed in precolonial times can be called "classical." Its core elements have remained remarkably intact in the face of the enormous changes that Central Africa has undergone in the past century, which includes the colonial and postcolonial periods. The exchange of ideas was expanded and intensified by various means: improved transportation, extensive migrations, the introduction of mass media and the establishment of schools. Certain elements of new-world religions (Christianity and Islam) and of colonial political and economic systems were selectively incorporated into the common culture.

Parts of the common Central African culture that evolved and spread were religious movements. Contrary to the allegations of some writers, these movements were not purely or even primarily reactions to the stresses of the colonial experience or modernization. They were an integral part of the precolonial Central African tradition and they were primarily religious in nature.

**Paradigm of a Central African Religious Movement**

Movements begin with the visions of a leader, who experiences visions for several years before he or she convinces the local community that they are true. When the community accepts the message, it observes the newly proposed rituals that are expected to bring fortune to the village and do away with affliction and witchcraft. To convince the first community takes some time; one does not see a single-day victory but rather a period of ebullience with new cult members dancing and singing at night or during part of the day to attract others. Once the first congregation is formed (whether it comprises all the members of a village or not depends on local social structures), it develops an internal organization. Specialized

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15 The clearing of forest or woodland for fields and village sites creates better conditions for anopheles (malaria), glossina (sleeping sickness) and perhaps for aedes Aegypti (yellow fever) flies. Standing water, as in the hollows of banana leaves, favors anopheles. Agricultural villages are sedentary, and in settled conditions dysenteries and helminthiases are much more common than among nomads, because of bacterial pollution of water and sand in the village and near its spring.

16 Characteristically, it was at this stage in the development of a religious movement that the Belgian colonial administration became concerned about its existence.
religious duties are allotted to “dignitaries” in a horizontal division of labor or in a hierarchical one, most often in a combination of the two. Specialists may be male or female, old or young. If there is a hierarchy, its exact form depends on the structure of the community and its traditions. The officials are, in a Weberian sense, the charismatic lieutenants of the original leader. They too may be innovators, but so may anyone in the movement. Dreaming and possession are the major ways in which further innovations or “messages” are received and added to the original revelation.

The movement spreads as neighboring settlements become convinced that the new movement seems to offer better protection against misfortune. At this juncture, they rush to the nearest village where the movement has been adopted and ask to be initiated. The cosmic view inherent in the common culture makes the villagers feel that misfortune always plagues them. Thus they are disposed to be responsive to a movement that addresses itself to this concern. Once the rush is on, village after village is initiated by the original center or any of the converted communities. The initiation presupposes a dramatic theater-like “production.” Old charms are discarded, the new movement is brought in with much dancing and singing. People are purified in one way or another (rites of communion, confession and incorporation), and the prospective new local leaders learn their “specialties” from the initiators; the whole process lasts at least several days. The new movement brings harmony and peace, and therefore it eliminates witches at the same time.

After the initiation the local movement consists of rituals held at regular (new moon, full moon) or irregular (crisis) intervals. The basic ritual remains relatively unchanged but modifications can be introduced by local leaders or by any member in such matters as songs, hymns, dances, prayers, formulae and derived symbols. A common shrine with the cult objects displayed constantly reminds the congregation of the daily prescriptions and proscriptions by which they must abide.

During the spreading of a cult, not all villages in its path accept it, so that on a map the spread looks more like a rash breaking out than a solid front “advancing and covering” areas. The villages rejecting the new movement may have many reasons, not the least of which may be that they Government officials looked especially for signs of a hierarchical structure. They interpreted hierarchy to mean that the movement was sufficiently well organized to constitute a threat to colonial authority. Thus, once they had classified a movement as hierarchical, they were likely to take action to curtail or suppress it. See P. Piron and J. Devos, Codes et Lois du Congo belge (Brussels: Larcier, 1954), vol. II, p. 875, and especially the ordinance of 25 August 1937 as cited under 6b “ou toute secte hiérarchisée.” A list of movements outlawed as of the end of 1953 follows on pp. 875-6. The general attitude towards such movements is indicated by the extract of the handbook for colonial officers (Receuil à l’usage des agents du service territorial) also cited here.
have another with which they are still satisfied. A movement does not spread in a burst of wild-eyed fervor, but only after much thought is given to it by the community and after the skeptics have had their say and been convinced.

