

THE SYNCRETISM OF THE GABONESE BWITI RELIGION AND CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY FROM A THEOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with the theology and theological ethics of syncretism of the traditional Gabonese *Bwiti* religion and Catholic Christianity in equatorial Africa. Traditional *Bwiti* religious rituals are based on the consumption of the root of the *iboga* shrub, which has strong psychedelic effects. In Gabon, some believers profess syncretism, which is enshrined in the *Bwiti* initiation ritual through the Catholic Sacrament of Penance, the Holy Communion, Christian prayers, etc. These Catholic Christians thus undergo a complex and physically demanding initiation process in Gabon. The aim of the paper is to answer the basic question of the whole text, i.e. is the psychedelic initiation ritual in the depths of the Gabonese rainforest consistent with the theological and theological-ethical foundations of the Catholic Christian life? The topic is elaborated by the method of own field research, supported by a comparison of relevant literature. Between 2001 and 2019, the author spent a total of three years on research stays in Africa, of which 12 months were devoted to West and Central Africa and the study of local syncretisms.

Keywords

Bwiti; Syncretism; Theological ethics; African Christianity; Gabon; Africa

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In Gabon, Africa, people – including many Catholic Christians there – practice traditional *Bwiti* rituals based on consuming *iboga* root with strong psychedelic effects. Larger doses of *iboga* lead to significant hallucinations, and the dose used for the *Bwiti* initiation causes temporary unconsciousness. The complex religious system of *Bwiti*, with its long tradition, is unique in relation to the surrounding indigenous African religions and cults: It is not about prayers, it is not

about worshipping deities or spirits, nor is it about bringing good fortune for oneself or, conversely, bad fortune for the enemy (typical of surrounding religious systems such as *Orisha*, *Vodun*, or *Juju*) – it is entirely about self-discovery, spiritual insight into the nature of reality, uncovering the spiritual veil, and encountering oneself in the innermost sense. The spiritual direction of *Bwiti* does not have a sum of doctrine to be passed on or taught (although some of the most general elements, especially in the approach to deceased ancestors and purification, also exist). However, it has initiation and progression rituals during which a change of consciousness and insight into the nature of reality is achieved. One opens oneself to visions and accepts an understanding of reality; one does not learn but observes.¹

As is the case with many other traditional African religions that have syncretised with Christianity (e.g. *Vodun* and Catholic Christianity in Benin)² or Islam (e.g. *Vodun* and Islam in Mali)³ – or even Nigerian Chrislam (e.g. the syncretism of the Yoruba religion, Islam, and Christianity in Nigeria)⁴ – syncretism of *Bwiti* and Catholic Christianity also arose in Gabon. As mentioned below, some Catholic Christians in Gabon profess syncretism, which is enshrined, for example, in the *Bwiti* initiation ritual through the Catholic Sacrament of Penance, the Holy Communion, Christian prayer, etc. These Catholic Christians thus undergo a complex and physically demanding initiation process in Gabon. *Bwiti* is an indigenous Central African religious tradition, which has its origins among the Pygmies deep in the pre-colonial past.⁵

The article presents the indigenous Central African Pygmy religion later adopted by the new inhabitants of Gabon (especially Bantu) as well as the complex initiation ritual as practised nowadays and the syncretism of this religion and Catholic Christianity. The aim of the paper is to answer the basic question of the whole text, i.e. is the psychedelic

¹ J. W. Fernandez, *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 470–489.

² Ondřej Havelka, 'Synkretismus katolického křesťanství a západoafrického vodunu z teologickoetické perspektivy,' *Studia Theologica* 23, no. 3 (2021): 149–174, doi: 10.5507/sth.2021.053.

³ Ondřej Havelka, 'Západosahelský kult: Synkreze islámu a západoafrického vodunu,' *Dingir* 23, no. 2 (2020): 42–43.

⁴ Marloes Janson, *Crossing Religious Boundaries: Islam, Christianity and 'Yoruba Religion' in Lagos, Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 58–61.

⁵ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 321.

initiation ritual in the depths of the Gabonese rainforest consistent with the theological and theological-ethical foundations of the Catholic Christian life? The question is centred on the African region of Gabon.

