

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN RELIGION AND MODERN CHRISTIANITY IN ZAIRE: THE CASE OF THE BIRA*

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Abstract: The rural Bira of northeastern Zaire have been exposed to the Christian message for well over half a century. It was during the Belgian colonial period that the first Catholic and Protestant missionaries came to this region of Zaire. Today most Zairians belong to either the Catholic or Protestant church, and the Bira themselves are predominantly Catholic. The suppression of ancestor worship is the only area where mission Christianity has scored a triumph over the traditional religious life of the Bira. In contrast, witchcraft beliefs persist. As for the belief in God, it appears that the Bira have utilized Christianity to make their traditional God *Mbali* less remote and more caring, a change which has also made the Christian God more compassionate and forgiving of sins. Thus, *Mbali*-God is a creative response on the part of the Bira to the syncretic religious encounter.

Résumé: Dans le nord-est du Zaïre, la communauté rurale Bira a été exposée depuis plus de cinquante ans au message chrétien. C'est à l'époque de la colonisation belge que les premiers missionnaires catholiques et protestants sont arrivés dans cette région du Zaïre. Aujourd'hui, la plupart des Zaïriens sont soit catholiques, soit protestants; les Biras pour leur part sont principalement catholiques. L'interdiction de pratiquer le culte des ancêtres est l'unique domaine dans lequel la mission chrétienne a triomphé de la vie religieuse traditionnelle des Biras. Par contre, les croyances en la sorcellerie ont persisté. En ce qui concerne la croyance en Dieu, il semblerait que les Biras se soient servis de la chrétienté pour rendre leur dieu traditionnel *Mbali* plus accessible et plus compréhensif, un changement qui a rendu le Dieu des chrétiens plus compatissant et indulgent vis à vis du péché. Par conséquent, *Mbali*-Dieu est la réponse créative des Biras à une rencontre religieuse synchrétique.

Introduction

The rural Bira of northeastern Zaire numbered about 100 000 in the mid-1980s (Krzywicki 1985). They are horticulturists who raise sweet potatoes, manioc, corn, beans and peanuts. Local communities are composed of segmentary lineages which form exogamous clans. Traditionally, each clan was believed to have occupied only one village. Now, however, a clan generally encompasses several villages. The social structure of the Bira is based on patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence. Men constitute a close-knit kin group in their own villages and import their wives from other villages.

The Bira have been exposed to the Christian message for well over half a century. It was during the Belgian colonial period that the first Catholic (White Fathers) and Protestant (Plymouth Brethren) missions were established in this region of Zaire, which was known as the Belgian Congo. Today most Zairians belong to either the Catholic or Protestant church, and the Bira themselves are predominantly Catholic. There is little difference apparent in the religious beliefs of Bira Catholics and Protestants, despite the fact that the missionaries who represent these two churches perceive their messages as being different.¹

The central objective of this paper is to provide a general comparison of the traditional African and modern Christian religious beliefs of the Bira. The perspective is that of the Bira themselves. Understanding—and appreciation—of this perspective was gained through intensive anthropological field research. It is not a neat and tidy picture, since the Bira embrace modern Christianity while at the same time they manifest ambiguity about the Christian message and sustain an undercurrent of their traditional religion.

While the Christian missionaries were able to suppress traditional ancestor worship and tried to suppress witchcraft beliefs and practices, they were never able to instill the “fear of God” into their Bira congregation. The Bira respect God as a remote creator of life and the sustainer of the life force. They view God as lenient, compassionate and always ready to forgive their sins. Thus, they are relaxed and carefree Christians. Yet, ironically, the Bira implicate the Christian church in what they see as a decline in their morality in modern times.

It must be noted that the economy of Zaire has been deteriorating since it became an independent nation in 1960, and real income had dropped sharply by 1979 (Huylrechts and van der Steen 1981:241). As for purchasing power, in 1979 an unskilled labourer in Kinshasa, the capital, had to work three days to buy a loaf of bread, seven for a kilo of dried beans and well over 100 for a sack of manioc (Mubake 1984:266-267). In this depressing economic environment, a more compassionate God appeared to be a great comfort to the Bira.