The duration of a movement is hard to predict. But it is not unusual for one to last twenty to thirty years. Some lose their vitality fairly quickly after their installation and remain dormant until they are replaced by another movement. In others the local visions and innovations keep the movement very much alive and in the center of social life for many years. Eventually all movements end by being replaced by others that seem very similar to outsiders, but look brand new to the congregations. Disenchantment sets in when the village comes to feel that its misfortunes are no longer being alleviated, and the appearance of a new movement that promises to be more effective gives the village a sense of renewal. To be recognized and accepted as such, the new movement must exhibit many features characteristic of its predecessor. This is the underlying process which accounts for the fact that all Central African religious movements are variants of a single tradition. However different they may be, they retain the attributes of the paradigm.

CULTURAL PARAMETERS OF THE MOVEMENTS

The presentation of the cultural parameters of Central African religious movements in greater analytical detail is a prerequisite for an in-depth understanding of their structure and dynamics. These parameters fall into two groups: goals and values; rituals, symbols, beliefs and myths.

1. Goals and Values. The goals of the movements and the values they express range from the specific to the diffuse. The following list is culled from our documentary materials:

Fertility of women
Successful hunt
Abundant harvest
"Proper" death
Invulnerability
Success in war
Invisibility
Impunity vis à vis authorities
Material wealth and prosperity
Love or conquest of a woman or a man
To become like a European (acquire their wealth, authority, power, technical intelligence, magic)
To replace Europeans (fight them, expel them)
To "get ahead" in status and prestige
Health
Vengeance with impunity
Africanization of Christianity
Return of the Golden Age
Force, strength, power
Liberty, independence
Salvation
Success in all undertakings and activities
Global well-being
Protection against evil, sorcery or witchcraft

This raw list gives not only a graphic idea of how widely the goals range but also of how they vary from classical (e.g., successful hunt) to modern (e.g., to become like a European). Although the goals are disparate, they are facets of a single cultural orientation which, in classical and modern Central Africa alike, is usually expressed in a single word, inadequately translated as "force" or "the good life." More accurately, this concept refers to harmony and absence of evil. In the absence of evil, there can be no stress, no disease, no unnatural death. In a Central African system of thought, the absence of misfortune is equated with the plenitude of force, and conversely the presence of evil connotes a weakening or a loss of force. The specific goals listed, such as "fertility of women" and "successful hunt," are code words used to designate the most encompassing value orientation in the common culture, namely the fortune-misfortune complex.

In the minds of the people, certain goals are linked to value constellations more specific than this ultimate value. Three major clusters of varying specificity can be readily identified. The first is the fecundity constellation that encompasses prolific child-bearing, fruitful hunting and abundant harvests. Wealth and prosperity are also partly linked with this complex. The second constellation revolves around the goals of invulnerability and impunity. It deals with the elimination of risk in a way that denies the role of chance in human affairs. It also disclaims personal responsibility for mishaps and calamities by attributing them to the intervention of significant others. This constellation focuses on security and protection. Its invulnerability aspect applies to situations fraught with danger not of the actor's making (for example, in war) in which he or she is scrupulously abiding by the prevailing norms. The impunity dimension entails danger of the actor's own making (for example, in stealing) in which he or she deliberately violates important norms. The third con-