The topic is elaborated by the method of own field research, supported by a comparison of relevant literature. Between 2001 and 2019, the author spent a total of three years on research (and work) stays in Africa, of which 12 months were devoted to West and Central Africa and the study of local syncretisms.⁶

1. The Traditional Central African Religion of *Bwiti*

The purpose of this part is to introduce the indigenous Central African religion of *Bwiti*, which is currently centred in Gabon. The *Bwiti* religion originated among the Pygmies,⁷ who discovered the effects of consuming the second layer of the *iboga* root.⁸ Pygmies – mainly the Mbenge ethnic group in Gabon (Aka, Gyele, Bongo, Baka, and Kola groups)⁹ – have observed the special effect of *iboga* in mountain gorillas that chewed the root. After small doses of crushed *iboga* root, the Pygmy hunters were able to cover a noticeably longer distance, carry a heavier load and not sleep for several days.¹⁰ As mentioned, larger doses of *iboga* lead to significant hallucinations and the dose used for the *Bwiti* initiation causes temporary unconsciousness. Exceeding this dose – in relation to the weight and health of the person – will cause death.¹¹ The Pygmies began to use larger doses of *iboga* for spiritual purposes, to gain insight into reality, and have developed a unique religious movement over time.¹² This spiritual branch of the tradition-

⁶ Ondřej Havelka, *Náboženský šok: Religiózní otřesy v odlišných náboženstvích a kulturách, mezináboženský dialog a praktická religionistika poutnickou perspektivou* (Prague: Akbar, 2021).

⁷ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 321.

⁸ Julien Bonhomme and Magali de Ruyter and G. M. Moussavou, 'Blurring the Lines. Ritual and Relationships Between Babongo Pygmies and their Neighbours (Gabon),' *Anthropos* 107, no. 2 (2012): 387–406, doi: 10.5771/0257-9774-2012-2-367.

⁹ Douglas A. Yates, *Historical Dictionary of Gabon* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 6–7.

¹⁰ Hans Dieter Newwinger, *African Ethnobotany: Poisons and Drugs. Chemistry, Pharmacology, Toxicology* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 1996), 207.

¹¹ J. W. Fernandez and R. L. Fernandez, 'Returning to the path: the use of *iboga*(ine) in an equatorial African ritual context and the binding of time, space, and social relationships. The Alkaloids,' *Chemistry and Biology* 56, no. 1 (2001): 235–247, doi: 10.1016/S0099-9598(01)56017-4.

¹² Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 473–475.

al Central African religion is now widespread mainly in Gabon and Cameroon (marginally also in neighbouring countries) among the Bantu ethnic groups Punu, Mitsogo, and Fang. The Pygmies, to whom the origin of *Bwiti* is attributed, are now no longer numerous in the area, with the last few groups surviving in the rainforest, estimated in the lower thousands.¹⁵

In Gabon, *Bwiti* is practised separately as an independent religion,¹⁴ but often together with Catholic Christianity in a syncretised form.¹⁵ The syncretism of *Bwiti* and Catholic Christianity is gaining increasing influence.¹⁶ *Bwiti* is one of the official religions of Gabon.¹⁷ The *Bwiti* religion is estimated to be practised by up to 3 million people in Gabon and surrounding countries. It is not clear how many of them also practice Christianity.¹⁸ The number of believers, according to the census in sub-Saharan Africa, should be taken as a very rough guide. In Gabon, it is possible to officially profess Catholic Christianity or *Bwiti*, but statistics do not yet show the possibility of professing both of these religions at the same time in syncretism.¹⁹

An initiate who prepares a drug from *iboga* and oversees the initiation ritual is called *nganga*. This name is common throughout Central Africa for healers, makers of magical figures, but also for sorcerers.²⁰ The initiation ritual in Gabon usually takes three to seven days (depending on the area). The ritual is not the same everywhere, yet it has some constant characteristics across regions. On the penultimate night of initiation, the initiated symbolically dies (is, in fact, unconscious or in a very deep sleep), sheds the old self and gains knowledge. The body of the initiated lies unconscious as their consciousness is to travel through the universe. If one pursues impure intentions, does not want to learn about oneself and the general reality, but wants to

¹⁵ David Brizer and Ricardo Castaneda, *Clinical Addiction Psychiatry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 51.