Several methods were used to gather data for this study. First of all, there was a substantial period of participant observation extending over a decade,

1974-86. My focus was on 40 Bira families. Numerous non-structured, open-ended conversations with Bira women, men and children were conducted with family members. Secondly, a formal questionnaire was administered to 311 school children and a structured interview to 106 adults in 1986.² The age of the schoolchildren who completed the questionnaire ranged from 8 to 21, with the median age being 14. The majority (71%) of children attended primary school and the rest were secondary school students. If only the formal research method had been utilized, the rural Bira would be revealed as diligent students of Christianity who understood, appreciated and assimilated the relevant teachings. However, the more informal method revealed that the Bira have reinterpreted the Christian message in the light of their traditional religious beliefs.

I also kept a log book covering the period from October 1985 to March 1986, in which I recorded all the spontaneous remarks about God that I heard. Whenever this occurred I entered the remark in the book, noting the person's name, sex and age as well as the location, time, date and any relevant contextual information. In this way I was able to document 111 explicit references to God. Finally, in order to take the missionary point of view into account, I maintained a residence at the mission station. I engaged in participant observation there for approximately four years and had many informal conversations with the missionaries. I also recorded sermons and talks both in Protestant and Catholic churches during the last year of my research.

Theoretically, this paper aims to contribute to the interdisciplinary discourse centring around the concept of "religious syncretism." It aims to add value of an ethnographic nature to this discourse by responding to the call of scholars such as Kiernan (1994) and Meyer (1994) for more detailed studies of how local versions of Christianity have arisen in Africa, especially from the local perspective. This paper focuses on well-established mission Christianity rather than the phenomenon of the Independent African Churches.³

Religious syncretism, as Droogers (1989:7) points out,⁴ is a "tricky" concept, since it is both objective and subjective, referring, on the one hand, to the mixing of different religious beliefs and, on the other hand, to how people experience and view this process of amalgamation. Droogers highlights power relations in his definition of religious syncretism in terms of "religious interpenetration, either taken for granted or subject to debate. This also implies that what is contested by some may be taken for granted by others, who may be opposed by the former, though not necessarily so" (Droogers 1989:20-21). Stewart and Shaw (1994) also stress the importance of power relations, suggesting that elites attempt to control the scope and direction of religious synthesis. These elites, as exemplified by Catholic and Protestant church authorities, have often used the concept of religious syncretism in a pejorative sense to denote corruption of the "authentic" Christian message (van der Veer

1994). Yet, elite control is never absolute, and conscious or unconscious religious syncretism is virtually irrepressible at the grass-roots level of mission Christianity.

Discussing mission Christianity in Africa, Schoffeleers (1989) makes a distinction between fundamentalists, who tend to condemn traditional religious beliefs, and a relatively small number of more liberal or progressive missionaries who respect and appreciate these beliefs. Schoffeleers points out that the primary obstacle to greater Christian acceptance of traditional African religion has been witchcraft and its associated beliefs and practices. I found both Catholic and Protestant missionaries to be more fundamentalist than liberal in outlook, especially in regard to witchcraft. These missionaries continued to engage in “diabolization,” which Meyer (1994), in her ethnographic study of religious syncretism among the Ewe of Ghana, defines as a process of encounter whereby the missionaries deemed the traditional religious spirits to be manifestations of Satan. However, both Catholic and Protestant missionaries provide sermons in Swahili, encourage lay participation in religious services and allow the use of traditional musical instruments.

Ancestors and Witchcraft

The field work clearly established that traditional Bira religion was oriented toward a benevolent supreme being who created and sustained the world. However, this God—who is called *Mbali*—was not concerned with everyday matters and was the object of few, if any, religious rituals of the Bira.⁵

The “gods” most intensively involved in everyday life were the ancestors, termed *sakana*. As opposed to *Mbali*, the *sakana* had a strong, ongoing interest in the quality of life and well-being of their living relatives. They demanded and got attention and respect. Before the advent of Christianity every Bira home featured a consecrated altar for offering sacrifices to ensure protection of ancestors. Male elders of the lineages sacrificed the first crops to the ancestors before the harvest could be used by anyone. Boys were initiated to manhood by being blindfolded and beaten by lineage men who told the boys that the *sakana* were responsible.