17 Kongo ngolo, Nyanga karamo, Kuba poloo, Tio mpolo, etc. The semantic content as described by Daniel Biebuyck for the Nyanga is characteristic. "Karamo is derived from irama, to recover, to heal. It means good health, force, salvation, good life. Karamo is the current greeting among the Nyanga; it is also the central theme in invocations, prayers and cultural practices. To have karamo means to be healthy, to be wise, to be successful in hunting, to entertain smooth relationships." See D. Biebuyck, The Mwindo Epic (Los Angeles: University of California Los Angeles Press, 1969), pp. 34–5. Identical statements could be made about the other peoples, except that personal salvation (an interlacustrine trait) does not exist in the Central African religious culture. (The Nyanga border on East African cultures.)
stellation concerns the desire to improve one's status and increase one's wealth. To become like a European, to "get ahead," or to assert black competence belong to this set, which is a modern version of the classical preoccupation with status and wealth. Despite the interest in wealth, no religious movement that was primarily a cargo cult has ever existed in Central Africa.18

The ultimate fortune-misfortune value complex, the three value constellations derived from it, and the specific goals that are their constituent elements are all contingent on a state of ritual purity. That is, the attainment of these value states and goals depends on the observance of those ritual rules that endow individuals or collectivities with sacredness. Thus, Fortune smiles on the sacred.

2. Rituals, Symbols, Beliefs and Myths. A checklist of rituals, symbols, beliefs and myths would take many pages and only some of them would apply to the common Central African culture.19 Moreover, such a list would be misleading because it would obfuscate their internal relationships. Ritual is symbolic action that refers to the goals and values identified in the previous section. This action may or may not be directed toward spiritual entities. This means that religious belief is not a primary element in Central African religious movements. The mythical element in classical movements is important only insofar as it can be broken down into preexisting, familiar symbols. The ritual-symbol package usually comes together in the notion and form of a charm, which is an object made under inspiration, embodying the most powerful symbols of the movement. Once accepted by a community, it is placed in a shrine. So that the charm may remain undefiled and strong, the community must observe certain taboos associated with it and engage in religious ceremonies of prayer, offering, and sacrifice directly connected with the charm. Where the power of a charm comes from does not really matter. It comes with the charm. A charm constitutes the centerpiece of all classical movements, and its purpose is to protect the community against disease and death. Colonial authorities condemned and banned such collective general charms, then proceeded to confiscate and destroy them. The movements continued nevertheless, but often the charms associated

18 The two movements that show a cargo cult type preoccupation with wealth are Kimbanguism (as reflected in some of its later hymns) and Tupelepele. In both cases, this aspect seems to have been influenced by the difficult economic conditions in the then Belgian Congo during the Great Depression of the early 1930s. For the case of the Tupelepele see: Sikitele Gize, La révolte pende (M.A. thesis, Lovanium University, 1971), pp. 76–120 and Sikitele Gize, "Les racines de la révolte pende de 1931," Études d'Histoire africaine, V (1973), pp. 99–153, especially pp. 127–41.

19 In the context of this article, myth is defined as a narrative connected with a body of rituals. Myths explaining the emergence of a movement changed easily during its diffusion without affecting the ritual-symbol complex itself, showing that the link between myth and the core of the movement was fairly loose.
with them were hidden. Only in movements that have incorporated non-
classical elements into their make-up can charms be marginal, or in an
extreme case absent.  

An analysis of the categories of ritual teaches us little except to show
that prayer, invocation and communion were the means to establish com-
munication with the “invisible world.” While sacrifice and communion
imply atonement and awe, confession indicates purity of intention.

Dance, music and trance occupy a special place in Central African
ritual. Music cures, music communicates with those above and beyond
the visible world; it is inspired. From the other world inspiration comes
in dream or in trance to women or men who sing and also dance in new
steps which have been taught by the good entities and which please them.
Dance, music and trance are media of expression that have preserved all
their symbolic and ritual potency.

A lone symbol is almost meaningless. Symbols acquire meaning only
in relationship to other symbols within a single ritual. Their meanings
may change as they are opposed to other symbols in other contexts. They
are the grammatical forms with which ritual fashions the elements of a
discourse.