¹⁴ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 347.

¹⁵ Christopher John Gray, *Colonial Rule and Crisis in Equatorial Africa: Southern Gabon, C. 1850–1940* (Rochester: University Rochester Press, 2002), 217.

¹⁶ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 360–366.

¹⁷ Stephen Gray, *Returning to Sacred World: A Spiritual Toolkit for the Emerging Reality* (London: John Hunt Publishing, 2010), 297.

¹⁸ Brizer and Castaneda, *Clinical Addiction Psychiatry*; 51.

¹⁹ John S. Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion* (Portsmouth, London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1991), 15.

²⁰ Peter Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 73–75.

acquire, for example, the art of harming others, the *iboga* ritual will destroy them according to the beliefs of the *ngangas*. *Iboga*, according to the *ngangas*, is supposed to powerfully amplify a person's basic attunement, their approach to the ritual, their approach to themselves and to others. According to initiates, this is also the reason why some people do not survive the ritual and never return from unconsciousness. The *ngangas* claim that *iboga* multiplies the negative attitude and evil in these people so much that it engulfs and kills them.²¹ While the psychedelic phase is to be followed by a so-called return or rebirth, the symbolic death turns into actual death in the case of these people.²²

2. *Tabernanthe Iboga* and the Initiation Ritual of *Bwiti*

*Tabernanthe iboga*²³ is a tropical shrub of the Apocynaceae family. The root of the shrub contains psychoactive substances that strongly affect the central nervous system, belonging to the group of hallucinogens which cause significant changes in consciousness in humans. *Iboga* is the most widespread Central African hallucinogen and is used for spiritual purposes, and healing but also as a poison, especially in Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, southern Cameroon, western Congo and western Democratic Republic of Congo.²⁴ Not only the *Bwiti* in Gabon, but also some other religious so-called secret societies – such as the *Ombudi* in Gabon – consider *iboga* to be a divine plant.²⁵ The root of *iboga* contains more than ten different indole alkaloids, the most effective of which is the alkaloid *ibogaine*.²⁶ A smaller dose of *ibogaine* helps the human body to overcome fatigue, hunger and thirst and temporarily increases energy. Psychedelic effects are caused by a larger amount of the ingested *ibogaine*.²⁷ An overdose ends in death.²⁸ It would

²¹ This claim is based on the consistent statement of several *ngangas*.

²² Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 457–462.

²³ R. Goutarel and O. Gollnhofer and R. Sillans, 'Pharmacodynamics and therapeutic applications of *iboga* and *ibogaine*,' *Psychedelic Monographs and Essays* 93, no. 6 (1993): 71–111.

²⁴ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 476–484.

²⁵ Hans Dieter Neuwinger, *African Ethnobotany: Poisons and Drugs. Chemistry, Pharmacology, Toxicology* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 1996), 207.

²⁶ Christina Pratt, *An Encyclopedia of Shamanism Volume 1*. (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2007), 219.

²⁷ Goutarel and Gollnhofer and Sillans, 'Pharmacodynamics,' 71–111.

²⁸ Michael J. Balick and Paul A. Cox, *Plants, People, and Culture: The Science of Ethnobotany* (New York: Garland Science, 2020), 101–135.

be a shortcoming to label the *iboga* root simply as a narcotic. In small quantities, it significantly helps people in their day-to-day activities, and there is a consensus in the literature that the active substance contained in the root is not addictive.²⁹ When applied to Central European culture, the effect of a small amount of *iboga* is sometimes compared to coffee, which also helps to overcome fatigue, increase performance and concentration, but is harmful in large doses and can kill a person if overdosed. However, higher dosing is completely incomparable, as *iboga* causes fundamental changes in consciousness.³⁰ Although a certain amount of *iboga* has undeniable healing effects, the main reason for consuming it in the context of *Bwiti* and the researched syncretism is spiritual opening, seeing the essence of reality, one's spiritual growth. The motivation to consume *iboga* is primarily spiritual.

