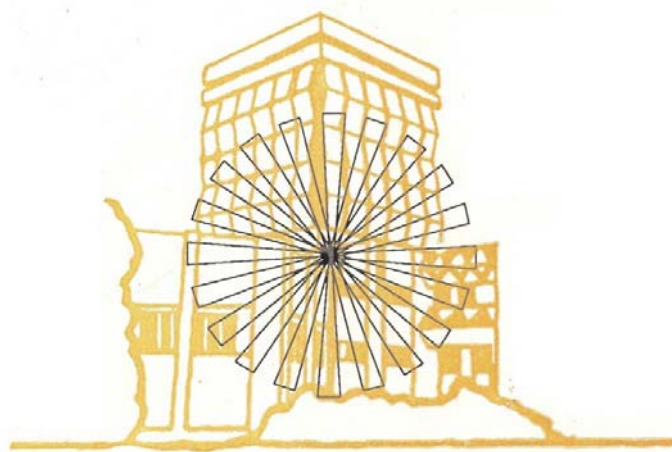


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ET LITTÉRAIRES  
G. E. L. L.**

**UNIVERSITÉ GASTON BERGER  
DE SAINT-LOUIS, SÉNÉGAL**



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## HOW THE ORBITS OF THE SHISONG MISSION AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITIES OVERLAP

Kenneth USONGOS\*

### Résumé

*Cet article démontre qu'il y a des similitudes entre l'Église catholique et le paganisme en ce qui concerne les croyances et les pratiques. Tout en s'appuyant sur **The White Man of God** de Kenjo Jumbam, il prouve que loin de s'exclure, les deux religions partagent pour l'essentiel des vues similaires sur les thèmes de la création et de l'adoration. Fort de ce constat, l'auteur en arrive à une postulation d'une coopération mutuelle pour le progrès spirituel de l'humanité.*

In spite of the religious tumult in which the world is plunged, Kenjo Jumbam, in *The White Man of God*, subtly preaches tolerance as a panacea to the various religious conflicts across the globe. From the Al Qaeda movement spearheaded by Osama Bin Laden against American capitalism and imperialism passing through the permanent unrest between the Israelis and the Palestinians, the world can be said to be sitting on a time-bomb. One way of diffusing this tension is a return to spirituality as advocated by Kenjo Jumbam. He articulates his opinion through a dramatization of the struggles of christianity to flush out paganism from the shores of Nkar. Despite this divide, it is argued that these two uneasy bedfellows share much in common in terms of beliefs, religious practices and culture.

### Beliefs

The notion of a supreme being ruling the world is common to most Africans and Europeans alike and, by extension, to pagans and christians. Zealots of christianity like Mama and Papa ought to be reminded that this religion is not superior to any other. Mama naively sees the construction of a maternity by the white missionaries as an index of the supremacy of christianity over paganism in Nkar. She is blind to the fact that this institution cannot survive without the financial and moral support of the whole community, Christians and pagans alike.

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Using a highly suggestive anecdote of a partridge and its chicks, Yaya admits the usefulness of the christian religion in terms of its teachings. She, however, identifies a snare in it. The white religion pompously arrogates superiority to itself and frowns at ancestral worship. What this supercilious religion fails to recognize is that, in the words of Yaya, God is a spirit and communicates only with spirits and that the black ancestors are the intermediaries between blacks and God (p.33).

Along the same lines, Yaya disagrees with the idea of an ever vengeful God. In the same way as we comfort a child after having beaten him is divine mercy. Thus, to Yaya, the white propaganda of a constantly jealous and revengeful God is suspect and should be rejected.

The white missionaries only need the force of the bible in emasculating blacks and not brutal force in subduing them. This is why Yaya sees the bible as a steady, strong and devastating weapon of the white man capable of cajoling blacks into abandoning their ancestral worship. And Papa largely exploits this tool in bringing Tansa into the christian fold.