The simplest symbolic expression comprises two terms. For every
category of cognition such binary relationships can be set up. For instance,
with respect to time, there are day and night, dusk and dawn, dry and wet
season. These binary oppositions are matched one to another across
categories according to certain rules. Thus, if the sun is good and the
moon is weak, the rooster should be a strong symbol, because it “calls”
the sun. It should also represent fire, as the sun does, in opposition to
the moon, associated with water. Since the rooster is the “guinea fowl
of the village,” it should represent humanity as opposed to unorganized
nature. Hence its feather should be the emblem of the village head or the
king. In Kuba culture, for example, all this holds. The rooster cannot be
taken as a sign of drought [sun = dry] :: [moon = wet]. In the presence
of eagle feathers the rooster’s feather, even though it represents the village,
takes second place because the eagle is “the king of all birds.” In that

20 The Jamaa is an example of such an exceptional Central African religious
movement that does not include charms. We attribute this to the fact that, to an
unusual degree, it has absorbed mystical Christian elements. Perhaps some mystic
lodges of the Sufic brotherhoods in Central Africa are also movements without
charms. They need to be studied in greater detail.

21 It has not yet been possible to ascertain all the rules that govern these combina-
tions. Free association is the moving force in the reasoning by analogy. But not
all associations are acceptable. There are other rules. The dynamic extensions al-
lowed by the rules and the generative limits imposed on the creation of derived
symbols have yet to be described. Frazer’s categories of sympathetic magic or
magic by analogy miss the point and so do the structural transformation procedures
of Lévi-Strauss, to mention but two of the better-known authors.
comparison the opposition between village and bush country is no longer relevant, while the classification of all birds takes precedence.

Derived symbols can be generated from primary symbols, by analogy and again according to certain rules. For example, the eagle is the king of birds and the leopard is the king of animals. If the leopard skin is a primary symbol of royalty, then the eagle’s feather will be a derived royal symbol. Derived symbols are created fairly frequently.

It is not surprising therefore that numerous objects from a foreign culture have found their way into the symbol system. The reed “machine gun” of the BaSuku people, with which witches can be killed, is an example. Another instance is the case of typewriter ribbon spools and the Christmas tree balls attached to the hats made of wildcat skins that the partisans wore in the Congo Rebellion of 1964. The machine gun is self-explanatory. The objects on the hats were superimposed on a classical item (wildcat-skin hats are for warriors.) They express an opposition: that of traditional power versus the modern powers of mechanized literacy (the typewriter spools) and of European festivity and confidence (Christmas tree balls).

Certain Central African religious movements have also absorbed elements from the Christian religions to which their members have been exposed as a result of missionary activities. Christianity, as opposed to Central African religion, assigns primacy to a systematic body of beliefs. Historically, this has been one of the crucial factors in facilitating the spread of Christianity. The new beliefs filled in significant gaps of the classical religion. Most notable was the doctrine of revelation which explained the nature and history of the Supreme Being, whose existence was already recognized.

For all Africans, the ritual is primordial in Christianity, and for many, in keeping with the emphases of their classical religion, the central objects in the ritual are equivalent to charms. The full panoply of sacraments and sacramentals in the Catholic Church, its special prayers for droughts and other calamities, and its hierarchy are especially valued. The hymn-singing and, above all, the collective interpretation of the Bible are the aspects of Protestantism to which Africans have been most responsive.

These aspects of Christian belief and myth, ritual and symbolism recurrently appear in those Central African religious movements which have

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been influenced by Christianity. The special quality of Central African religious movements is not that prophets can don snow-white garments and take up shepherd's crooks and attire themselves with different signs of rank and hierarchy, as they do among the Bapostolo. All of that was already there in germ before the movement began, when the Scriptures were first read and were beginning to be understood and brought into line with older basic forms of symbols and rituals. The same applies to symbols and rituals, such as candles (fire), baptism (water), the temple (analogous to the classical shrines and initiations), and the hymns (music).