The initiation ritual is very important for the Gabonese: it is during this ritual that they are initiated into the *Bwiti* religion and consume *iboga* for the first time in their lives. After successfully completing the initiation ritual, they can consume *iboga* throughout their life, whether during festivities, treatment, or for their personal spiritual development.³¹ The initiation ritual most often takes place in early adulthood, around the age of fifteen. A child of the *nganga* lineage who is destined to become a *nganga* undergoes initiation earlier, around the age of seven.³²

The common characteristics of the initiation ritual in various areas are monotonous music with a repetitive melody, purification, vomiting, fasting, censing, and receiving a drug from the *iboga* root. The initiation ritual is sometimes called simply after the shrub the crushed root of which is consumed – *iboga*.³³

3. Syncretism of *Bwiti* and Catholic Christianity in Gabon

As mentioned above, the *Bwiti* religion is one of the official religions in Gabon, but in reality, it is very often professed by believers in syncretised form with Catholic Christianity.³⁴ The theology of *Bwiti*

²⁹ Goutarel and Gollnhofer and Sillans, 'Pharmacodynamics,' 71–111.

³⁰ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 492–493.

³¹ Goutarel and Gollnhofer and Sillans, 'Pharmacodynamics,' 71–111.

³² Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 476–484.

³³ Fernandez and Fernandez, 'Returning to the path,' 235–247.

³⁴ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 366–369.

and Catholic Christianity does not compete too much because *Bwiti* is exclusively about self-knowledge and a deep insight into the essence of reality. *Bwiti* itself does not dwell much on God or deities, yet it is said that the Creator God *Zame ye Mebege* gave *iboga* to the people.⁵⁵ The identification of indigenous gods and deities with one of the Christian persons of the Trinity – typically God the Father – is common in African syncretisms.⁵⁶

The *Bwiti* religion does not deny any god or deity professed by the surrounding religions, and although *Bwiti* acknowledges the existence of the Creator God called *Zame ye Mebege*, his worship is not a key element of practice. A key element of the practice is seeing the spiritual nature of reality and finding oneself in the totality of reality. The devotees of the syncretism of *Bwiti* and Catholic Christianity identify the Creator God *Zame ye Mebege* with the Christian God the Father. While the followers of *Bwiti* itself do not pay much attention to God (this does not mean, however, that they do not acknowledge the Creator God), the devotees of syncretism, in line with the Christian attitude, place much more emphasis on the importance of God in the spiritual life of man. Simply put: the Catholic plane of syncretism is oriented towards God, while the plane of *Bwiti* is oriented towards man, towards oneself. In their spiritual life, devotees of the syncretism of *Bwiti* and Catholic Christianity, in addition to Catholic services and prayers, also undergo the *Bwiti* initiation and consume *iboga* for their spiritual growth throughout their lives. It is also possible to encounter people who consume small amounts of *iboga* before a Catholic service or on important Catholic holidays.

Bwiti can be considered one of the so-called ethical religions. Believers should strive for ethical and moral development. Working hard for personal development, reaching the peak of one's qualities and serving the community is de facto the basic characteristic of *Bwiti*. Another key characteristic is tolerance. *Bwiti* rejects no religion, no tradition, no cult.⁵⁷

Crucial to the insight into the syncretism of *Bwiti* and Catholic Christianity is the statement that *Bwiti* itself is an essentially ethical religion that makes considerable ethical and moral demands on the

⁵⁵ Pratt, *An Encyclopedia of Shamanism*, 75.

⁵⁶ Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion*, 15.

⁵⁷ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 369–370.

believer and is a tolerant religion. Another key fact is that *Bwiti* is practically not interested in God, gods or deities, nor in spirits as in the surrounding religions (*Vodun, Thron, Juju...*). During the field research, it took the author quite a long time to find information about the Creator God *Zame ye Mebege*.³⁸ Research is also significantly hampered by the lack of primary literature of Pygmy or Bantu origin devoted to the *Bwiti* religion and context. The researcher is therefore dependent on field research and secondary literature, especially by European and American authors.³⁹ However, research in sub-Saharan Africa is a separate topic and concerns many indigenous African religions.⁴⁰