Whites and blacks have the same vision of creation. Adam and Eve are the prototypes of Leh and Jing within the Nso community. The notion of heaven and hell representing paradise and suffering respectively is viewed in the local community as Up and Down. Up embodies good things as the sun, the moon and other planets and Down inhabits unpleasant dead matter. It is probably because of this awareness that Yaya tells Papa to guard against assimilation, and to strike a balance between the apparently opposing religious views of blacks and whites:

*... I have been afraid that perhaps you are neglecting our own god for those of the white man and when our own god shall turn his back on us those of the white man will not recognize us. That has been my fear. (p.37)*

Yaya questions the dogmatism of the christian religion, its avowed determination to assert itself through the crushing of other religions. To her, God can punish a man for an evil action, but certainly not for eternity. (p.38). She buttresses her point with the story of Luko-Komi who had repented of his sin on earth and so cannot be punished again. Put simply, Yaya seems to be preaching against the tenacious pursuit of one line of thought, against those with inflexible and bigoted opinions on religion. And she stands up to this message when she accepts to be christened Maria while still keeping her roots in paganism. This philosophical, vocal lady, through this action, towers above all the other characters in *The White Man of God*; she is a perfect synthesis of christianity and paganism. And we considerably admire her because a character like Pa Matiu, who arguably

### **The orbits of the Shisong mission and the local communities overlap**

shares her view, is not courageous enough to defend the one or the other religion when he is pushed to the wall. He seems to be contented to follow both paths, ensuring that one does not overturn the other. In other words, events are in the saddle and riding him.

Like Yaya, Fonjo is tolerant in his views as he allows his wife, Dubila, decide what religion is best for her to worship. It is instead the cork of christianity that punctures the smooth turning of the wheel of spirituality: *“He says are you willing to put away the other wives and have only this one?”*(p.51). What a bold option by the white man of God to sow dissension and strife in a hitherto peaceful family! In the face of this, Fonjo is left with no choice but to reject the white religion. Indeed, the white man’s proposal of divorce to Fonjo is truly one of *“the things that spoil the country”*(p.52). And Yaya nurses her fears about this new way of worship in the following light:

*In Meluv it has divided children of one womb even when they all go to church. Some say they belong to this church and others to that one. And those of this church won’t talk to those of that one. What sort of a thing is this? And when I say that there are many gods they want to kill me for it and yet they worship in rival churches. What this foreign god will bring to this country is still hidden. It is like a pregnant woman. No man can say what child it will be until it comes. (p.53).*

Yaya certainly sees nothing wrong in worshipping God the way that is best suited to one. No one is right in hating the other for making his choice; it is a matter between him and his God. Even the thief in Kisenjam that steals Lukong’s goats, when he is hit by a spear, calls out the name of God. In doing this, he is convinced that, even though his act is punishable, God will console him. Stated differently, the various beliefs held concerning a supreme being by christians, pagans, animists etc are simply an illustration of unity in diversity.

### **Christianity versus Paganism**

Perhaps the best illustration of consensus between the Shisong Mission and the local community is their religious views; whereas the one leans towards christianity, the other tilts towards paganism. Interestingly, both communities find common ground in terms of worldviews on religion. Many tribal peoples also believe in a single supreme God who exists in the

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background above all the other spirits and divinities, and can be conceived of as a universal god for all men.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the Banso community from which Kenjo Jumbam contrives his story is essentially monotheistic; this polity of people has one of the richest legacies of culture and religion in Cameroon. And their attachment to these apparently opposing elements is unwavering. Surely, they did not learn of God from the white missionaries because before the advent of the latter, the Bansos already had the word yuy in the local parlance to represent a Supreme Being.<sup>2</sup>

The incident involving Lavran, from a christian home, and Sidiy, from a pagan one, is a microcosm of the clash between christianity and paganism in Nkar. Lavran's pulling off of Sidiy's laya and the former's tearing off of the latter's medal allegorically represents the struggle for dominance between these two religions within Nkar. Yaya's pacific attitude towards this conflict is evinced in her placing side by side of the medal and the laya in her palm. To her, God is one and differences can only be found in the approaches to him. Be you a Presbyterian, a Roman Catholic, an Anglican, a Pagan, "*what difference does it make?*"(p.41). Whichever following you choose, there shall always be followers:

*All right, take it [medal] to Maria and she will find some thread and tie it back on your neck. And you Sidiy, take yours [laya] to Biy Wibah and she will tie it for you. And let me not hear anyone insulting the other, and no more fighting.(p.41)*

Yaya draws an interesting line between the white man of God and black ancestors. In the same way as christians approach God through the spirit Christ so too do pagans get to him through their ancestors:

*Only the dead and spirits can go to Him and talk with Him in the language of spirits. And who can talk better on your behalf to God than the spirits of your ancestors? And when you break away from them as you want to do, how do you*

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<sup>1</sup>H. W. Turner, *Living Tribal Religions*. London: Ward Lock Educational, 1971, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> There is little wonder that the only Roman Catholic cardinal of Cameroon is from Bui and the foremost Cameroonian scholar of letters, Bernard Fonlon, was a native of this place. These Nso people are proud of their religious and cultural heritage and it is not surprising that they often discuss issues of their well being in their mother tongue irrespective of the presence of non-natives who are usually abandoned to themselves for unending hours.

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*expect to receive you [sic] own favours from God. You follow  
this new way of the white man. He leads you to beg God  
through his own ancestors and you just accept it and carry all  
the children there. What is wrong with your own ancestors?  
Are you told that they do not see God in the world beyond?*  
(p.32)

Here, Yaya is the voice of the black soul, preaching tolerance and challenging dignity in oneself. She seems to be saying that no religion or culture is inferior or superior to the other. This telling passage constitutes a ringing challenge to various religions across the globe to sink their differences and forge a rapprochement among them because we are all creatures of the same creator, and made in his likeness. S.T. Coleridge states this view magisterially in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”:

*He prayeth well, who loveth well  
Both man and bird and beast.*

*He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all.*  
(612-617)

As Yaya feels a presentiment of death through the voice of her late husband, Ndze, she sends for Father Cosmas. Her meeting with the white priest is a celebration of the marriage between paganism and christianity. Yaya’s dead ancestors were not baptized and when she questions the man of God about the fate of these departed people, he replies that it is only God that knows. And the priest agrees with her that baptism will not bar her from meeting her husband in the next world. Truly, God is a meeting point for all people (p.119) irrespective of race, colour, age or sex. And this is probably why Yaya, though enmeshed in tradition, does not want to keep her family bickering over religion as she instructs her son-in-law, Papa, to baptize her. The issue of a christian name to her is irrelevant; Yefon is as good as Maria. It is in this belief that she accepts holy communion from Father Cosmas. This vindicates the point that tribal religions can be tolerant of other religions, and sometimes borrow certain elements – even gods- from them.<sup>3</sup> And their impact will continuously be felt through the advent of numerous indigenous forms of Christianity that mushroom across Africa with strange

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<sup>3</sup> Turner, *op.cit.*, p. 7.



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blends of biblical and traditional practices.<sup>4</sup> Yaya's blend of Christianity and paganism is therefore not surprising. Most people, aware of the states of mind of the Bansos, will see her as a true upshot of this community, a veritable replica of these natives that show no qualms embracing Christianity and paganism. Her acceptance of Christian baptism constitutes a challenge on tolerance to Big Father. Aware of the shortcomings of this white priest and his acolytes, Yaya joins Leopold Sédar Senghor in instructing deviant white missionaries thus:

*let black blood flow into your blood.  
That it may rub the rust from your steel joints, like an oil of  
life,  
That it may give to your bridges the bend of buttocks and the  
suppleness of creepers.*<sup>5</sup>

Yaya's cosmopolitan bent of mind is truly in line with the symbolism of her name which, to the Bansos, means tolerance.<sup>6</sup> But this is not to be confused with cowardice which involves surrendering in the face of a heated argument. Not Yaya. As a repository of wisdom, she listens and teaches at the same time.

