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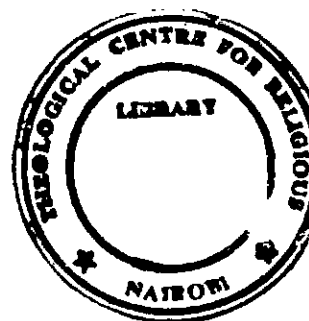
***THE BAKONGO CONCEPT OF GOD  
AND THE CHRISTIAN REVELATION***

An Essay Submitted to the Department of Systematic  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the B.A.  
Degree in Religious Studies.

BY  
***FUMWASENDJI KAPUMBA SYMPHORIEN, IMC***

TUTOR  
***Fr. NICHOLAS FOGLIACCO, IMC.***

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## STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I the Undersigned student, declare that this is my original essay which has not been submitted to any college, institute or university, for academic credit.

All the information gathered from different literature and people interviewed have been substantially acknowledged. Thank You.

Signed:.....*Symphorien*.....>

Date:.....*12/02/1999*.....

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to all those who consider that peoples' culture is a privileged place where the Gospel is incarnated.

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## **GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

Nobody knows God fully and no one of us has seen him, but the Son himself.

However, human beings from the beginning have had their experiences of the Supreme Being in various ways.

In this essay, our main concern is to show how the Bakongo people conceive their God. Who he really is for them? The Almighty, the creator, the invisible and so forth. Some Bakongo riddles, sayings, stories, and proverbs will be studied to support this hypothesis.

We would compare some elements of the Bakongo beliefs with Christian ones. The similarities can be incorporated in people's faith. The dissimilarities, that is, those which are not compatible with the Good News, will need to be purified. Our goal is to show that in every human culture (Bakongo in this case) we can find something that is compatible with the Good News and facilitate the process of Inculturation of peoples' faith.

Beside the general introduction and conclusion our essay will consist of these following chapters:

1. Clarifications of terms.
2. God's names.
3. Nzambi for the Bakongo.
4. God's Attributes.
5. God Bakongo in Social and Religious life
6. Eschatology.
7. The Bakongo Concept of God and the Christian Revelation.

**METHODOLOGY:** Twofold.

-Interviews conducted in DR Congo during our long holidays (May-August 1998). Our field work was very much limited because of time factor. It was mainly done in Kikongo.

-Research of scholars on this topic.

# CHAPTER ONE

## CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

### **1.0. Introduction**

We would not take for granted that all our future readers know accurately the meanings of some the terms we will be using in our essay. That is the reason why we have chosen to begin with a clarification of some new terms, especially the non-English ones, that will appear repeatedly throughout this paper. We hopefully think this will bring about a better understanding and familiarization. Hence, we have taken upon ourselves this task or responsibility. It is, our belief that this clarification of words will serve to highlight the remaining parts of this paper.

The following (terms) will be clarified:

- Bakongo/Kongo people
- Nkongo dia Ntontila
- Kongo
- Bantu

In addition to the above words, we shall lightly discuss the Bakongo origin, and their geographical expansion (bakongoland).

### **1.2. Bakongo/Kongo People**

The term Bakongo simply means Kongo people or Bantu-ba-kongo, in kikongo. It is the plural noun of Mukongo and it signifies a Kongo person or citizen of Kongo.

The Kongo people belong to the great family of the Bantu<sup>1</sup> people who live in the Southern Sahara region of Africa south of the equator.

“The Bakongo occupy the central African coast on both sides of the river Congo, from the Republic of Congo (Congo Brazzaville) on the North, through the Democratic Republic of Congo (former Zaire) into Angola and extending inland several hundred miles.”<sup>2</sup>

They were inhabitants one of the great pre- modern African civilizations, namely the kingdom of Kongo discovered in 1482 by the Portuguese explorer Diego Cão. Nevertheless, it is believed to have existed long before this western breakthrough. Kikongo is their language which is one of the major languages or vernaculars widely spoken in the two “Congos” and in northwestern part of Angola. The people of Kongo claim Kikongo to be their common language even though this language presents some local variations.

### **1.3. Their Origin:**

When a foreigner asks any African people about their origin, they do not need a history book or an academic degree in history in order to answer this question. They spontaneously know it.

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<sup>1</sup> Bantu; this word will be clarified later on.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Bockie, Death and invisible powers, the world of Kongo belief, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 2.

Why? -Because they have been told and taught orally by their parents or their great parents or again their great grandparents who in turn were taught by their ascendants/ancestors. It is in this way that our Kongo people are able trace their origin.

All Bakongo not only unanimously proclaim to share the same origin but also the same common eponymous ancestors, regardless of their present geographical and social situation. These people strongly hold the belief that their ascendants, great grandparents, ancestors migrated from somewhere called Kongo-dia-Ntotila<sup>3</sup> which can be literally translated as Kongo of the King. This is their birthplace and the first capital according to Bockie of their kingdom of Kongo. This hypothesis was confirmed by all my informants both at Mbenseke Mfuti and at Kimbondo<sup>4</sup> and it is generally accepted by all bakongo.

When I asked Mr. Yvon Ngeka about the origin of his tribe he had this to say: "Our ancestors came from Kongo dia Ntotila, this place still exist until now." Where is it, I asked. He stood up and turned westward pointing his index finger and said; "it is in San-Salvador (Mbanza Nkongo), in today's Angola. I am telling you the truth, my son, all the Bakongo people came from there". He added, "even if you ask other Bakongo, they will tell you the same."<sup>5</sup>

Concerning their origin all scholars both Congolese or foreign experts ( For instance, Wing, Srtuyf...) and Kongo people themselves, such as Buakasa, Bockie agree with this version. Actually there is no other version in this regard but the above one.

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<sup>3</sup> Kongo - dia- Ntotila , we will highlight a lot more about this word as we go by.

<sup>4</sup>Mbenseke Mfuti and Kimbondo are in the west outskirts of Kinshasa, it is here that we carried out some field work.

<sup>5</sup> Interview carried out at Mbenseke Mfuti, on July 23<sup>rd</sup> .

#### **1.4. Nkongo- dia- Ntontila:**

As we have mentioned early this term Nkongo- dia- Ntontila, can be translated as Kongo of the King. According to Bockie, this place was first discovered by a hunter, who chasing a wounded animal, but let it go in order to contemplate the beauty of the place. Fascinated, he decided to move his family and settle there. Later on, this location was called San Salvador by the Portuguese explorers and colonists<sup>6</sup>. In our day this town is known as Mbanza Kongo, that is, the town of Kongo. It is situated 500 km northwest of Luanda the capital city of the republic of Angola.

Historically speaking, all Bakongo dwelt in/around San-Salvador but were eventually split or dispersed. This happened because of some social, economic, political and demographic factors, such as, the increasing number of population and the centrality of power, etc. The Bampangu or Bantandu, the Bakongo sub-group we consulted most have a related story to the split.

#### **1.5.Kongo**

There are four things that need to be said about the term, kongo

1. In kikongo, which is the language of the Bakongo, kongo means “a hunting land.” This is reflected in the belief that only stronger hunter, can rule it. “Kongo dia Nkongo a ngolo ko, kwena ye ngolo ko, Kongo kuyala dio ko,” “a weak person can never expect to lead a kongo group”.<sup>7</sup>

2. This word denotes a name of a certain ethnic group and especially the people of

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Simon Bockie, Death and the invisible powers, the world of Kongo belief, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Bockie, ibid. p. 3.

that very ethnic group.

The singular indicates a member of this same group. That is, Mukongo or N'kongo. Musi-Kongo, Mwesi-Kongo, muntu-a-nsi-Kongo, all mean the same thing.