One of the key responsibilities of ancestors was the punishment of moral transgressors. It was believed that they sent bolts of lightning to strike thieves. One of my informants told me that her father burned down his domestic ancestral altar to demonstrate his Catholic allegiance. Soon afterwards, she said, her father’s knees “went soft” and he was unable to walk. Although a faithful Christian like her father, she viewed this as a punishment from the ancestors. Sometimes the ancestors appeared as figures dressed in grass clothing. Accompanied by initiated men, they walked through the village yelling loudly and causing havoc. This was supposed to frighten people, especially the women, and keep them on the moral path. During a traditional wedding cere-

mony the groom's lineage elders mark the bride's forehead with saliva. This symbolized blessing of the marriage by the ancestors. It was also viewed as a potential curse on the wife if she ever deserted her husband.

Catholic and Protestant missionaries sought to suppress the belief in ancestors. As a result of these efforts the ancestral altars at home and the ancestral huts near the fields gradually disappeared. While the Bira remain reverent toward their deceased relatives, formal rituals for the ancestors are discontinued about two years after the funeral. In other words, living family members no longer sustain a long-lasting relationship with their ancestors as they did in the past before the advent of colonialism and Christianity.⁶

In times of crisis, though, the Bira believe that the ancestors can enter a living person and bring a helpful message from the spirit world. Women experience spirit possession more often than men. This is not a traditional phenomenon, since in the past the Bira relationship with the ancestors was considered the exclusive responsibility of men.

With the advent of colonialism the Bira became inspired with the idea of modernization. Christianity was identified with all that was modern and progressive, while the traditional beliefs were seen as old-fashioned and "primitive." Bira men, however, did not want their women to become modern and they tried to insulate them from Western influences, which were viewed in terms of "contamination." The men did not want to send girls to school because they thought that education would render them unfit to be proper mothers. Men accepted jobs from the colonizers, but few women were allowed to do so.

Sickness, other misfortunes and even death itself were thought to be the result of witchcraft, termed *ulozi*. Diviners were employed to discover the etiology in specific cases and to find the guilty person, generally believed to be a female witch. When someone got sick, women engaged in an important ritual whereby they gathered together, each in turn saying, "If she [the one who caused the disease] is I, may the sick person be healed." They would then spit on herbs to make medicine for the sick person. The act of spitting was viewed in terms of the restoration of social harmony because the individual thought to have caused the disease was participating with the others in the healing process.

The Bira belief in *ulozi* was disparaged by colonial administrators and missionaries—it was deemed superstitious and ignorant. This did not stop the Bira from practising *ulozi*, but merely drove it underground. The chief's courts did not officially record any cases dealing with witchcraft, although they did adjudicate such cases. I heard some Bira refer to cases which had been won because the plaintiffs convinced the chief that they had been the victims of witchcraft.

In Christian churches, the subject of witchcraft is studiously avoided. Although the Bira often say that their Christian God protects them against *ulozi*,

they rarely express complete trust in God's protection. The church itself does not provide the Bira with special powers to protect themselves against witchcraft. In the past it was thought that only a relative could harm a person with witchcraft and that such destructive tendencies could be controlled by the ancestors. Today, in the cities and sometimes in the villages it is widely believed that strangers can inflict harm with witchcraft, and, as indicated above, there is little protection to be expected from the ancestors, who have diminished in importance for the Bira.

In the formal questionnaire administered to 311 school children, there were only five students who claimed that they did not believe in witchcraft. Most (82%) of the respondents indicated that they were afraid of witchcraft and a substantial minority (22%) indicated that they had been bewitched, some of them many times. There were several instances in which respondents had initially indicated that they had once been bewitched but then crossed out the statement.

The traditional social context for witchcraft was the minimal lineage, which encompassed four generations. Those who did not belong to a particular minimal lineage had no power to harm its members with witchcraft. However, women had the power to practice witchcraft against the members of their husband's lineage. I heard several Bira complain that witchcraft was becoming unpredictable and disorderly; one did not know where to look for a witch because anyone could bewitch another person. In my structured interviews of 106 adults, just over half (52%) of the respondents indicated that a bewitcher may be an outsider rather than a family member.

Many Bira cannot imagine a world without witchcraft. They believe that even the missionaries and other white people are also involved in the practice of witchcraft, despite their disparaging attitude toward it. One educated Bira woman stated her belief that just as black people have black magic white people have white magic. This appeared to be a Bira way of explaining some of the seemingly inexplicable activities of whites, such as sunbathing or recreational hiking. It was widely believed, moreover, that in order to protect their power and wealth white people deliberately withheld supernatural knowledge from the Bira.