Pa Matiu's sermon on the eve of the coming of the white man of God touches on the theme of reconciliation between blacks and whites, between pagans and christians. He transplants the story of the Good Samaritan to Nkar soil. First, he argues

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<sup>4</sup> I have in mind the case of Cameroon and Nigeria with a plethora of new churches such as Olumba Olumba, Charismatic Revival, Celestial Church, Cherubim and Seraphim etc.

<sup>5</sup> Gerald Moor and Ulli Beier eds. *Modern Poetry from Africa*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963, p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> The name, Yaya, signifies old woman. This name may also be given to young girls at a very tender age; and this is a sign of affection to the young ones. As these children grow old, they command respect by virtue of the importance accorded this name. Although the name Yaya is normally attributed to persons, it can also be extended to inanimate things and these things bearing this tag are considered feminine. But if they are seen as masculine, they carry the tag Taatah. For example, let us consider a car to be feminine. If we want to show how old a car is in Lamnso, we call it yaya motor. Yaya may also signify how mammoth a thing is in size. For instance, a very big car can be called yaya motor. Therefore, Yaya, simply put, is used in association with age and size in Lamnso. But in the case of the protagonist of *The White Man of God*, Yaya represents old age and its attendant virtues of wisdom, clarity of mind, objectivity and fearlessness.

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forcefully that the black man abandoned his kin in suffering and it was the white man that rescued him. Second, that the black man is responsible for the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ. Third, that on Wailun or Tuesday, people should stream towards the Tsemkan River to welcome the white man of God. This transmutation of the bible is done with the intention of drumming up support in terms of money, food and morality towards the visit of the holy man. Pa Matiu wants the entire Nkar community to radiate unity, tolerance and love in the face of this unprecedented visit. And even poor Widin, who had earlier challenged the morality of prostitution, is seduced by his plea when she opts to accompany Paulina to Bamenda in a frantic attempt to contribute to the visit of the white man of God. Similarly, Fonjo, the staunch traditionalist, contemplates assisting in this occasion. Pa Matiu is an embodiment of christianity and paganism; he smoothly blends both ways of spirituality that even when the fiery white priest accuses his christian folk of partaking of juju celebrations, he interprets this message to the christians while maintaining an olympian calm. His serenity is a powerful, silent reminder to the white priest that there is nothing wrong in practising both religions and that you can still be a good christian and play the Wan-mabuh. Put in biblical terms, Matiu is saying that we should give to God what is his due and to Caesar what is Caesar's. In the same vein, Andreas of Kimakong finds no quarrel with tying a band of layas round his waist in order to defeat the people of Mensai in a tug of war on Mission ground.

The European missionaries are guilty of the same sins they accuse the blacks of. Big Father castigates blacks for indulging in adultery and fornication yet he sleeps with Lucy and, through Feliy, steals Adolf's father's oranges. The Basel man of God is not better; he makes love with Anton's mother in the farmhouse. Small Father takes leave of his congregation without bothering to say farewell. He and Big Father live like two jealous housewives, always at loggerheads with each other. Indeed, a strange attitude from these men of God that ought to have been a shining example to the Nkar community. On their part, blacks too are susceptible to some of these vices. Dinni commits incest by impregnating Biy Wibah. Paulina is driven into prostitution by the demands of baptism. She is convinced that because this practice of prostitution is for the purpose of the church, God will exonerate her from any charge of sin. One can imagine Big Father nodding in approval of this fallacy, perpetuating fornication and later praying to God.

Like Yaya, Father Cosmas is the necessary balm that tries to yoke both local communities of blacks and whites, of pagans and christians. His prayers are so compelling that even if you do not understand his language, you are entreated to identify with

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them. We are told that, in less than a year, he learns Lamnso which he uses as his language of instruction. He mingles indiscriminately within his community, playing football with christians and pagans alike. Through this device, he wins many pagans to his cause:

*After the match, everyone went into the church for evening prayers. Even pagans and their children came in and one by one they learnt the doctrine and became christians.*  
(p.109)

The whole community is therefore gratified upon learning that Father Cosmas visited Lukar's compound, ate a banana, and drank a glass of palm wine.