Professor Buakasa acknowledges that in some classic writings many authors used Mu-Kongo for Mwesi-Kongo, for example the Jesuit sociologist Joseph Wing, a Bakongo expert<sup>8</sup>.

We find it acceptable to use Bakongo (people of Kongo) and Mukongo, its singular. These terms are very familiar to the present Congolese society. However, we often use other synonymous in order to avoid monotony and repetition.

3. Kongo finally stands for the Kingdom of Kongo and the eponymous ancestor of the Bakongo people.

4. We will not use kongo with the letter C to signify Bakongo people. In this essay, we reserve kongo with C to the two countries having the same names, that is, Republic of Congo, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

### **1.6. Kongoland (Bakongo Country)**

The Bakongo and their country did not escape the so called "arbitrary partition of Africa," in Berlin 1885. Their territory was divided into three regions. The Northern land of the Kongo which is part of the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) was given to the French.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Buakasa Tulu kia Mpansu, L'Impensé du Discours, Kindoki et Nkisi en pays Kongo du Zaïre, (Kinshasa: F.T.C. K. 1980), p. 9.

The central region of Kongoland, which had a population of 1,500,000 inhabitants in 1980, is the Democratic Republic of Congo (ex Zaire) but was under the Belgian rule until 1960. Finally, the Southland region of this country is part of Angola that acceded to independence from the Portuguese in 1975.

Therefore, the Bakongo are dispersed throughout in these three cited countries, and they all the Bakongo share nearly in the same heritage. However this study will focuss on the Kongo people of my own country, namely the Democratic Republic of Congo. Here the Bakongo live in Bas-Congo (Bas-Zaire) province in a territory of around 65,000 Km<sup>2</sup>.

The following are the main subgroups of Bakongo in DRC as listed by Buakasa: Ndibi, Ntandu (Mpangu), Manianga Nsudi, Besi-Ngombe, Yombe, Bamboma and Zombo.

We would like to note that many of our informants are is from Mpangu, that is, the Ntandu subgroup.<sup>9</sup>

### **1.7. Bantu**

Bantu means people. Muntu or mtu, and some other related expressions, are its singular equivalents which denote a human being. It is neutral by gender and can be applied to both masculine and feminine persons.

Bantu is nevertheless used to mean a group of people who present and share some common traits physical characteristics. They may distinguish themselves from others in their way of living, their social organization and religious belief, and even in

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<sup>9</sup>, Buakasa, Op Cit. p.11

their way of thinking - - namely, their philosophy.

Moreover, the term Bantu is used to indicate a linguistic group of people. It was the German philosopher Bleek, H. (in 1860) who proposed to name Bantu all those languages which use muntu to express human being (Bantu its plural) and its correspondents.

When we use the word Bantu, it connotes these three meanings, namely, people, a group of people who present and share some common traits and a linguistic group. The Bantu people, as we said earlier, live in the South Sahara region of Africa especially south of the Equator. The Bakongo people belong to this group.

## CHAPTER TWO

### GOD'S NAME

#### **2.0. Introduction**

Before tackling our chief concern which is God or his concept, we think it is interesting, wise and important to say something about peoples' names among the Bakongo, what their impact is, and how they describe ones' role in Bakongo culture and society.

So we would ask ourselves what is the real meaning that this category has for a Mukongo person. It will pave our way and help us to grasp God's place in their life.

#### **2.1. People's Name (s)**

A Mukongo person is made up of four main components or categories. Whenever one of these categories is lacking there is no way we can speak of a complete and an integral human being. Here are the four categories as suggested by Joseph Wing<sup>10</sup>

##### **a) Nitu (body)**

What we can see, the physical appearance of a human being. Only a human being has got a Nitu. Animals possess Nsuni, that is, flesh.

##### **b) Soul (moyo)**

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Joseph Wing, Etudes Bakongo. Sociologie, Magic et Religion, (Bruxelles: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959), p. 289.

**c) Menga (blood)**

The blood contains the second component, that is moyo or soul. This third component blood (menga) is very necessary because even the Ndoki (witchdoctor) can use one's menga for some superstitious or occult purpose. Here the blood is very much respected and cared for. That is the reason why to spill one's blood is an offence which needs to be charged accordingly.

Blood is the dwelling place of the soul, known as Moyo. The soul is spread all over the human body through one's blood and any loss of blood causes the suffering to the soul. That is, why the former will abandon the dead body. This understanding explains the role that blood plays in occult practices. Whoever manages to get someone's blood becomes master of occult practices.

**d) Zina ( name)**

The name is the fourth integral part of a human being in this society. Taken together these four components constitute a complete human being.

In the Bakongo society the name is regarded to be one of the four components of an integral man/woman, along with the body (Nitu), soul and menga that is; blood.

For instance, after birth, a mukongo child is not yet considered to be a complete human being until it is named. The newly born is looked at as a "kimpiatu" meaning a caterpillar which needs to undergo a certain transformation. Here we do not mean that these people equate their baby with a caterpillar. They use this analogy because this small creature (caterpillar) is bound to undergo several stages in order to become a butterfly or

a moth or something else. The baby is not going to undergo this caterpillar metamorphous. However, by receiving a name (s), the newly born baby is going to undergo a sort of change in him/her. It can be identified and addressed.

Hence for the Bakongo, like in many other African societies, a name is of crucial importance because it identifies its recipient. For it describes the person, the events under which he/she was born, the traditional medicine that was used to treat him/her or the mother either before or after birth. A child can also be named after his relatives in order to just remember them. Also one can be named for his own achievements after initiation period/school, etc.

For example, the name Mukoko (according to the Bampangu) corresponds to a boy who during the time of birth came out with the hand on his head. While matiti (leaves) is given to a baby who was born in the wood (bush) during wartime and some other terrifying events that occurred in the village, and his mother went to the bush for shelter or refuge. Nzuzi and N'simba are given to twins. Nlandu and Nkunga, for a boy or girl respectively, are names of those who immediately follow twins. Nsunda is one who during birth both his legs come out first. Bakadi, albinos, are very hard in character. A girl who made a sneeze at birth time will be called N'sona.

Nkenge, Wumba, Yanga and Mansansa and many more are names given to people who were treated with the traditional medicine of a similar name in the very early moment of their birth. Bakulu (ancestors): the ancestors live a previous child died, but this one will live.

Balonda: The whole clan died, but this girl will restore it (Londa) by supplying it with human richness, (offspring). Kitoti: This name can be given to a child who is hated

by her foster father. Consequently, the father always complains about her.

Luvungu, Lukaya: something to remember always. Mampasi: if during pregnancy the mother suffered constantly, the new born will carry this name. Baseya: People always mock at us; now the new born will carry this name and make an end to this mockery.

This category plays a major role in Mukongo's life. It affects their daily activity and identification so that even if a Mukongo has to wish a misfortune to somebody he/she will need just to know the name of the person to whom the curse is directed.

If a mukongo is asked by an unknown person his/her name straight away, he/she may even give a pseudo name, simply because he/she does not know the identity of this stranger and what will this one do with her or his name. It is only after realising that the visitor (s) is not an enemy but a friend, relatives will the mukongo reveal his name.

During the night it is not prudent (wise) to call somebody else's name loudly because of the bad spirits that wander around the village. They can use a person's names for their own sake by inflicting pain or illness.

When, I asked Mr. Ngeta Nkosi, about it he said that a parent may say, "you my son, tree, where are you? Come back home. Nobody will dare to call someone else by name loudly during the night".

## **2. 2. GOD'S NAME**

All those who have studied the Kongo people, especially their beliefs must have come to this conclusion: that for the Kongo people there exists an absolute or a supreme being to whom people owe the origin of everything either here on earth or else where.

This being is no one other than God: Nzambi.