Thus, the ethnographic evidence indicates that Christianity was a key factor in the attenuation of ancestor worship among the Bira. However, Christianity has been less influential in regard to witchcraft, since these beliefs have persisted and have even widened (today, not only relatives but also strangers are thought to have the power to inflict harm through witchcraft). From the perspective of the Bira, it appears that they gave up their belief in ancestors in favour of their belief in Christianity but sustained their belief in witchcraft in spite of their Christian beliefs. In terms of the power relations surrounding religious syncretism, then, mission Christianity had the power to suppress an-

cestor worship but no comparable power with respect to witchcraft. Witchcraft remains contested or controversial, since it exists in lively opposition to Christianity at the grass-roots level (see again Droogers 1989).

Belief in God

The missionaries, of course, emphasized the worship of God, which was not a priority in the traditional religious system of the Bira. *Mbali*, their supreme being, was deemed to be God by the missionaries, and they expected faith in God to become the major force for maintaining social order and upholding morality. *Mbali*—in name only—was transformed into the Christian God. In the traditional religion, *Mbali*, like the Christian God, was regarded as the creator and sustainer of life. But the notion of a supreme being who, like the Christian God, rewarded and punished human behaviour was new to the Bira. Moreover, they found it difficult to comprehend the notion of Heaven, the place where righteous people live in eternal bliss after death, and Hell, where the unrighteous deceased live in torment forever.

It became evident during the course of field research that the Bira interpret the Christian God in light of their traditional knowledge of *Mbali*. A frequent comment was to the effect that God was far away and therefore difficult to get to know. A few said that they did not know much about God until the missionaries arrived. Most were aware of the general notion of God, but few knew any theological specifics. One middle-aged woman, who believed she had been created by God, indicated that she was illiterate and unable to read about God's work.

The formal questionnaire and structured interviews included questions about God. When asked if God was watching over them, all the parents and nearly all (98%) of the school children answered in the affirmative. When asked if they "feared" God, most of the parents (92%) and most (88%) of the school children said yes. These responses suggest a Christian understanding of God. It soon became apparent, however, that *ogopa*, the Swahili term for fear, connotes respectful awe rather than fright or terror. God is feared, but only in the sense of being the most highly respected and awesome creator and sustainer of the "miracle of life." God is not feared as a potential punisher of sins.

The missionaries do not appreciate the fact that when the Bira talk about fearing God they are expressing homage to the syncretic *Mbali*-God. When I discussed these Bira responses with one of the younger Protestant missionaries, he told me that the theologically correct view is that one should fear God because he is holy, not because he created life. An elderly missionary said, "God is opposed to sin but they [Bira Christians] don't seem to realize it."

The Bira view the relationship between God and humans in terms of the relationship between parents and children. The questionnaire explored this metaphor by asking who was the most severe, God or parents. God was the answer given by most respondents (82% of parents and 66% of the children). When asked why, the following responses were typical:

- “He brought us into the world.”
- “He created both parents and children.”
- “He is our life sustainer.”

This is the traditional view of *Mbali*, but the Bira have no difficulty fitting Jehovah into this picture. A few adults said that God was more severe than parents because “He does not want us to do bad things” or “He judges us in the afterlife.” Adults who said that parents are more severe than God stressed the role of parents in punishing recalcitrant children. One Bira mother stated, “Parents beat their children but God forgives.” God and parents, then, are similar to the extent of being creators of life and of children, but they differ with respect to their punishment role.

Respondents were asked if the primary role of God was to punish transgressors or to forgive them. For “punish” the Swahili term *analeta malipizi* was used, which denotes “to pay back” or “to take revenge.” For “forgive” the Swahili term *anasamehe* was used, which means “to pardon.” These terms are part of everyday conversation. Two thirds of the school children (66%) and half of their parents (50%) said that God is a punisher. Yet, nearly a quarter of the parents (22%) indicated that one cannot judge God’s role. Those who saw God as a punisher said that he does it through sickness, drought, famine and so on.

Many children gave specific examples of God’s punishment, and some provided details from their own lives. Parents provided fewer examples, especially personal ones. The tendency on the part of children to see God as a punisher suggests that they have been more heavily influenced by the Christian message, but it could simply reflect their more impressionable nature and more vulnerable position as recipients of punishment from the adult world. The fact that many adults consider God remote, even ineffable, suggests a survival of traditional religious beliefs. The view of God as a forgiver, held by a substantial minority of Bira, is discussed below.