When misfortune strikes Nkar, the entire community forgets its differences and rallies forces to contain the common enemy. This is the case of the chickenpox epidemic. The white missionaries, including Big Father, work tirelessly treating christians and pagans. And this good gesture of the missionaries wins more pagans, including even the wives of Fais, into the christian folk. Credit for this goes to Father Cosmas whose routine visits to pagan homes and his affability are commendable. And when he takes ill, it is all of Nkar, christians and pagans alike, that is grieved. People flock the Mission yard anxious about the welfare of this white priest. It is out of this concern that Ta'adom, the medicine man, is dispatched by the fon to treat Cosmas. Unfortunately, this kind gesture is rebuffed by Big Father who is oblivious of the fact that the success of the evangelization ministry can be facilitated through promotion and assurance of the health of people, using both modern and traditional health-care methods provided that they are not objectionable to the Christian Faith.<sup>7</sup>

## Culture

One element that acts as a common denominator between the blacks and whites of Nkar is, undoubtedly, culture. It is interesting to note that even though these two communities worship two apparently divergent religious institutions, that is christianity and paganism, their arts are curiously symmetrical.

The adornment given the house that is to host the white man of God bespeaks an attempt to reconcile the seemingly opposed cultures of the whites and the blacks: "The ceiling and

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Ateh et al. *Pastoral Plan*. Bamenda: Copy Printing Technology, 1999, p. 39.

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floor were covered with new mats with black and white, diamond-shaped designs and the walls had plain white mat coverings.” (p.31)

The colours black and white symbolically represent an endeavour to unite blacks and whites, a bold attempt to find common ground on which both races can cohabit without necessarily assimilating the one or the other. One exponent of the reconciliation between the christian population and the pagan one is obviously Yaya. Defending Tansa before Mama against the charge of his partaking of a pagan sacrifice at the Fai's, Yaya argues that “You cannot break away from the past like that and live. You cannot. Hear me, if the Fai does not include you and your children and their father in his sacrifices, you cannot live.” (p.32)

This opinion of Yaya is truly in line with Paul Verdzekov's appraisal of his christians within the Bamenda archdiocese:

*Divination, the use of charms, and other superstitious practices are now rampant among many Christians. Many Christians are now leading what we must call a double life. They go to church, receive the sacraments, and afterwards go to diviners to seek solutions concerning illness, deaths, marriage problems, thefts, business problems, employment, promotion in their work and so forth. One catholic woman openly said that whenever she has a serious problem, she does three things in order to be sure of success: she offers a Mass, goes to consult a Marabout, and then goes to consult a traditional diviner or “medicine-man”. For her, the Mass is something in the same category as divination, dreams, omens and “medicine”.*<sup>8</sup>

Against a typical African backdrop that involves incessant booming of gunshots and gleeful dancing of Samba and Chong, the white man of God gracefully enters Nkar. His reception is a rich blend of African and European values:

*Ver sha'tia ver sta'tia dji awa yua  
Ver Sha'tia ver sta'tia dji awa yua  
Shikumkumko shikumkumko shinon she ndzev  
Shikumkumko shikumkumko shinon she ndzev  
Yibei bong ker, yibei bong ker wo awiya ver wong.  
(Our greetings our greetings you're welcome.  
Our greetings you're greetings you're welcome... (p.48)*

There is rollicking dancing, plenty of palm wine and food; no one, including even pagans, can remain indifferent to this

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Verdzekov. *Pastoral Letter on Superstition*. 1980, p. 2.

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ceremony. While Yaya is elated by this reception, the white man of God visits the various dance groups present. This reception clearly indicates the importance of harnessing African and European values for the collective benefit of the local community. It is a symbolic demonstration of the will of both cultures to coexist if they are well guided by their proponents. And this is the dream of Father Cosmas as he greets his folk in Lamnso: “*Nyuy servi ven adzem... Nyuy servi wo Tata!*” (p.106).