Nzambi is the Bakongo name for God. This name or concept of God existed long before the coming of the first European Christian missionaries to the Kongo Kingdom. To this noun they often add an epithet Mpungu (phungu). Hence, this compound, Nzambi Mpungu<sup>11</sup> the supreme being, the almighty God, the powerful one, the creator and maker of all.

Fr. Wing confirms the pre-existence of the Bakongo name for God by quoting some Portuguese anthropologists and missionaries who had asserted:

“The Moscicongos were from the beginning very much faithful to their customs and were less barbarians. They were subject to reason and neither worshipped idols, built temples for them nor venerated them. They solely knew God and adored him as the author of everything. He was called Zambia Mpungu, Supreme God. They also knew about devil, however, he was not adored, people regarded him as the author of evil. Cariampemba was his name.”<sup>12</sup>

Nzambi, God's name, is unique, incomparable and it is solely reserved to Him and Him alone. No human being dares to have this name and nobody has been named after him without committing a blasphemy. Even to their ancestors, the founder of their clans, their rulers, and all the spirits these people do not attribute the name Nzambi.

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<sup>11</sup> According to prominent Bakongo experts and Bakongo people themselves the original meaning of the word Nzambi remains vague and unknown. Even though many experts have been speculating in this regard, we prefer not take a side since this does affects very much our enterprise. During my interview on this question of the meaning of Nzambi, they all said that at different terms, Nzambi is Nzambi. He is a mystery. We do not know anything about Him. Mpungu- This word Mpungu is a very common word. It stands for ampungu which means the highest. It is also the name of a charm found in every village to protect it against disputes, witches, and evil spirits. For, fr. Nzuzi Bibaki, Mpungu (Phungu) refers to a kind of Gorilla, specifically the Chimpanzee which is the King of the animals in the forest. Applying to God it means that he is the Highest one.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Wing, Etude Bakongo, Religion, sociologie et magie, (Bruxelles: Desclées de Brouwer, 1959), p. 296.

Nevertheless, it can be said of a parent, especially the father, that he is a Nzambi ya (a) ntoto, God of the earth for his children. This short sentence does not mean that the Father is absolute.

It is used for some disciplinary or moral reasons, for instance, when there is dissension and dispute between parents and their children within the family circle people can use it referring to the parents. It means that through the parents God continues giving his life. Therefore, the children must respect and obey them because for they are God's representatives. We will discuss this at length later.

Nzambi is also called Mvangi, Mbumba, the creator, Tulendo, the strongest one and Kalunga, complete.

The uniqueness of God's name also explains why Nzambi's name is rarely used in Bakongo daily life. However, when one wants to pledge an oath or prove the truthfulness of a statement, he/she may say; *"This one is the truth I am saying Nzambi is seeing me, I cannot tell lies. In God's name I did not do this or that."* Nowadays one may take this statement less seriously, because people can use it to cheat or deceive.

## CHAPTER THREE

### NZAMBI MPUNGU FOR THE BAKONGO

#### 3.1. WHO IS GOD?

It was my own observation and my feeling that whenever I asked my informants about what I would the identity or the nature of their supreme being, people were a bit confused and felt embarrassed. They would say that Nzambi, as such, is indescribable and unknown. He is beyond Mukongo's imagination. He cannot be measured or contained he is complete and does not need anybody or anything else to fill him.

"God is a power, like life itself, present all things even in the air we breathe. It would be impossible to describe God in words or to construct an intellectual concept of his nature. God can only be felt and perceived as all- pervasive power there cannot be a material symbol of such a power, or any location where the power is more present than at another. The power which contains all things cannot be contained"<sup>13</sup>

If Nzambi is not a human being or an animal, who is Nzambi then? He is not an ancestor, he is not dead because Nzambi cannot die. He is stronger and more powerful than death. He exists and he is Nzambi -. There everything is said.

To the question as to whether God is your ancestors or the founder of your tribe, the Bakongo had nothing to say, bakulu are Bantu like us, and were made by Him. Nzambi is the origin of everything. He is the source of what people cannot see. He is like the roof of the house everything is under Him.

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<sup>13</sup> Simon Bockie, Death and the Invisible Powers, The World of Kongo Belief, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 135.

So for the Bakongo Nzambi is the author par excellence of the land in which they live of the green forest which surround them of the animals which it contains, of the rain which keep their forest green and dense. Everything comes from him.

It is God who makes the fetus in a woman's womb and in which the soul resides. Even the super power of the intelligent sorcerer stem from God. Even whatever people use to defeat the bad spirits that threatened human life originate from Nzambi.

He is the beginning and the end of everything -- the Alpha and the Omega to borrow a christian expression. "His power sustains all of life and he is always acknowledged to be the real and ultimate power behind the ancestors and other spiritual beings and their actions."<sup>14</sup>

### **3. 2. GOD OF RIDDLES**

The Bakongo express their devotion to the creator in didactic riddles which are learned by heart and transmitted from one generation to the next. These following riddles emphasized the creative identity or aspect of God. Even though we will analyze them later, let us just point out a few.

"Nzambi has made a field with two light patches, what is it"? The sky with the sun and the moon. "Nzambi has made a path and keeps it clean," what is it? The throat.

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<sup>14</sup> Simon Bockie, Death and the Invisible Powers, The world of Kongo Belief, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 137.

They also have some sayings stressing the creative activity or function of their God. Namely, “Nzambi mpungu, Utuvanga Nzala ye Nlembo” it is the Supreme God who made us with our nails and our fingers. It means that even the smallest parts of our human body, we owe to God and nothing in us escapes his creative action.

-Nkongu Nzambi, Nzala Nzambi utuvanga: God made us naked and hungry.

-Nzambi Mpungu uganga/ utuyidika beto minti dimoya: God shaped (fashioned) us as living trees.

- Nzambi has made a knot in a string that will never be undone. What is it? The navel.

-The bush (forest) that Nzambi planted is ever growing, Name it? The hair.

- God made something which is protected by the militaries, What is it ? The tongue.

-God made a tree whether it is cut far away its echo resound here, What is it? Smoke.

We can sum up this section by saying that according to the Bakongo, nobody has seen Nzambi. He cannot be represented in crafts and located. Nzambi is neither a man nor a woman. Nzambi is neither a Nkulu (ancestor) nor a Nkita (hero- ancestor). He is neither the spirit of the water, the forest nor the spirit of the dead. God is neither this cloud we see nor the earth in which people live and cultivate.

He is nothing else than Nzambi Mpungu himself. Nzambi Mpungu is the supreme being, the absolute, the powerful one, the Highest, the only creator, the beginning and the end, the one who comes even before all our ancestors. He is invisible and, he lives and acts with sovereignty. Nzambi is Nzambi.

When I asked some of my informants, if Nzambi was the God of christian faith they had learned in their early catechesis, they all somewhat said what I can summarize here:

We heard what our grandparents and other elders of village said. they taught us this, we kept it and are telling you. It is true because it has been said to them by our ancestors.

Apart from the riddles and sayings, the Bakongo acknowledge the creative act of God through myths. We will expand on this topic when we treat this attribute of God.

### **3.3. HIERARCHY OF BEINGS**

In their hierarchy of being the bantu people, to whom the bakongo belong, put the supreme being, God, in the first place, next come the spirits then ancestors and finally the living. This classification is according Nunes Gabriel. We are going to describe briefly these beings:

#### **3.3.1. God**

He naturally comes in first position because of everything we have said. The Bakongo regard him as the highest being, the strongest, the powerful one. He cannot be described like any other being. He is life in abundance. He is the creator of everything and everything depends on him. So, he is always classified beyond the human cosmology.

#### **3.3.2. Spirits**

There are two types of spirit, some are good and some are bad, both were created by God. The later are harmful to human community. This category of being occupies the second rank.