Informal interviews revealed that few Bira know precisely how God punishes sinners. Many adults claimed that it was difficult or impossible to know this, even though they felt that God does punish sins. According to one informant, the Bira believe that life’s struggles and setbacks constitute God’s punishment of human beings and there is no other punishment. A Bira Protestant pastor stated that “God’s whipping is in hiding.”

Of the total of 111 references to God that I recorded over the five-month period, only three characterized God as a punisher. The majority tended to refer to God as a creator and sustainer of life—for example:

- “God has given us strength to carry these heavy baskets.”
- “I will give birth to my baby with the strength of God.”
- “We leave the sick person in the hands of God.”
- “God is powerful. If he were not with her, she would have died.”
- “We’ll see tomorrow, if God wills.”
- “Yesterday I was afraid that the food would not get cooked on time but God helped me and it got ready.”
- “If God continues to watch over us, you will find us in a new house when you next visit.”

A group of people were discussing the death of a woman whom they respected for being the mother of 20 children. One said, “She surely has worked a lot for the Lord.” This epitomizes the traditional Bira belief in the creative mandate of both God and parents. The missionaries, on the other hand, place greater emphasis on regular church attendance and judicious moral behaviour.

The following incident serves to illustrate the traditional Bira view of God. I was driving to a village when my van got stuck in the mud. I got out to inspect the situation and said in a sarcastic tone, “I guess I’ll have to sit here until the sun dries the mud.” A man hoeing in a nearby field appeared offended by my remark. He said, as if scolding me, “*Lakini Mungu iko*” (“But God is”). It appeared that my sarcastic statement had run counter to the Bira view that God sustains all life, including drivers who get their vehicles stuck in the mud. The man then ran back to the village and brought some other men to help push my van out of the mud.

A Catholic woman stated that she would be able to obtain medical treatment for her child if God helped her earn a living by making liquor. Distilling and selling liquor were illicit activities, discouraged by both the Catholic and Protestant churches. The woman, however, perceived God as the sustainer of life who helped people survive. On one occasion, when I attended a Catholic choir practice with an elderly woman, the choir sang several songs, including one which scolded people for the habit of drinking liquor. The song caused several choir members to smile, because excessive drinking is common among the Bira. On the way home from church, the elderly woman stopped to pick up a gallon of liquor for resale in her village. When I reminded her of the song just rehearsed she stated that one had to make a living and that God understood and forgave her.

Although the Catholic church forbade inebriation, I sometimes observed intoxicated individuals returning home from evening mass. When I mentioned this to a Catholic priest he said, “Here in Africa you find an incongruence between words and deeds.” A Protestant church elder once scolded me for interviewing Catholics because he considered them “drunks.” He said that I should only interview Protestants because they were the only sober people (however, I observed drunken Protestants from time to time).

Returning to the questionnaire, one section queried the benefits of believing in God. Almost half the respondents (48% of the children and 46% of parents) indicated that the main benefit was the promise of eternal life. Yet, when asked the same question in an informal interview, most would not provide further clarification. This suggests that the Bira have merely memorized the Christian message.⁷

The Bira are well aware of the Christian message concerning the transmission of God's love of human beings and forgiveness of their sins through his Son, Jesus. Moreover, several noted the contrast between the severe God of the Old Testament and the more forgiving God of the New Testament. Many informants told me that, while God may punish people for their sins a little after death, he ultimately forgives. To the Bira, the notion of forgiveness implies God's acceptance of human weakness. Thus, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the Bira appear to be relaxed and carefree Christians.⁸

The Bira, whether Catholic or Protestant, appear to take considerable pride in being Christian as opposed to "pagan," and they attend church on a regular basis each Sunday. Churches provide ritual as well as entertainment and the Christian message is perceived as complementary to their traditional religion. The Bira are grateful for what they regard as the benefits brought by the Christian missionaries, including schools, hospitals, houses and, above all, material goods such as clothing, radios, watches and bicycles. Some older individuals, though, evaluate the situation less positively. They view white people as the favourite children of God to whom he gives everything, leaving the Bira empty-handed.

