

James N. Amanze, *African Traditional Religion in Malawi: the Case of the Bimbi Cult*. Blantyre: CLAIM, 2002 ISBN 99908-16-38-7, 228 pp. (Paperback)

African Traditional Religion in Malawi: the Case of the Bimbi Cult is the first detailed study of a Chewa rainmaking cult based at Ulongwe in Balaka district. Colonial authorities, historians, and missionaries made references to it but hitherto no detailed study was undertaken. The Mbona cult in Nsanje and the Makewana cult based at Msinja, Lilongwe have received greater attention. By focusing on the Bimbi cult the author sought to contribute to an understanding of the way in which religious beliefs affect the lives of people living in an agricultural subsistence economy vulnerable to ecological forces; and how, in turn, these forces shape the people's understanding of God, of themselves, of the world around them and the relationship existing in this triad (p. 10).

The book is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 1 defines the nature and functions of Bimbishop among the people of the Upper Shire valley. The reader learns that Bimbi serves as a medium through whom God, working through Chewa ancestral spirits, communicates with the people. Through the link with ancestral spirits, who are intermediaries between God and human beings, he/she is able to acquire foreknowledge of future events, especially those associated with natural forces such as droughts, famine, floods and epidemics and advise on appropriate actions to placate God and the ancestral spirits whose displeasure results in these calamities. Chapter 2 discusses the call to the Bimbishop and the series of events which culminate in the formal installation. The succession to the Bimbishop, which is believed to be a "divine call", does not conform to the principle of matrilineal succession which governs Chewa village headships and chieftaincies. The call can go to a nephew, grandson, daughter or sister of the departed Bimbi (p. 36). An important feature of the succession is that it alternates between male and female: a male Bimbi must be succeeded by a female; and a female by a male. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the rituals and ceremonies performed by Bimbi and the people to placate God and the ancestral spirits in times of ecological disasters. An important function of these rituals and ceremonies is to reinforce the unity of the

Chewa and other ethnic groups. Chapter 5 examines the Chewa belief in God and ancestral spirits. The reader learns that the Chewa are monotheistic, believing in a Supreme God variously known as Mulungu, Namalenga, Mphambe, Leza and Chisumphi (p. 125). This Supreme God maintains interest in human affairs through ancestral spirits. The belief in one Supreme God apparently predates the arrival of the two great monotheistic religions - Islam and Christianity. In Chapter 6 are discussed the origins and development of Chewa rain shrines in Central and Southern Malawi. The origin of the Bimbi cult and the better known Mbona and Makewana cults can be traced back to Kaphirintiwa in central Malawi which the Chewa believe is their original home (p. 148). The spread of the rain shrines associated with the cults is closely associated with the migration of Chewa clans. Chapter 7 discusses the interaction between the Bimbi cult, on the one hand, and Islam and Christianity, on the other. According to the author, the Bimbi cult has proved resilient in the face of opposition from both Christian and Muslim leaders who associate it with idolatry. In his view, as long as the people of the Upper Shire valley remain subsistence producers vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather, they are likely to continue to need the ritual services that Bimbis have provided through the generations (p. 205).

While it is true that the Chewa, in spite of being matrilineal, assign the role of "head of the family" to a husband, it is not correct to conclude, as the author does, that the "Chewa world is a man's world" (p. 13). Women may not always be visible in the public domain but they are certainly not powerless. They own primary land rights, for example, while males acquire land rights indirectly through their wives. The husband's authority over the land is constrained by the wife's rights over it. It is also important to note that under Chewa customary law a man can only be installed as village head or chief if his *mbumba*, which is made up of his sisters and their daughters approve, even if he is the most eligible candidate according to the order of succession. Women are the effective "Kingmakers". The author effectively contradicts himself later when he says: "A man without his *mbumba* is powerless and of little sociopolitical prestige ..." (p. 35).

The Bimbi cult is part of the Chewa religious system, which developed at Kaphirintiwa and spread to other parts of the country as Chewa groups spread to colonise other areas farther afield. Chapter 6 which puts the Bimbi cult in its proper historical and sociological context should, in the view of this reviewer, have come much earlier and not towards the end. That would have enabled the reader to be aware from the outset that the Bimbi cult is not an isolated phenomenon but part

of a complex religious system which goes back a long time. It must be noted in this connection that Chewa paramount chiefs who led the migrations were known as *Kalonga* rather than *Karonga* (p. 150). The author seems to confuse the chiefly title to that of the district in northern Malawi.

Ngoni military threats compelled the Chewa of the Upper Shire valley to seek military protection from the Yao under chiefs Liwonde and Kawinga. The author reports that an agreement under which the Chewa formally recognized the Yao chiefs' superiority in secular matters and, in turn the Yao chiefs recognized the Bimbis' superiority in spiritual matters was *signed* at Chilanga, not very far from Ulongwe. The question that arises is how illiterate people were able to sign an agreement. Is it not possible that there was another way of sealing the agreement?

If indeed the establishment of "Pax Britannica" in Southern Malawi contributed to the spread of Islam, one is interested to know how that happened considering the fact that early colonial administrators had actually tried to check the spread of Islam, which they associated with the slave trade. It would also be useful if the author had taken time to explain why, from its humble beginnings in the early 1900s "the Catholic church has become a gigantic movement second to none ..." and with a great deal of impact on the lives of many Malawians (p. 193). Such a discussion could have provided a clue as to why the Anglican Church, which had been active in the Upper Shire valley much earlier than the Catholic Church, failed to have much impact and actually lost influence to the latter.

A critical reader would question the appropriateness of the detailed description of beer making for the "rain-calling" ceremony (pp. 98-100) when a discussion of the symbolism of beer and the sexual taboos associated with its production would have sufficed. The beer making details, while they are informative, do not add much to our understanding of the essence of the "rain-calling" ceremony.

There are a few errors that should have merited the attention of the editors; for example, an incomplete sentence (p. 177); the use of *wield* for *weld* (p. 184); *consulant* for *supplicant* (pp. 71 and 72); *experimental* for *experiential* (p. 93). The name of the famous anthropologist is *Raymond* Firth and not *Rymond* Firth (pp. 65 and 69).

The observations made above notwithstanding, Amanze's book is a major contribution to our understanding of the Bimbi cult, which has hitherto been little

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known. The student of theology, sociology or anthropology will find much that is useful in this book. I would certainly recommend it as a course text in African traditional religions.

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