#### **3.3.3. Ancestors**

Who are they? They are the living dead Some scholars even called then the intermediaries

between God's world and human societies. According to Bockie,

“ The term ancestor is reserved solely for this class of beings, not everyone who has gone before can be called an ancestor. Ultimately, when the ancestors close their earthly existence completely, when no living being is able to remember them and when their personality is no longer incarnated in newcomers, they are called Nkukunyungu: Light. Because they are closer to God than we are, the ancestors are imbued with power wisdom. And because they were once part of the human community, they can be used by God to project that power into daily life and circumstances.”<sup>15</sup>

### 3.3.3.1. Characteristic of ancestor.

Dead person.

They died long ago

A person who was good: socially and morally. They were persons of integrity during their life time, an upright people. Therefore, a thief cannot be called an ancestor.

Living Dead, those who live after their death because of whatever they contributed here on earth.

It is said that in their village that the ancestors are classified according to their earthly social status. For instance, a king will keep his subjects even there. However, it is said that they are at peace. There are no quarrels or wars -- there is abundance. It is where the good people will reside after their death. The bad will not be allowed to enter this village, they will be sent away and will go wandering around, and take different forms of life.

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<sup>15</sup> Simon Bockie, Death and the Invisible Powers, The World of Kongo Belief, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1993, p. 134.

### 3.3.3.2. Where do they live?

Some say Kumasa: under water. Kumfinda: far in the depth of the forest. Actually there are some particular days when people do not go to the field in the forest because it is said to be the day of the ancestors.

### 3.3.4. Human beings

The living comes before the animals, plants and natural forces...

## CHAPTER FOUR

### GOD'S ATTRIBUTES

This chapter will be divided into two parts on part one we shall discuss six attributes of God, one of which we have developed earlier. Part two is an attempt to analyse some proverbs related to God's attributes.

#### *PART I*

##### 4.1.1. God the Creator

Bakongo attribute the origin of life to God. He is creator, the maker of everything. Nothing came by itself, everything visible and invisible was created by HIM. However there are many things which do not serve the Mukongo at all, namely, natural disaster, insects like locusts, other animals and plants. These are things of Nzambi, but He knows why he made them for. He is the maker of heaven and earth, sun and moon, etc.

The creation of man also is owed to Nzambi; he is the one who made the first human being. God was also the one who introduced death when human beings disobeyed Him. Here death was introduced as a way of liberating oneself from this hopeless and helpless world.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Simon Bockie, Death and the Invisible Powers. The World of Kongo Belief, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 136 - 137.

#### 4.1.2. Nzambi the Almighty <sup>17</sup>

“Nkole yakanga Nzambi Muntu Mlenda go kutula.” the prisoner arrested by God, nobody can free him.

“Masa Kaleki, Nzambi utuma Kwenda,” It is God who commends the stream of water that runs.

These two cited bakongo proverbs emphasis the omnipotentness of God. That is to say, God is honoured as the all powerful one. He is beyond everything and every force of nature. Even the kings cannot be equated to Him. He is invincible and incomparable.

He has power beyond all authorities. God’s Grandeur is unique. He is Nzambi Mpungu, everything obeys him even the running river... he is the only one who commends it.

#### 4.1.3. God is Kalunga<sup>18</sup> (complete)

He is independent and he does suffice for himself. He does not depend on somebody else or again upon something else. It is from Him that everything depends. Our life depends on him.

#### 4.1.4. Nzambi is Omniscient

Speaking of God, Bakongo say that when the baby cries we do not understand, we just guess. Nobody knows the noise/ language of the birds and animals. Those are God’s secrets. He is the only one who knows them and understands them.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Mulago gwa Gikala, La Religion Traditionnelle des Bantu et Leur Vision du Monde, (Kinshasa: F.T.C., 1980), p. 97.

<sup>18</sup> Kalunga means sea, it symbolises immensity, limitless. Applying to God it means that, he is infinite, without beginning and end. Cf. Joseph J & Williams, sj. “Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute,” Africa’s God (v), ( Chestnut Hill: Boston College Press, 1937), p. 101.

“Wenda mu nsi vo mu Zulu. Nzambi wena yaku”. Wherever you go God is there, either in heaven or under it. It means that God sees and knows everything. He knows what takes place in the woman womb, he knows about the genesis of the fetus. There is no secret for him. He does not sleep, meaning nothing blinds his sight. No one can cheat God because he is the all knowing. Besides being the omniscient being, the bakongo God is omnipresent. (Cf. P.R.T.G. A, n. 3)<sup>19</sup>.

#### **4.1.5. Nzambi is Immaterial**

“Ku tombi Nzambi Ko, Kadi Ka Kena ye nitu Ko”

Don't look for God -- for, he is bodiless. Nobody has seen him. Nzambi is beyond human imagination.

#### **4.1.6. God: the Provider**

For the Bakongo God is the provider of everything they eat, from leaves (vegetable) to meat.

They only plant the field but they do not know how the crops grow. It is Nzambi's power that lets things grow they believe.

He also provides them with rain that makes their forest green, fruitful and fertile.

He does the necessary and human beings play a secondary role as stated in this following proverb:

“ It is God who cooks luku (Cassava bread), the staple food of the Kongo peoples. We humans only prepare condiments.” So everything belongs to God. We are stewards. (Cf.

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<sup>19</sup> The acronym P.R.T.G.A, stands for; Proverbs related to God's attributes. That is. the second topic of our fourth chapter.

P.R.T.G.A, n. 15).

## **PART II**

### **4.2. Proverbs Related to God's Attributes.**

#### ***An attempt at analysis.***

**1. *Kalunga Mwangu Nzo:*** Nzambi is the roof of the house. According to the Bakongo, the roof of a hut is the highest part and the people are just under that roof. Hence, applying this to the supreme being, it indicates that all human beings and other creatures are under God's control. They are subject to Him and he is superior to everyone and everything.

#### **2. *Kimbembi Kibaba Malunsi Ku Nzambi Mpungu:***

The Eagle that flies elegantly gets its support from God. Nzambi Mpungu is the support for everything and everybody. We stand because he wills it. If he takes his support away, we will fall.

#### **3. *Konso ta Luvumu Nzambi Katala!***

Whoever lies God sees him/her. God punishes those who lie; he is the legislator. He sees all over. Actually, the Bakongo say that God does not sleep; he does even not blink his eyes.

#### **4. *Konso Kimfumu ku Nzambi Mpungu.***

Authority comes from Nzambi Mpungu. These people show great respect to authority because they believe it comes from God. He is the one who conferred it to the from God the ancestors. Here authority is a symbol of unity and harmony.

**5. *Lau Nzambi ungene diau:***

My luck in chasing animals comes from God. Every success during the hunting time comes from God.

**6. *Masa Kaleki, Nzambi utuma Kuenda:*** Water does not sleep because God commended it to run. Therefore do not act against your nature.

If your a man, behave like a man and do not behave like a woman.

**7. *Nge u Kikeba, Nzambi Kakukeba:*** Keep yourself; help yourself God will come to your help.

**8. *Nsafu tudia Ka u beto ko, u Nzambi.*** Nsafu (edible kind of tropical fruit) which we eat does not belong to us, it is God's. We benefit from God's gift.

**9. *Nzambi bakidi kima Kiani:*** Nzambi has taken (his things) what is his. God has called this or that person. We don't belong to ourselves, we belong to God our maker.

**10. *Nzambi go Utubokele mbila, yina mbila nani utina yau?***

If God calls us back to him, who will resist his call? Not even the stubborn one.

Nobody will escape either death or whatsoever God wills.