An occasion like baptism affords an opportunity to synthesize African and European cultural values for the interest of Nkar. The church is decorated with palm fronds, flowers and banana leaves. There is a rich display of local African dishes, corn beer and palm wine. The sounds of drums accompany the essentially christian songs enchanted by the congregation. This beautiful commingling of local folklore with European artifact is unprecedented:

*It was not customary at the time to have Catholic christians beating drums in worship and praise of God. We had been made to understand that drums were instruments meant for diabolical use or at best for dancing, though dances were themselves heathen.*(p.99)

Several years later, this practice was to be enforced by the Catholic Church in its famous post-synodal declaration of Yaounde, 1995, when it officially accepted the integration of African values into a hitherto European doctrine of catholicism. This bold decision strongly intimates an acknowledgement of a supreme being that may be praised through various means; it is a powerful submission that African and European cultural values are essentially centripetal: “The great task of the African churches today is to encourage their members to express their African and Christian Values in a fully African way-hence Inculturation.”<sup>9</sup>

The news of the death of Father Cosmas shocks almost everybody in Nkar. His indefatigable contribution towards the welfare of this community earns for him the title Fai Mission. Therefore, his death necessitates a huge funeral celebration at the palace. Men and women are expected to bring along palm wine and food respectively to commemorate the passing away of Cosmas. This occasion is slated to hold on Sunday. This unusual day metaphorically represents an endeavour to unite christians and pagans; it is a telling reminder of the need for tolerance in the practice of religion.

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<sup>9</sup> Ateh et al., *op.cit.*, p. 64.

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On the appointed day, the various jujus of the land display between the Mission yard and the palace. The Shigwalah opens the show to the pleasure of curious onlookers, including even Big Father who watches from his veranda. At five o'clock, the church bell chimes, reminding people of evening prayers. It is at this crucial moment that the Kibarankoh, the most dreaded juju of the land, makes its appearance. The orbits of the Shisong Mission and the traditional community interlock; christians and pagans are enjoined to identify with the one or the other. On the one hand, there is Big Father entreating the people to hearken to the call of his God and, on the other hand, the Kibarankoh is daring them to spite him:

*People wanted to see it before going for evening prayers, but Big Father said that it is time for evening prayers and everybody had to go into church. But it was not easy to get people to go into church before the juju had come and danced and gone. (p.142)*

The Kibarankoh takes the lead in the struggle by dancing into the Mission premises. Big Father, on his part, tries to outsmart it with surprising kicks. Not satisfied with this effort, he unmasks the juju and, behold, there is Matiu, his trusted catechist. The marriage between christian and pagan values cannot be more evident. Through this move, Pa Matiu is clearly restating that there is nothing wrong in serving a christian God and a pagan one; that both are opposite sides of the same coin. This he is aware of as, after responding to Big Father, he replaces the mask on his head and heads to the palace.

In fact, Kenjo Jumbam painstakingly recreates the culture of Nso in his story. Most people who are familiar with this culture will easily identify and appreciate the awe with which such jujus as the Kibarankoh, the Shigwalah, the Wan-mabuh are held. Any Banson, no matter the depth of his Christianity, will shudder in the face of some of these jujus and, of course, the attendant cultural practices in honour of these dreadful elements. The collapse of Big Father clearly attests the price to be paid by any foolhardy person who attempts to flout their authority. Pa Matiu and Feliy, disciples of Big Father, are conscious of their limitations and this explains why they avoid any headlong collision with the jujus. Even Papa and Mama, irrespective of their avowed attachment to Christian values, forbid Tansa from disclosing anything with regard to the confrontation between Big Father and Kibarankoh. They know that mere mention of this abomination forebodes misfortune not only the victim, but his entire family. No one can afford to toy with or defile Nso tradition.

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*The White Man of God* is a moving allegory on the need for peaceful coexistence between christianity and paganism, between European values and African values in the common goal of serving a supreme being. None should attempt to sideline the other for its existence; such behaviour will, undoubtedly, put into question its survival. Both religions, as has been amply demonstrated, nourish on each other and need the support of the one or the other for the progress of divine work.

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