The liturgy of the followers of syncretism in Gabon is identical to the liturgy of the local Catholic Church. Syncretists attend the same services as Catholic Christians, who do not mix their faith with any other religion. There is no difference in the service. The differences are mainly evident in the *Bwiti* initiation ritual, where the Sacrament of Penance plays a key role in the so-called purifying ritual and the Holy Communion after the completion of the whole initiation ritual. The whole process of initiation is also accompanied by Christian prayers for followers of syncretism.⁴¹

3.1 Theology of Syncretism

Many Central African traditional religions profess that the Supreme God (such as *Olodumar* in the Yoruba religion or *Nana Buluku* in *Vodun*)⁴² is inaccessible to man and cannot be communicated with other than through a mediator.⁴³ From a purely Christian position, such a concept (of a completely inaccessible God the Father, who created the world and then moved away and is not present in any way, thus creating the need for a mediator who does not reach the greatness of God the Father) may reek of one of the many forms of subordinationism,⁴⁴ but believers do not reflect this much. Rather, they note Jesus' mediation in

³⁸ Pratt, *An Encyclopedia of Shamanism*, 75.

³⁹ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 470–489.

⁴⁰ Ondřej Havelka, 'Dogonské náboženství: problematika výzkumu,' *Dingir* 24, no. 4 (2021): 112–115.

⁴¹ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 271–283.

⁴² Havelka, 'Synkretismus katolického křesťanství a západoafrického vodunu,' 149–174.

⁴³ The knowledge follows from the consensus of the respondents.

⁴⁴ Ctirad Václav Pospíšil, *Ježíš z Nazareta, Pán a Spasitel* (Prague: Krystal OP; Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2010), 147–153.

the Scripture (1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:15–20; Eph 1:3–14), and such an understanding of mediation is theologically quite legitimate.⁴⁵

In the case of the Gabonese syncretism under study, the situation is much simpler since *Bwiti* practically does not present any God or gods and does not guide to their worship. If the devotee searches deeper into the doctrine, they will probably learn about the existence of the Creator God *Zame ye Mebege*, the giver of life and the giver of *iboga*, from an experienced *nganga*.⁴⁶ He is identified in syncretism as God the Father.

Syncretism builds on Catholic theology, in which one can discern certain tendencies towards latent subordinationism,⁴⁷ where the God-man Jesus Christ is seen as a mediator between the inaccessible God the Father and people, while being diminished in some – perhaps not entirely intended – way in relation to God the Father. However, Gabonese devotees of the syncretism of Catholic Christianity do not understand Christ in an extreme, even Arian-type way as a created mediator, which would ultimately be in direct contradiction to Catholic doctrine. Not at all; that implicit subordinationism is more of a subtler, Origen type.⁴⁸ Jesus Christ is understood by the followers of syncretism as the true God and the true man, who is, however, in a certain unspecified form subordinate to God the Father and does not have exactly the same greatness. It should be added that subtle patristic theological disputes, as known and still popularly reflected in the common Catholic milieu, are not a topic in the Gabonese Catholic environment. The author would certainly not suspect Gabonese Catholic Christianity, with its specific emphases and themes, of any heresy. Rather, Christians in Gabon emphasise that God is love (1 John 4:8)⁴⁹ and that this should be reflected in the Christian life.

The part of syncretism based on the *Bwiti* religion follows exclusively the line of personal spiritual and social growth and self-knowledge.⁵⁰ At the theological level, no significant collision arises. The question is how to approach the consumption of psychoactive substances from the

⁴⁵ Gerhard Ludwig Müller, *Dogmatika pro studium i pastoraci* (Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2010), 179–180.

⁴⁶ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 470–489.

⁴⁷ Pospíšil, *Ježíš z Nazareta*, 147–153.

⁴⁸ Ctirad Václav Pospíšil, *Jako v nebi, tak i na zemi: náčrt trinitární teologie* (Prague: Krystal OP; Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2007), 145, 264.

⁴⁹ Ctirad Václav Pospíšil, *I řekl Bůh. Trinitární teologie stvoření* (Prague: Karolinum, 2019), 133.

⁵⁰ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 466–469.

position of Catholic Christianity, or more accurately from the position of Christian ethics. A small amount of *iboga* helping with fatigue seems to be fine. Larger doses that help individuals with anxiety, depression,⁵¹ or other mental disorders without causing intoxication, changes in consciousness, or inability to concentrate also seem justifiable. Psychiatrists are currently investigating the use of *iboga* as a psychiatric drug.⁵² The main reason for consuming *iboga* in the context of *Bwiti* and the researched syncretism is spiritual opening, one's spiritual growth.