**11. *Nzambi Kakuteka nima (curse)***

May God turn his back to you, may he forget us and let you live. This one is addressed to God. When parents want to curse their child ( children), who can't listen to anybody in the family, clan and the village set up. He does not listen to God's representatives who are his/her parents. God cannot ignore his representatives because he was the one who entrusted them with that responsibility. On the contrary, He will turn his back and curse the one who does not follow his ways. Here God is the legislator, the one who judges and punishes.

**12. Nzambi Kakutoba Ku futu:**

May God throw you in the smoke. May he forget you and let you alone. May God give you long life. ( this last sentence is put in an allegorical form, it expresses the opposite idea).

**13. Nzambi Mpungu Uganga beto baminti dimoyo:**

Nzambi Mpungu created us living, as living trees beings, the supreme God is our creator.

**14. Nzambi Mpungu utuvanga Nzale ye nlembo:**

Nzambi Mpungu created our nails our fingers, (even the least of ourselves we have to owe it to God). Whatever we are comes from Him.

**15. Nzambi Ulamba luku** (Cassava bread) **matongo beto bantu.** God cooks cassava and we prepare the condiments. God plays the essential role. Because he is the absolute master of everything, Our role is secondary.

**16. Nzambi utuvwidi.** Nzambi possesses us. God is our absolute master.

We are nothing in front of God since he possesses us. He can do anything with us.

**17. Nzila zi Nzambi Kalengilanga:** It is God's ways that he follows. He is an upright person, because he lives according to God's will.

**18. Seya Nkweno, Kalunga Mwasi kena:** The one who mocks his neighbour,

The almighty will mock him. He is like a widely opened door. God sees everything, actions and incidents, he also punishes those who do not practice charity.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### GOD IN BAKONGO SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

#### 5.1. SOCIAL LIFE OF THE BAKONGO

In their everyday life the Bakongo do not say God's name: the simplest reason is that they do not know him. During my interview at Mbenkeseke Mfuti with Mr. Simba Zikonda Alphonse, I asked him about the reason why and he said: " We do not say Nzambi's name in vain first of all because we do not know God physically, nobody has seen him. Nevertheless, we know that he is Nzambi. He is the almighty and everyone must show respect to him."<sup>20</sup> However, people may use God's name to emphasis the veracity of a statement. For instance, one may say, "Nzambi, I did not do this or that." It implies that he/she is saying the truth, Even though it is not always the case today.

Apart from being the creator to whom everything traces its origin, the people of Kongo regard their Nzambi as the Legislator par excellence. I purposely say legislator par excellence because according to these people everything is under his dominion, he punishes the breaker of his laws.

Some proverbs we have studied previously expressed these attributes or characteristics of bakongo's God. The following proverbs emphasize in a special way the latter.

-Konso ta lufumu Nzambi Kantala: God takes notice of whoever lies.

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<sup>20</sup> Interview carried out at Mbenseke Mfuti on July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1998.

- Konso ta lufumu Nzambi Kantala: God takes notice of whoever lies.
- Kalunga Mwangu Nzo: God is the roof of the house.
- Nzambi Kakuteka nima! May God turn his back to you!
- Nzila zi Nzambi Kangilena: He follows God's laws. It referred to an upright person. God has given us his laws through our ancestor and those who disobey them are punished.

Actually God is the lawgiver, He was the one who gave the ancestors and their predecessors the laws and customs of their country so that they may govern and rule their descendants in harmony. These laws were given by Nzambi to the first human couple and are transmitted from one generation to the next. Each and every member of this society regardless of his/her status is bound to keep them faithfully because any violation of these customs and laws is seen first as a serious offense against the legislator, first then the ancestors and finally against the community of the living. This offense (sin) is to be respectively sanctioned by these three categories of beings.

Here sin has both a personal effect a communal effect, meaning it may not only affect the individual who committed it but also the whole community in which this subject lives, in such as his family and clan. For instance, some particular transgressions immediately God's castigation: the lack of respect towards one's the parents who should be looked upon as God's representatives by their children; the lack of hospitality and generosity towards visitors and travelers; robbery and murder; immorality (adultery and incest) which is also severely sanctioned by God and others. According to Wing, the three first violations can ultimately bring death to the unfortunate person whereas, the

outcomes of the later can be divided into two groups and has different effects.<sup>21</sup>

Terrible illness, women's sterility in the clan of the victims, drought and famine to the community in general result from incest. It is said that in the past those caught in incest were immediately burn alive.

Kesa, which consists in vomiting, inflating or losing of weight by the culprits and their children was a punishment for those who had committed adultery. Only a public confession in which everybody assists, could restore health and harmony within the family.

Mr. Ngeta, one of our informants told, us that slavery to another village was also a way to punish those who frequently showing a continuous lack of respect to their parents and were frequently misbehaved and became a source of scandal for their family. Divorce also was an immediate consequence of adultery which broke the bonds between families of spouses and dishonored the female's victim family.

**NB:** Since these laws or commands came from God through our ancestors and down to us, the elders of the community were naturally entrusted with the responsibility of teaching their younger ones about of this. They did it by means of sayings, proverbs and riddle, etc. This took place at night during the story telling time, or in the evenings around the fire or even during palaver times/open tribunal.

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<sup>21</sup>. Cf Joseph Wing., Etude Bakongo, Rereligion, Sociologie et Magie, (Bruxelles: Desclées de Brouwer, 1959), pp. 303-305.

## 5.2. GOD'S WORSHIP

Let us initiate this section with some views of our predecessor on this very subject.

“The religious consciousness of Bamanianga is not focused as restrictedly on God as it is in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In daily life, God is not called upon with appeals for help or protection or invoked as a witness or a watchful presence. That level of interaction is instead assigned to the ancestors, who serve as God's intermediaries.”<sup>22</sup> Bentley states: “that the Bakongo's idea of Nzambi is confused and vague...their belief is purely nominal.”<sup>23</sup>

“Among the Ba-Congo people no cult of God is seen. They leave God at ease in possession of his supremacy, but there is a cult to inferior divinities, as to those which the Romans looked for protection in the different circumstances of social, or family, or private life.” Anzanneau.<sup>24</sup>

And many other studies of the Bakongo affirmed the same. There is not an explicit cult or direct worship of the supreme being in this society. However, all of them may unanimously agree that there is a shift from God to the ancestors. Why? Maybe because the ancestors are closer to us.

“ Concerning God's cult, there is no temple (erected),or offering given. However, people have tried to worship HIM. Even the chief of the clan may enter into dialogue/contact with the Creator when the clan needs that. But one cannot say with precision the right content of such a prayer done by the clan's chief. ”<sup>25</sup>

### 5.2.1. WHAT DO WE PERSONALLY THINK?

Before drawing any conclusion on this matter, we think that it is good to define or rather to describe the word worship. After pointing out its range of meanings, we will give our

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<sup>22</sup> Simon Bockie, Death and the Invisible Powers, the World of Kongo Belief, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. 134.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Williams, SJ., “ Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute”, Africa's God ,V- (Chestnut Hill: Boston College Press), 1937, p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 81.

<sup>25</sup> Mulago Gwa Cikala, M. La religion Traditionnelle des Bantu et Leur Vision du Monde, (Kinshasa: F.T.C., 1980), p. 98.

own point of view.

- According to *Oxford English dictionary* the noun worship entails:<sup>26</sup>

The Practice of showing respect for God or a god, e.g. by praying or singing with others at a service or for instance, bowing ones head in worship. This practice be either can both in individual one or in a community level.

*To worship means:*

- 1) to show respect and honour to God or a god.
- 2) to attend church service.
- 3) to feel love and admiration for somebody or something especially to such an extent that one can not see their / its faults.