In terms of religious syncretism, then, the Christian missionaries accepted the Bira God *Mbali* and the Bira accepted the Christian God. This mutual acceptance, equalitarian in nature, has been non-controversial, even "taken for granted." From the Bira point of view, cultural construction of the syncretic *Mbali*-God has rendered the traditional deity less remote for everyday life and more compassionate, and it has rendered the Christian God more understanding of human weakness and forgiving of sins. It is worth noting that Meyer (1994) found a similar equalitarian synthesis among the Ewe of Ghana, where *Mawu*-God is the supreme being (along with Jesus, who protects against evil spirits, and the Holy Spirit, which is a personal guardian spirit).

Modern Moral Decline

The Bira are convinced that their traditional standards of morality are declining, especially in the areas of sexual behaviour and marriage.⁹ Illegitimate pregnancies, adultery and divorce appear to have increased, largely due to organizational changes brought about by colonization and the attenuation of traditional social controls in favour of Christian morality. During the process of colonization, population centres and markets were created where mixing of

different clans and ethnic groups was the norm. With the building of roads, it was easier for people to move from place to place, and even previously secluded villages were invaded by outsiders such as school teachers and mission staff members.

In the modern era eligible spouses became publicly accessible to one another. This stands in contrast to the traditional situation where women and men were segregated from each other—both at home and in public—and the meeting of eligible spouses was strictly controlled by parents. Missionization encouraged free socializing between the sexes, especially in church-related activities. Such socializing is viewed as scandalous, if not immoral, by the Bira.

An elderly Catholic man who had regularly attended church until he became too weak to do so and had served the first bishop in the region for many decades told me that churches and schools were “bad” because girls and boys could freely meet each other there. Another man said that trouble begins when a girl starts to attend school. When an urban Bira woman was asked why she never walked with her husband, she replied that only prostitutes are seen in public in the company of men.

A similar attitude is evident in two incidents involving teenage girls. The first had to do with a man beating his sister when he caught her walking in the street with a young man. In the other incident a girl, who was staying with the family of her father’s brother in order to attend school, was sent home as punishment for receiving a letter from a man. Moreover, Zairian mothers at the mission station are notably suspicious of young men and women meeting together at the church. Missionaries themselves are viewed as immoral, since male and female missionaries walk, talk and eat together. Furthermore, they also ride motorbikes together, with the female passenger’s arms wrapped tightly around a male driver who may not be her husband.

The Bira believe that honesty is on the wane. Thievery is perceived to be rampant, especially in the city. During the course of my field research people were always commenting on the high number of break-ins and burglaries. These were occurring for the first time in the village. Stealing from the fields, although not new, was believed to be on the increase. Referring to the traditional way of protecting the crops, a Catholic man commented, “Earlier we used magic, now we only pray to God.” Others stated that such magic was losing its power since in the past it would cause a thief to become sick, which was not the case today.

It was widely believed that everyone, including church personnel, cheated in money matters if the opportunity arose. A Protestant missionary in charge of supplying electricity to a village adjacent to the mission station told me that a church elder had tried to skip payments by tampering with the electricity meter. This same elder was discovered cheating his neighbours in regard to the weight of the sugar he sold them.

Children were said to be less obedient than before, and the Christian children living at the mission station had the reputation of being the worst thieves. A grandchild of a respected church elder was involved in a thievery during my field work in 1985. The incident was widely talked about at the mission station and in the villages, causing "shame" to the church elder.

It appears that the Bira are more relaxed about their social behaviour today than in the past when the wrath of the ancestors could fall upon them. For example, a Bira man who was once an active member of the Protestant church took several women as concubines, ignoring both the traditional custom of paying bridewealth and the Christian prohibition of adultery. He was expelled from the church, and he thought of himself as a man who would suffer loss but in the end would be saved. My informal interviews with the man revealed his belief in the New Testament passage from the first book of Corinthians which states, "If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved."

While conducting my field research I met several Bira men who had been pastors but resigned after taking a second wife. Being a pastor or a church elder was prestigious, as was polygyny; however, the two were incompatible in terms of the opposition between traditional culture and modern Christianity. A church elder pointed out to me that he was tempted to take a second wife, since his wife was now a paraplegic and could not do the household chores. Rather than cause problems for himself, he remained monogamous and did his wife's work for her. Another pastor, who also decided to remain monogamous, told me that in principle he could have taken another wife because his wife bore only daughters. A third pastor took care to appear monogamous. He had several mistresses, one of whom beat his legal wife up so severely that she almost died. It caused an uproar in the village. The man lost his position as pastor and his wife's family sued him in the court. His wife told me that it would be better if he had taken a legal second wife rather than cause all this trouble, which included the loss of his cattle by way of compensation for his illegitimate children.