More difficult to decide is how to deal with large doses during the initiation, which cause unconsciousness and, if the limit is exceeded, the initiated is also at risk of death. It is necessary to point out that the initiation ritual takes place for many days also so that the *nganga* unambiguously identifies the amount of *iboga* that the initiated can withstand and also wants to withstand. If someone is very sick at smaller doses, *nganga* will adjust the dosage. If someone does not want to go through the phase of unconsciousness, they definitely do not have to. Many initiated simply fall asleep after a relatively larger dose of *iboga* and several days of sleep deprivation. If everything goes as intended, the ritual should not directly endanger life or health. However, there are exceptions and deaths at initiation have been observed. This must be emphasised.⁵³

The theology of the syncretism of Catholic Christianity and *Bwiti* in Gabon, in the author's opinion – based mainly on own field research – is not in a serious collision with Catholic orthodoxy. A slight theological bias is found in a certain latent subordinationism, which, however, is a problem in much of sub-Saharan Africa and is not a marginal or isolated issue. The potential conflicting point is not in orthodoxy but in orthopraxy, specifically in the consumption of an amount of the psychoactive substance *iboga* that is close to the limit of a life- or health-threatening amount, which brings us to an assessment in terms of theological ethics.

3.2 Theological-Ethical Assessment of Syncretism

This part will examine the syncretism in question from a theological-ethical perspective. Christian ethics has its paradigms, its

⁵¹ Fernandez and Fernandez, 'Returning to the path,' 235–247.

⁵² Brizer and Castaneda, *Clinical Addiction Psychiatry*, 52.

⁵³ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 236–237.

imperatives, and its directions, which speak more intensely into the practical life of the believer than some subtle theological speculations, such as the aforementioned latent subordinationism of the Origen type, of which the believers in Gabon are more or less unaware and unperturbed. Ethical imperatives are 'louder' in this regard, and the syncretism of Catholic Christianity and *Bwiti* in Gabon is formed from two ethical religions. It should be mentioned that there are, of course, more approaches to Christian ethics, so-called legitimate pluralism; this paper advocates the ethics of Aristotelian-Thomism. This is openly acknowledged and left for the reader to consider.

The end of the previous part opened a potentially conflicting point regarding the use of a large amount of the psychoactive substance *iboga* leading to unconsciousness of the initiated. Theological ethics speaks quite consensually that deliberately harming one's health is not in line with Christian principles, nor is deliberately risking one's life excessively.⁵⁴ Human life and health are God's gifts and should be regarded as such. In theological ethics, one certainly cannot draw sharp dividing lines and see reality in black and white, but one should at least try to set a direction and find boundaries that have meaning. The author believes that such a limit, in this case, is the consumption of such an amount of *iboga* that can endanger life or health. As already mentioned, experienced *ngangas* oversee the course of initiation at all times and try to prevent excessive ingestion of *iboga* using their experience. Yet it happens at times. Consciously exposing oneself to the direct danger of death seems to run counter to the foundations of Christian ethics.⁵⁵ Human behaviour should be responsible, even to oneself.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the author believes that smaller doses of *iboga*, which do not endanger life or health and do not lead to addiction, cannot be understood as ethically conflicting.

However, the categories of custom and morality come into play. What if it is a social custom in a given area of Gabon that one puts oneself in immediate danger of death when initiated? And what if it is also in accordance with the conscience of the person and their free choice?

⁵⁴ Jiří Skoblík, *Přehled křesťanské etiky* (Prague: Karolinum, 1997), 189–190.

⁵⁵ Donna McAuliffe, *Interprofessional Ethics: Collaboration in the Social, Health and Human Services* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 86–104.

⁵⁶ Konrad Hilpert, *Základní otázky křesťanské etiky* (Brno: CDK, 2017), 10–12.