- *The Catholic Dictionary of Worship* on the other hand describes worship as:

“ a universal phenomenon which consists in a response of veneration in the face of recognized presence of God who is seen as *Mysterious*.” It continues: “The person who worships, realizes that his/her response to God demands a total and a whole-hearted commitment to faith in God and a life in accord with God’s Laws... the form that worship takes would, in the main, be words, music bodily action or a silent contemplation. Its content would be expressed by means of adoration, reverence, sorrow for one’s sinfulness, gratitude for past favors, petition for future gifts.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Crowther, Oxford Advanced learner’s Dictionary of current English, 5<sup>th</sup> edition,( Oxford: Oxford University Press), p, 1379.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Fink., SJ. The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship. (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990), p. 1331.

During my interviews I tried my best to spent a long time with my informants discussing this topic. My aim was to know if there existed a kind of worship of God before the coming of the European Christian missionaries.

In the following I will condense the result of my interviews on the worship of God.

When I wanted to know if in traditional Bakongo society people worship God in specific places, they said, unlike us today, our ancestors never had a specific place to pray to their God. There was neither temple nor a church. Our elders addressed some prayers to God. However, they regularly invoked our ancestors.

*Question:* Was it a lack of respect?

*Answer:* No, they did not lack respect for God. Actually, they respected God more than we who go to church and other houses of prayer today. Actually, there were not many problems during those days, especially problems related to morality, criminality, sexual misconduct, and many others. But when the western missionaries came they brought with them their religion, and many other things. Some even told us that our ancestors were worshipping idols and to invoke the ancestors' names was to disregard the true God. We worshipped God even before the arrival of the Europeans. He is the Creator of everything and the almighty, He is Nzambi Mpungu, he is the one who showed our ancestors how to live in society. They revered and honoured our Creator and they told us about God even before the missionaries.

Wing and Bockie observed that the Bakongo rarely address their prayers to God. In their prayer they are quite familiar with the ancestors. Unlike the prayers to the ancestors which are made in special places, such as a cemetery, people go to celebrate

seasonally, or before undertaking any activity such as hunting, game, going to war, fishing, labouring the field, planting, journeying, initiating and giving birth. Prayers to God can be made in case of some persisting phenomenon or situation which threatened to destroy the community.<sup>28</sup>

In the end, we find it somewhat tricky to assess this practice simply because we never did a thorough field work. However, it is not impossible.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Simon Bockie., Death and the Invisible Powers, The World of Kongo Belief, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 138.

The English noun worship means practice of showing respect for God or a god.

Since there are some kinds of prayer addressed to Nzambi, regardless of their natures (whether they're short petition, complaints or thanksgiving). We affirm that these people worship God. For they respected, honour and revere him as the only supreme being. If they respect and honour him this implies that God has a certain influence on the people's daily life.

Considering the second meaning of the verb to worship that is, to attend a service in particular day, I would not hesitate to say that, it does not exist in this society because there was no erected church where the people went for God's service on a particular day. Here the communitarian dimension of worship seem not to exist.

If to worship means to show respect and honour to God or god, were the Bakongo a God worshipping people? We would say that the Bakongo in their society were taught or told about God who he is ever present.- Nzambi Mpungu. This is can be seen in their proverbs, their stories and daily life as mentioned above. However, the explicit and direct worship of God existed in the Bakongo society in a very low level. It seems that one of intermediaries, such as the ancestors, overshadowed it. We do not know the exact motive for that.

## CHAPTER SIX

### ESCHATOLOGY

In this chapter we will deal with the Bakongo understanding of the last or final things: death, hereafter and judgment. Beside humans role in all these ultimate things we shall bring to light God's role in these last things.

#### **6.1. Death**

On the one hand for Bakongo, like for many African societies, death is understood as a great disrupter of community harmony, because the death of a person effects himself first, then his family and the community in which he /she lived. On the other hand, it is conceived to be a rite of passage to a new world.

##### 6.1.1. Origin

Virtually all the Bakongo myths or stories of the origins we have studied and heard about assert unanimously that the original state of human being was the state of happiness, joy, peace and harmony. That is to say, from the very outset the primary vocation of man and woman was to live in accordance to the will and desire of the Creator and closer to him. The Mahungu stories say that God cares and did everything for this creature. Unfortunately, this precious plan of God did not have an everlasting duration due to the third force, which broke the harmonious relationship between man/woman and the Creator.

For the Bakongo, Nzambi is the offspring of everything. It is from him that we stemmed and all creatures either on earth or in other worlds owe their origin to him. By

the same token, the people of Kongo attribute also the genesis of death to God. We can sum up their thought or rather philosophy of the beginning of death in this sentence; Nzambi created death but human being chose it. Meaning, God did not choose death for us, even though he created it. In this regard, nobody knows what was the purpose of creating death. We never come across any myth or story explaining that in either our readings or in our field work. They also acknowledge that God is the only one who knows the purpose of it, since he is the Creator of all. All in all, they would say human beings himself for death.

The following stories of creation will explain succinctly how death come about in this world:

#### 6.1.1.1. THE STORY OF NDOSIMAU<sup>29</sup>

God created the first man who was called Ndosimau and the first woman whose name was the breaker of prohibition. He instructed this first couple about whatsoever they were bound to do and whatsoever they were not. That is, the dos and the don'ts. And he set them to live in the world. They built a hut and in due cause of time they had a baby. When Nzambi came to see them, he told them this: " If your baby dies, do not bury it, but cover the baby under layers of fire wood. After some three days it will revive." The baby died the next day so the parents buried it under the firewood, but after a time it began to smell badly, so they buried it in the earth. God came back and said: " You will have children and they will die and none of them will revive after that."

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Ian Knappert., The Aquarian Guide to African Mythology, (Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1990), p.182.

### 6.1.1.2. THE STORY OF MAHUNGU<sup>30</sup>

Mahungu is the name of the first human being Nzambi made. This word derives from the verb hunga: “to carry away;” He was a bisexual being, able to procreate by himself because he was muntu walunga, meaning a complete being.

To him God entrusted the management of the whole creation, stewardship. He was even more powerful than the ancestors. Even so, Mahungu did not keep his high position among other creatures because of his unsuitable behaviour before God. He was too talkative to the extent that Mahungu began to reveal his Creator’s plans and secrets to other creatures, mainly to animals. He did his several times, saying for instance: “Here is what God intends to do tomorrow”, “Lutala Nzambi makana vanga mbazi.” God was aware of Mahungu’s attitude and began to make new plans since it was not his intentions to disclose his secrets to other creatures than Mahungu. God became angry and finally decided to cut off his partnership with this being. For the latter was unable to hold in confidence what God told him. Subsequently, God withdrew and no longer intervened directly in human affairs. As God’s departure was too much for Mahungu, who became helpless, to save him from this desperate situation, God introduced a new element in the world, namely, death. Here death which is natural is nothing else than a way of getting rid of this world and joining the other one.

### 6.1.1.3. THE STORY OF KIMBANZIA

“ God sent the first man into the world bearing a tiny green leaf of

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<sup>30</sup>Cf. Simon Bockie. Death and Invisible Powers. The World of Kongo Belief, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 36 - 37

kimbanzia, a sacred plant that is used to heal and to save life. Then he sent a second man bearing a dead leaf, a symbol of death, The human race chose the dead leaf or death, because he was afraid of immortality. It was better to exist for a while and then join God than to live forever not knowing how one would be able to cope with advanced age.”<sup>31</sup>

We would conclude this section by saying that for the Bakongo the responsibility of death is divided between human being and his creator. So the creator made death, (No one knows its exact reason) and the human being either chose death or brought it on themselves by making a wrong choice or by not keeping faithful to God’s word, that is, disobeying his/her Creator and distorting human being original state and God’s plan.