One young man ran away with a girl, married her and then sent his first wife away. When I asked him why he did not keep both wives, he told me that he could not because he was in good standing in the Protestant church. He said that he would not be able to attend the Lord's table (communion) if he kept two wives. When I asked if his situation would improve when he went through with his planned divorce of the first wife, he told me that he would stay away from communion, but, once the situation calmed down, he would repent and begin to go there again. He planned to have his new wife convert to Protestantism and join the church. Yet, after a year, his first wife returned to him and he stayed away from communion.

A Bira woman said that in the past women believed that “the saliva of the ancestors” kept marriages together. As mentioned above, the marking of a bride’s forehead with saliva during the marriage ceremony was considered to be a blessing if a woman stayed with her husband but a curse if she left. It was a viable form of social control. The woman went on to say that today it is God who keeps marriages together.

Traditionally, disputes were settled within the social context of the lineage. During the modern era they have become the responsibility of village or district chiefs. Many Bira feel that the traditional dispute settlement procedure benefited the community as a whole, unlike the modern approach, which is for the monetary benefit of the chiefs. They say that one must always “pay to talk to the government.” A chief’s power is feared and respected, because he can employ corporal punishment and levy fines. In extreme cases, even today, a chief may order the hand or foot of a habitual thief to be cut off.

Christian punishment, in contrast, is more lenient. The Bira feel that the church should perform the same function as God: it should understand human weakness and forgive transgression. Consider the case of a young man who accidentally burned down several houses of his village when he lost control of a fire in his field. The families who lost their houses negotiated with the man. One of the victims was a Protestant pastor who reminded everyone that they were Christians and proposed that they should forgive the man and demand no compensation. Since the pastor was elderly and respected, his advice was followed.

Illegitimate pregnancies are handled more severely by the family than by the church. The unwed pregnant girl is beaten by the lineage elders to induce her to name her lover. His family is then compelled to pay compensation. Protestant church officials ask the girl for the name of her lover, but no physical force is used. One girl indicated that in order to keep her lover near her at the mission school she refused to give his name to church officials. She then had to move outside the mission station. She told me that other young women in similar situations were allowed to reside at the mission station if they were the daughters of church elders. A middle-aged man told me about his affair with a woman several years in the past. He gave the woman some money and she never divulged his identity.

Both Protestant and Catholic missionaries complained that too many girls get pregnant. Alluding to the fact that those attending communion are expected to be exemplary, a Protestant missionary said, “They attend the Lord’s table all pregnant as if nothing has happened.” Once it is discovered they are pregnant, however, they cease to participate in church activities. A Catholic missionary who had worked in other parts of Africa told me that she had never encountered so many illegitimate pregnancies among girls as in Zaire, and she was quite upset about the situation. In a church sermon, an elderly Zairean

Protestant evangelist pointed out with pride that neither he nor his six brothers, who were "heathen" at the time, had made any girls pregnant before marriage and before the arrival of missionaries.

One Christian sanction which the Bira regard as too severe is the dismissal of people from staff jobs when the rules of the mission station are broken. Both Catholic and Protestant schools dismiss teachers for public drunkenness, adultery and polygyny. A Protestant teacher was dismissed when he was discovered embezzling school funds. He contested the dismissal, asserting that God had forgiven him and the church should do the same. The Bira feel that such matters are related to job competition and ethnic tensions rather than morality and justice. Although the mission stations are situated in Bira country, members of various other ethnic groups live and work there.

Concluding Remarks

Meyer (1994:64) concludes her study of religious syncretism among the Ewe of Ghana by pointing out, among other things, that "missionaries' control over their convert's ideas has been much more limited than critics of the mission are inclined to think." Meyer's statement will also serve as the key concluding remark of this present paper. The suppression of ancestor worship is the only area where mission Christianity has—to use the metaphor of a contest—scored a triumph over the traditional religious life of the Bira. In contrast, the fact that witchcraft beliefs persist is a clear victory for the traditional religion. As Schoffeleers (1989) suggests, witchcraft exists within the context of an indigenous theory of evil and sin, which, if not suppressed, has the potential to enrich the syncretic encounter between Christianity and traditional African religion.