3.2.1 *Morality and Customs in the Gabonese Context*

Ethics evaluates human behaviour;⁵⁷ it judges whether it is ethically right or wrong, morally good or bad; it seeks the good life as a whole, the criterion for assessment being the well-being of the person.⁵⁸ The well-being of the person⁵⁹ as a basic criterion for assessing the ethics and morality of human action is based on Aristotle's⁶⁰ virtue ethics (the criterion was a successful life as a whole)⁶¹ and is typical of the contemporary Aristotelian-Thomistic line of ethics. In ethics – from the Greek *ethos*, meaning habit,⁶² custom⁶³ – there is a difference between moral and customary categories. However, the distinction is crucial and essential for our theological-ethical thinking. A person's actions can be moral or immoral, otherwise expressed as morally good or bad, or they can be right or wrong according to the specific customs of a concrete community. Moral – from the Latin *mos*, plural *mores*, meaning will⁶⁴ – is such an action that is in accordance with the conscience of the acting person, regardless of the objective side of the action.⁶⁵ A question from the field of applied ethics at the moral level might therefore be: Is it morally good for the Gabonese devotee of the syncretism in question to participate in the *Bwiti* initiation and to consume a large amount of *iboga* leading to unconsciousness? In other words: Is it in line with the person's conscience?

However, customary behaviour is differentiated as well: right behaviour is one that is in accordance with valid customs, traditions, and norms in the given area and at the given time. A question from the field of applied ethics might therefore also be: Is it right for the Gabonese devotee of the syncretism in question to participate in the *Bwiti* initiation and to consume a large amount of *iboga* leading to

⁵⁷ Arno Anzenbacher, *Úvod do filozofie* (Prague: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1990), 193.

⁵⁸ Helmut Weber, *Všeobecná morální teologie* (Prague: Zvon; Prague: Vyšehrad, 1998), 149–171.

⁵⁹ Ondřej Havelka, 'Teologicko-etický princip personality a jeho soudobé myšlenkové směry,' *Verba Theologica* 39, no. 2 (2020): 98–109.

⁶⁰ Skoblík, *Přehled křesťanské etiky*; 26.

⁶¹ Aristotelés, *Etika Nikomachova* (Prague: Rezek, 1996), 23–43.

⁶² Thomas Aquinas emphasised that moral virtue is acquired by habit, by getting accustomed, cf. e.g. Tomáš Akvinský, *Komentář k Etice Nikomachově. Book II.* (Prague: Krystal OP, 2015), 29.

⁶³ Marek Vácha, Radana Königová and Miloš Mauer, *Základy moderní lékařské etiky* (Prague: Portál, 2012), 20.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Anzenbacher, *Úvod do filozofie*, 223.

unconsciousness? In other words: Is it in accordance with the customs and norm of the community?

Society also speaks of so-called conformity: the set of learned cultural patterns of behaviour and action that each form of human society requires of its members.⁶⁶ Social customs – conformity – is similar at its core across cultures and histories; it is often based on the imperative not to kill one's neighbour and to help one's neighbour in need.⁶⁷ Resisting conformity is often difficult and, as a result, self-exclusive in traditional African societies. Ethical judgments must therefore be cautious and honest, but on the other hand, it is necessary to remain faithful to the Gospel and the essential pillars of Christian doctrine.⁶⁸

Returning to terminology, the customary category evaluates the objective, exogenously given, substantive side of action,⁶⁹ while the moral category evaluates on the basis of internal, endogenous criteria of compliance with the conscience of the acting person; it considers human action in a good-bad dichotomy. The customary category uses the adjectives right or wrong to evaluate, assessing behaviour based on the social *ethos*, i.e. the norm or custom determined by the social context.⁷⁰

Based on what has just been said, it is clear that the external evaluation of the believer of *Bwiti* and Catholic Christianity is not easy, and caution and honesty are needed in the conclusions.⁷¹

3.2.2 *The Conscience of the Gabonese Believer of Syncretism*

Conscience is the ability of the acting person to distinguish between moral good and evil (GS 16). In a moral sense, no superior authority can stand over the conscience of the acting person because if the exercise of conscience is to be autonomous, there cannot be an authority over it that would determine it and thus negate real autonomy. In Kantian terms, this would have to be the heteronomous exercise of conscience. When asking whether it is morally good for a Gabonese devotee of the syncretism in question to participate in the *Bwiti* initiation

⁶⁶ Henry Sidgwick, *The Ethics of Conformity and Subscription* (Collingwood: Trieste Publishing Pty Limited, 2017), 20–49.