#### 6.1.2. CAUSES OF DEATH IN BAKONGO DAILY LIFE

Writing about the causes of death in the Manianga community, Simon Bockie attested this: “The Manianga community deals with death in two general ways depending whether it is natural, that is, the result of old age or inevitable factors, or whether it is an untimely interruption that can be attributed to *kindoki*, the exercise of invisible powers.”<sup>32</sup> (This belief is applicable to all Bakongo people and Bantu. For instance, to die in old age denotes natural death for it was introduced by Nzambi himself. But the opposite can easily be imputed to other invisible powers, commonly known as *kindoki*. Here other human beings are pointed by finger to be responsible for such a practice. Hence, this death is unnatural).

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<sup>31</sup> Simon Bockie, Death and Invisible Powers, The World of Kongo Belief, (Bloomington: Indiana Univerasity Press, 1993), pp. 37- 38.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 36.

This belief can be explained in various ways and given several reasons. For instance, it can be said that a woman loses children because she stole this or that, so the fact of losing children became a result of her previous act. It can, however, be said that someone was killed by the bandoki because he was intelligent and the so-called killer would like to succeed in business by using the victims at his own secret services. Sometimes but not very often, people attributed somebody's death to other people even without looking for external or internal causes. This way of thinking is not uncommon even today. In October 1990 when a more or less 14 year old Ngituka died at Mbenseke after being bitten by a wild dog, people said he was killed by some members of his extended family. The main reason seemed that this animal had a rage. If the unfortunate boy could have been taken to the hospital as soon as the incident occurred, maybe his fate would not have been the same. This mentality which can be seen in several societies of our country and continent may prevent people from developing certain preventive methods or techniques. It, nevertheless led people abandon their responsibility to secure human life.

However, Wing mentions that at times if parents had applied different types of medicines and had seen different traditional doctors or nganga, then they give up and wait for God to take their sick child. Because it was believed that God wants it that way. Therefore, no human effort is needed.

### 6.1.3. SOME THEMES RELATED TO DEATH

Some themes related to the African notion of death presented by J.Healey and Sybertz, which we find fitting to the same reality in the Bakongo society, namely: Transitoriness, Inevitability<sup>33</sup>.

#### 6.1.3.1. TRANSITORINESS

This theory holds the belief that after this life, we will pass from one world to another world and even if our body will die, it will only change skin like a serpent does. We continue to live there as we are here; a carpenter here will be a carpenter there, a chief here will remain chief with plenty of wives, employees, subjects. A farmer here will be the same there. Our village corresponds to the village of the ancestors. It is an other facet of this world. However it differs in richness, abundance, no war, peace, happiness and harmony.

#### 6.1.3.2. INEVITABILITY

Without thinking of the average life expectancy in Africa, it is already known (to any mature person) that death is inevitable. Whether by natural cause or unnatural causes no one of human being will escape death. It is an unavoidable fact. Whether strong or weak, good or wicked, each person has got is own day (however when death comes people react differently).

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Joseph Healey & Sybertz, Towards an African Narrative Theology, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1996), p. 207.

As critique to this attitude we can attest that it is a tendency to refrain from multiplying means for subsistence, to limit epidemics, to impose rules of elementary hygiene, to supply drinking water, to eradicate unnecessary poverty that leads to premature death and where necessary, to provide medical care. Here, the idea of inevitability is also linked to death being always caused by someone or something, such as: sorcery, witchcraft, anger of ancestors or another person or again the fate of one's parents, etc. The causal factors of death related to physiological and physical conditions or accidents are simply ignored or given very little attention.

#### 6.1.4. OTHER CONCEPT OF DEATH

According the Bakongo traditional religion to die does not mean to be finished, to vanish and to decompose. Rather, in dying one gets the opportunity for better life if he/she has lived according to social norms and expectations or for a worse life if he failed to respect both social norms and expectations.

#### **6.2. LIFE AFTER DEATH/ HEREAFTER**

Do Bakongo believe in life beyond death?

Absolutely, they do. They believe that life does not end in this world, even though human life is destroyed and community harmony disturbed by death. In actual sense, the destruction and disturbance are just ephemeral, transitory.

What is the attitude of the living towards those who have preceded them? The Bakongo

post and after funeral ceremonies consists in several items: songs, riddles, proverbs to name just some. The veneration given to their dead and the enduring relationship between the world of living and the world of dead, “ living dead, ” can only confirm that, Kongo people and like them, many other African people, give credence to life after death. It is furthermore their faith that after living this world we shall join the invisible world and dwell over there. Where is it located and who are there? This twofold question will be tackled in an other section of this chapter.

Who are the Dead then? “ The dead are the living par excellence, they are endowed with a lasting life and with extra-human power that enables them to go out of their underground villages in order to influence human beings, animals, plants, minerals and nature either in good or in bad.”<sup>34</sup> In the following poem Cheik anta Diop expressed similar idea about the dead in Africa in general:

“Those who are dead have never gone away  
They are in the shadows darkening around,  
They are in the shadows feelings into the day,  
The dead are not under the ground,  
They are in the trees that quiver,  
They are in the wood that weep,  
They are in the water that sleep.  
They are in the crowds, they are in the homestead.  
The dead are never dead.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Joseph Wing,, Etudes Bakongo, Sociologie, Religion et Magie,( Bruxelles: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959), p. 250.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Healey, & Sybertz. Towards an African Narrative Theology, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1996), p. 212.

### 6.2.1. THE LAND OF THE DEPARTED: ANCESTORS' VILLAGE

The Bakongo generally state that after death, we go to the ancestors' village where we continue living a peaceful, joyful and enjoyable life. Where is it located then? For the Bakongo their ancestors' village is located Ku masa, in/ under the water, in the heart of the unseen or mysterious forest. Altogether it is invisible.

“In their village, the ancestors have houses and fields; they moreover possess a lot of wealth, tissues, silver, palm wine...”<sup>36</sup> (In this society palm wine is the main traditional brew). To each village of the living there corresponds a village of ancestors situated somewhere. No one knows exactly where.

People live in accordance to their earthly personality or rather social rank and have everything in plenty. There is no war, no sufferings and no mistreatment over there.

### 6.2.2. WHO IS ADMITTED TO THE ANCESTORS' VILLAGE?

Not everyone has access to this village. The inhabitants of this village are called Nkulu, bakulu in plural, becomes nkulu, after his life. They are the one who lived honestly, according to the laws and customs left behind by the ancestors and given to them by God himself. The notorious wrong doers, the thieves of the villages, the killers and bad sorcerer are not welcomed to the Bakongo ancestors' village. These go wandering around disturbing the living and may even take a new form so that they may be killed and die for the second time.

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph Wing., Etude Bakongo. Sociologie, Religion et Magie, (Bruxelles: Desclée de Brouwer 1959), p. 250

Talking to me about those who are not accepted to the ancestors village Mrs. Makengo (at kimbondo) said, “We don’t eat antelope( N’kay) meat, simply because we believe that those wrong doers who were rejected from our ancestor’s village reincarnated themselves into N’kay. Therefore, to eat this meat is to provoke one’s own sickness and sufferings.”<sup>37</sup>

According to the Bakongo we may state that our future life depends on whatever we do here on earth. The notion of retribution is very much developed here. The wicked face their own fate because of their earthly life and people of integrity, the good ones are received into the ancestors’ village and enjoy a peaceful life because they merited it. It is a logical consequence of one’s life.