As for the belief in God, it appears that the Bira have utilized Christianity to make their traditional God *Mbali* less remote and more caring, which has also made the Christian God more compassionate and forgiving of sins. Thus, *Mbali*-God is a creative response on the part of the Bira to the syncretic encounter. A modern Zairian Catholic theologian Tshibalabala (1983:15-16) envisions uplifting the ancestors to the company of God by teaching that human life is controlled by the ancestors as well as God. Through revitalization of the traditional reverence toward the ancestors, Tshibalabala argues, Bira culture will be able to regain the moral integrity it lost when some important traditional religious beliefs were attenuated in favour of modern Christianity. This suggestion poses an interesting and meaningful challenge not only to the Bira but also to the Catholic and Protestant churches in Zaire to transcend diabolization and facilitate genuine indigenization. Meanwhile, the Bira will continue to draw comfort and compassion from their *Mbali*-God in the increasingly harsh economic conditions in Zaire.

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Notes

- * *Editor's Note:* Since this paper went to press, the Mobutu government in Zaire has fallen. Zaire is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We have retained "Zaire" in the text because it is historically correct.
1. Ottenberg (1984) reports that Christian and Islamic West Africans hold religious beliefs that are similar to one another. He suggests that traditional cultural commonality overrides modern religious differences.
 2. The use of questionnaires allowed me to collect a large number of children's views in a relatively short period of time. Indeed, I was able to survey the views of virtually the entire literate child population of the research communities. Moreover, this method allowed for more standardized comparison of their responses, and suggested areas worth further investigation (by way of participant observation and interviews with selected informants). More children than parents were available for the questionnaire, since I was able to administer it to the children at school in writing. The parents had to be interviewed individually because, for the most part, they were illiterate. Swahili, the *lingua franca* of East Africa, was used in the field work. Some of the field work was conducted among the Bira who moved 450 km south to the city of Goma, where they live in what they term the "white people's fashion." There were, however, no notable differences in the interpretation of the Christian message by the rural and urban Bira. See Warkentin (1989, 1994) for comprehensive ethnographic accounts of Bira religious and family life.
 3. African independent churches are not an important institution for the Bira. However, these churches are a major force in some parts of Zaire. The most famous one, the Kimbanguist (Église de Jésus Christ sur la terre par le prophète Simon Kimbangu), was established in the Lower Congo in the 1920s. It gained official status in Zaire in 1959.
 4. Droogers (1989) further suggests that religious syncretism is a process of encounter about which it is not easy to be objective, that it is often a controversial process, that it may entail protest against authority, that it may occur within currents of the same religion and that it may involve an encounter between religion and other domains of cultural knowledge such as science and philosophy. Shaw and Stewart (1994) point out that while the Catholic church has been more open to religious syncretism—or "indigenization"—since the Vatican II councils 1962-65, some church authorities continue to view it as distortion or loss of the Christian message. Schoffeleers (1989) refers to the case of Emmanuel Milingo, former Catholic Archbishop of Lusaka, who began his healing ministry in 1973 but 10 years later was disciplined by the Vatican, which feared that his ministry would cause a schism in the Catholic church in Africa.
 5. This generalization is supported in the older literature—see Constance-Marie (1947) and van Geluwe (1956).

6. McCall (1995) reports that among the Ohafia of Nigeria the ancestors continue to play a vigorous role in daily life. He argues that since the 1980s Africanists have shown little interest in the phenomenon of ancestors.
7. The literature on traditional African religion emphasizes that the Christian notion of eternal life has not taken hold: "African religions are not so much concerned about the beginning and the end of the world, they are rather more concerned with the good life here and now . . . with failures and other obstacles in the path of self-realization and fulfillment" (P'Bitek 1970:62). See also Uchendu (1964) and Horton (1984).
8. Bercovitch's (1994) account of Christian converts in Papua New Guinea provides an interesting contrast. The Atbalmin, who have been Christians since the 1970s, worry a great deal about sin and salvation, viewing themselves as inadequate Christians.
9. The decline in morality as a consequence of conversion to Christianity has been noted by some scholars, notably Messenger (1959) and Poewe (1978).

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