**Dynamics of the Movements**

By the dynamics of a movement, we mean both the processes of innovation through which its cultural parameters are combined and recombined and the processes of diffusion by which the movement spreads from one community to another and from one ethnic cultural milieu to another.

Most analyses have tried to account for the dynamics of religious movements in terms of their situational context. They have evoked such factors as the colonial situation, modernization, economic depression, relative deprivation, political protest, marginality of leaders and followers, the impact of Islam, Christianity and European civilization, and so on. Such factors do play a role in the circumstances out of which such movements are born and develop. But they do not explain why these movements have the shape and content that they do. Religious factors are the core of these movements. The fundamental religious factors involved are derived from the common Central African culture and its rituals, symbols and beliefs.

A movement is initiated by a visionary leader, who reinterprets in dream or vision the relationship between the main religious symbols and rituals prevalent in the community. The leader may also invent new myths or recast old ones, and may or may not alter some of the current beliefs. What legitimizes these dreams and visions and the religious modifications that emanate from them is the claim that the leader's inspiration comes from a supernatural source recognized by the community as belonging to their Ultimate Reality. Such visionary leaders very often manifest patterns of behavior which both they and the members of their community consider to be psychically abnormal. Usually, the visionary withdraws to some retreat from which he emerges once the inspiration he has received has become a coherent message. The ex post facto explanation that the community gives for his prior derangement is that it was the precondition for the realignment of rituals, symbols, beliefs and myths to which he has introduced them.

The reshuffling of these primary symbols and rituals overawes the community by the revelation of new, hitherto hidden facets of their former
religious ways. The deeper the reshuffling, the longer it takes to persuade a community to accept a new movement, but also the greater is the potentiality for its success. Success can be measured not only by the enthusiasm with which the initial community responds to the movement, but by the size of the geographical and cultural area over which it eventually spreads and by its duration through time as well.

An example of the process of cultural reshuffling is the following. The leader makes a statue, representing the power of the charm central to the movement. Before the occurrence of the movement the charm was kept in a little pot that was dealt with as if it were a statue: it was given a raffia dress. Originally the dress was a classical symbol connoting that the area it enclosed was sacred, but because it looked like a dress, people began to think of the pot as a person who was clothed. In carving the statue the leader explicates the progressive shifts in meaning. In so doing, he anthropomorphizes the power of the charm and thereby creates a new symbol with a new meaning. The process goes on and on. Essentially, a transformation of a movement by a leader depends then on new symbolic interpretation and ritual and the potentiality of this new gestalt for further elaboration through the dreams and visions of his followers.

The same process operates in the diffusion of a movement. The new movement is accepted because of its novel features, and these are understood in local terms. Within a few months’ time, a new movement sweeps throughout large areas belonging to the same symbolic “province” and gains acceptance. It takes months or years for it to inch forward from one province to the next, and then to resume its high speed of diffusion after it has become adapted to the symbols and rituals of the new cultural milieu. The adaptation process is very like the one that occurs in the creation of a movement. Certain groups take a minor symbol in a new movement and elaborate it, because in their religious tradition that symbol was important. For example, the BaCokwe people saw to it that the lupambula charm was cooked. The cooking was not very important for those who diffused it; but it was for the BaCokwe. For them, fire is a key symbol linked with sterility and witchcraft. So the cooking became a purifying ritual and received its own special dignitary. Symbol and meaning were matched.

Sometimes the symbol is translated. An eagle’s feather in the north is the equivalent of a parrot’s feather in South Kasai and a Ndua feather.

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23 The next step is for the statue to acquire a personal name. Then perhaps a short myth may arise around the name, or a statue of the opposite sex will be made, for the sake of harmony. It too will acquire a name. This kind of evolution did take place among the Bakuba.

in Kwango-Kwilu, just as the leopard is the king of animals, except where lions are prevalent. There the lion takes the leopard’s place.