### **6.3. JUDGMENT**

You may not find the word judgement in the Bakongo way of thinking about the hereafter; however, the existence of this notion of judgement seems clear to us. Here judgement is not the same as we find in the Synoptic Gospels which is done either by Christ himself or by the Father. It is up to the ancestors to judge whom they would like to enter their village or not. On the one hand they are the ones welcoming people of integrity, namely, those who kept their commands and were socially accepted and did not disturb the community running. Even though in their life they committed sins against the community but they recognized it and were restored to the community life. On the other hand they do not accept those who and denied, disobeyed their rule here on earth. As

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<sup>37</sup> Interview carried out on July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1998 at Kimbondo.

matter of justice, they also deny them the right of joining their village or kingdom. Here judgment is nothing else but the outcomes of one's way of living here on earth. It seems to be similar to the Old Testament's notion of judgment. According to this belief the notion of salvation through Christ the redeemer does not exist. On the contrary, faithfulness to the ancestor's laws is very on fashionable here. Consequently, one has to deserve whatsoever will be his/ her future destiny.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### BAKONGO CONCEPT OF GOD AND THE CHRISTIAN REVELATION

#### **7.0. INTRODUCTION**

This section of our essay will attempt to bring to light the similarities and dissimilarities that we have observed in both religious beliefs, that is, Christianity and the Kongo traditional religion. We are aware that this comparison is not exhaustive. In so doing, our main objective will consist in looking at this cultural religious heritage from an objective point of view and try to point out both positive and negative values. The positive values of Bakongo religious beliefs that are compatible with the Good News will be incorporated into the Christian message.

#### **7.1. SIMILARITIES**

These two religions acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being. He is unique and transcendent. He is God, the almighty one to whom both beliefs attribute the origin of everything. He is beyond human knowledge, he is mystery. Moreover, he is the creator of everything visible or invisible, even the human being was created by him as affirmed in the biblical accounts of creation (in) Genesis and the Bakongo myths of origin which have already seen. E.g., Gn. 1; 1. “ In the beginning, when God began to create the heavens and earth...”, Gn. 1: 26ff. and Gn 2: 7 show God being the Maker of human beings.

The original state of human beings according these religions was the state of harmony, peace, joy, happiness. Man/woman enjoyed the closeness of their Maker. They

lived in paradise.

The human being is seen as the creature par excellence; he is superior to the rest of creation. In the first chapter of Genesis, God asked man to fill the earth, subdue it and rule over every living creature that move on the ground. Man also named other creatures, but above all he was created in God's image and likeness. Cf. Gn 1: 26 -30, Gn 2: 20. For the Bakongo the Mahungu story of creation stipulates that God entrusted the management of the whole creation to Mahungu, that is, everything was at man's service. He revealed his secrets to human beings only. This shows a special type of relationship that existed between human beings and God and the position this latter occupied before God.

Man broke his relationship with the Creator, either by disobeying his God or by making a very wrong choice. Christians and Bakongo people acknowledge the presence of this state of sin, and death. Cf. Gn 3: 1 ff., the Fall, Gn 3: 14 ff., the judgement of God and also the three Bakongo stories of origin we studied previously confirm this.

They believe in life after death. Even though the means to get it may differ.

The two religions recognize the existence of law, however, their conception is quite different from one another.

According to these two beliefs, God is full of goodness, he is a saintly God.

## **7.2. DISSIMILARITIES**

### **7.2.1. ORIGIN OF DEATH.**

- a. Christians: God did not create death, Man was the one who out of his freedom, made a wrong choice, that is, he disobeyed God's law, he sinned. Death comes as the consequence of man's sin. It is inadmissible that God who is full of goodness creates evil. "God saw all that he had created, it was very good." Gn 1: 31. Hence, God is not the origin of evil.
- b. Bakongo: God is the creator. Even death was created by him but human beings do not know why he did so. However, man was the one who chose it. See the three bakongo stories of origin cited previously.

### **7.2.2. AFTER SIN**

a. Christians: God did not abandon his people for good, he prepares the way for the Messiah, the redeemer of the world, Jesus Christ. He walked with human beings in history to pave the way for the saviour. Cf. Gn 12: 1, call of Abram, the ancestor of God's people, God made a covenant, Gn 15:1, Gn18: , Gn 27:1. He freed his people from the burden of the Egyptians and delivered them from slavery. Cf. Exod. 6:6-8. God of Christians, who is ever present in the history of humanity, showed his love and mercy by sending his only Son to save the whole humanity. Jesus is the incarnation and revelation of God's mercy. Cf. Heb1: 1-2.

Bakongo: God withdrew and no longer intervenes directly in human affairs. This also may explain the closeness to the ancestors.

### 7.2.3. Law

**Bible:** Old Testament, the law existed, law of Moses given to him by Yahweh.

New testament: Jesus is the sign of God's great love for humanity, is the summary of every law and the master of the Sabbath. Mk 2: 28. "So the Son of Man is master of the Sabbath." (Here Sabbath symbolizes all laws and traditions) and the perfection of every law. Matt 5: 17. "Do not think that I have come to remove the law and the prophets. I have not come to remove but to fulfill ( perfect) them".

**Bakongo:** The law was handed down by the ancestors who were given it by the creator. Each and every member of the community has to follow it.

### 7.2.4. HOW TO GET LIFE AFTER DEATH?

**OT:** Faithfulness to law of Moses, this law came from Yahweh.

**NT:** Faith in God (this faith is to be seen in one's words and deeds), faithfulness to love, salvation is the gift of God no one deserves it. We are saved through Jesus Christ. Cf. Jn. 3: 16, Col. 1: 20ff.

**B:** Faithfulness to the ancestor's law. We merit whatever we will be in the future life here on earth.

### 7.2.5. NATURE OF GOD

- a. Christians: God is one, in three persons; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. These three persons are related in love. He is merciful and loving God. It is a relative monotheism.

- b. Bakongo: God is one and unique. He does not have three persons, actually is kalunga meaning complete. He is sufficient in himself. It is an absolute monotheism.

#### 7.2.6. CREATION

God is the creator in these two religious beliefs. They differed from one another in the way of creating. For example, the Bakongo do not mention another person who participated in God's creation. Whereas for Christians God the Father created through his Word, in him, and for him. He was there before the beginning of the world. Cf. Johannine account of creation. Jn. 1: 1-3 and the Pauline letter to the Colossians. Col. 1:15-17.

#### 7.2.7. JUDGEMENT

Bakongo: It is up to the ancestor to welcome or send away those who are fit and those who are not fit into their own village. This election depends on the individual previous life on earth.

Christians: Since the Gospels portrays several models of judgement or rather judges, we will select one of them, that is, the Johannine model as shown in Jn5:25ff. Here God the Father has given the authority of judging to his Son Jesus Christ. "Those who have done good will rise to live and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned." Cf. Jn.5: 28.

#### 7.2.8. HEREAFTER: HOW WILL LIFE BE THERE?

Both religions agree that life over there is somehow different from ours but they diverge in some points. For instance, the Bakongo believe that in the other world we keep our

social status, the king here will be the king there, the one married to many wives here will be the same there. However, there will be no war, no famine, no pain but peace, joy and happiness. To deal with the Christian future life, we find it interesting to bring to you the argument of Jesus and the Sadducees on the resurrection of the dead. Matt 22: 23- 30:

“The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying,

"Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.' Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman herself died.

In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her." Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.”

We may conclude by saying that for the Christians our future life is totally different from whatever we live here on earth.

## **GENERAL CONCLUSION**

From the previous pages, it is quite clear that the Bakongo have a strong religious heritage and tradition. We have seen some positive values which need to be not only promoted by Christianity but also integrated into the process of inculturation. This will be a significant contribution to Bakongo Christianity. For example, during catechism or homily, the catechist or the homilist may incorporate some of those beautiful proverbs, riddles or sayings in order to explain better some of the doctrines of the faith. This could advance and deepen evangelization. We have also seen some shortcomings of this religious tradition, which need to be checked on, challenged or purified by the Good News of Jesus Christ that we are called to announce. In this way, the major task of the evangelisers will be to work with the local people so that they may come to discern, to choose and to conserve both the values of their Christian faith and the positive values of their culture.

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