Rituals can also be replaced by the appropriate “translation.” The BaSuku people purify with lustral water and the Booli purify with smoke. Such alterations bring about transformations that go beyond mere replacement, in that the connotation of symbols and rituals is different for different substances and actions. But the movement can be grasped only through the process of transformation. No community feels that the movement has become its own until its own leaders or dreamers have given the basic translation. After that, all members can add little touches to the now established movement, in dream or song or dance.

The successive transformations that movements undergo make it difficult to ascertain whether movement X is movement A slightly altered, or whether it is a new movement. In our view, many observers have failed to recognize the dynamics of transformation within movements. Consequently, they have exaggerated the number of new movements and underestimated the characteristic life-span of a movement. As already suggested, we have reason to believe that twenty to thirty years constitutes a minimum duration, while some movements have lasted fifty years or more. The determination of whether a movement is new or not is further complicated by the phenomenon of dormancy. Ostensible inactivity of a movement is often a result of the hostility of a political regime toward it. The movement continues underground and resurfaces when circumstances have become favorable again.

**CONCLUSION**

Our theoretical study of many movements in Zaire demonstrates that a common Central African culture exists and that it is characteristically expressed in religious movements, with the distinctive features identified. The fortune-misfortune complex is central to the culture and to these movements. The value-constellations and goals involved are all derived from this overarching complex. They vary along a specificity-diffuseness dimension. The cultural parameters of symbol and ritual are of primary significance, while beliefs and myths are of lesser importance. Some sets of symbols occur again and again, such as those connected with color and fertility. The incidence of negative rituals or avoidances, especially food taboos, is high. Symbols and rituals develop by free association, structured and constrained by culturally dictated rules. Items of foreign origin are incorporated as new symbols or ritual acts, if they can be interpreted as derivatives of existing primary symbols. Charms are central to the culture, and most movements are built around them. Such major charms are complex bundles of basic symbols that refer to the whole fortune-misfortune constellation, and they are always collectivity-oriented. Ac-
According to Central African conceptions, this means that the charms and the movements are religious rather than magical. A "magical movement" is a contradiction in terms, because a movement must be oriented toward goals sought by and for the community.

The concept of culture that emerges from this study differs significantly from the assumptions of most anthropologists. Culture in Central Africa is less homogeneous and less particularistic than has generally been supposed. One culture does not exist for each ethnic group, for each shares part of its cultural makeup, especially the fundamental aspects of its religion, with many others. These aspects are the core of the common Central African culture. Another finding, to which not much attention has been given, is that Central African cultural patterns are flexible. The patterns are stable, but their specific expressions vary within specified limits (free association/rule-bound).

The common religion has been remarkably stable, perhaps for millennia. Specific religious movements rise and fall over periods of time ranging from a quarter to more than half a century. Changes in the membership and organization of a movement and in its symbols, rituals, beliefs and myths continuously occur; different time scales are involved. Social scientists and historians who study such movements should specify both the nature of the change with which they are dealing and its concomitant time scale. Statements with regard to fundamental change in the common religion should not be made on the basis of short-term intervals, since this deep-seated, comprehensive part of the cultural tradition changes very slowly.

We do not know to what extent our findings are valid outside Central Africa. Our analytic approach should be tested on data from other areas. Only in this way will progress be made toward a more general theory of religious movements and common cultures.

Willy De Craemer first arrived in what was then the Belgian Congo in 1951 and has since been engaged in sociological research on Congolese/Zairois society and culture; his special field of interest is sociology of religion. In 1953, Jan Vansina began anthropological and historical fieldwork in the area; religious movements became one of his principal concerns. In 1962, Renée C. Fox undertook sociological research in post-colonial Congo-Kinshasa. In 1964–5, a society-wide movement known as the Congo Rebellion drew us into the process of discussion and collaboration out of which this article developed.