⁶⁷ Andrew West, 'After Virtue and Accounting Ethics,' *Journal of Business Ethics* 14, no. 1 (2018): 21–36, doi: 10.1007/s10551-016-3018-9.

⁶⁸ Havelka, 'Synkretismus katolického křesťanství a západoafrického vodunu,' 149–174.

⁶⁹ Anzenbacher, *Úvod do filozofie*, 223.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 335–339.

and consume a large amount of *iboga* leading to unconsciousness, it is necessary to evaluate only the exercise of the person's conscience and not the external social norm. It may happen that a person determined to act in conformity with the local customs will act in opposition to their conscience when participating in the initiation ritual. They will therefore act in a customary right, but morally bad way. The conscience of the average Gabonese believer is very strongly shaped by society.⁷² This is still necessary to keep in mind.

An interesting dispute over the authority of conscience flared up in high scholasticism. While the eminent theologian Peter Lombard (1100–1160), famous for his *Sentences*, opted for external loyalty and thus submission to authority in the event of a conflict between conscience and law or superior authority, one of the greatest theological authorities in the history of theological thinking, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who carried out the so-called re-inculturation of theological thinking to Aristotle's philosophical legacy⁷³ and added the equally influential Aristotelian-Thomistic theology to the influential Augustinian-Platonic one, upheld the primacy of conscience over any heteronomous authority. Aquinas was well aware that two different people could take opposite views on the same issue, in accordance with their consciences, yet in the moral field, he defended their conscience as the supreme authority that cannot be wrong in a purely moral sense at the level of *synderesis* and *sapientia*. His thought model therefore means the possibility of own decision by exercising an autonomous conscience, even in the event of an extraordinary unfavourable external factors. This is, in the author's judgment, crucially important because, as the situation in Gabon and elsewhere shows, a Christian may be caught up in many intra-religious contradictions, but this does not diminish their responsibility before God.

The acting person should act customarily right and morally well in life – ideally, such actions go hand in hand in both areas. However, if the customary and moral areas come into conflict, one must make a choice: according to Aristotelian-Thomistic principles, one is bound to act in accordance with their conscience; otherwise, one would consciously do moral evil, which is unacceptable, even if one is

⁷² Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics* (Hammond: Hippo Books, 2009), 65.

⁷³ Ctirad Václav Pospíšil, *Hermeneutika mystéria. Struktury myšlení v dogmatické teologii* (Prague: Krystal OP; Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2005), 52.

forced to do so by law or a superior. This is the so-called principle of *epikeia*,⁷⁴ the foundations of which were formulated by Aristotle⁷⁵ and the most significant representatives of which were Albertus Magnus (1206–1280) and Thomas Aquinas. The principle of *epikeia* is certainly a pious thought pattern, but it is necessary to repeat that it is extremely difficult for a Gabonese believer to defy social customs in fidelity to their own conscience.

3.2.3 Evaluation of the Perceived Syncretism

It follows from the above that the final assessment of customary right and moral good rests on the social custom in a given region and at a given time and on the conscience of a particular believing individual. If believers do not ingest a life-threatening amount of *iboga*, such behaviour does not conflict with the basic imperatives of theological ethics.⁷⁶ *Bwiti* is one of the so-called ethical religions, and its imperatives to help one's neighbour, tolerance, forgiveness, respect for alterity and efforts for personal spiritual and general human development are in line with the foundations of the Christian life.⁷⁷

However, when a believer ingests a life-threatening amount of *iboga* at the initiation, it depends on the level of morality whether such action is in accordance with their conscience and ethical, and whether it is in accordance with the customs of the place and time. If the believer acted in accordance with custom but contrary to their conscience – they would not act on the basis of an autonomous decision, but under the influence of external custom contrary to their personal conviction – they would act right according to local customs but not morally well. If, on the other hand, they chose to undergo the initiation ritual with only a small amount of *iboga*, despite the custom and what society expects of them, for that would be the result of an autonomous decision of their conscience, they would act wrong as regards customs but morally right. If a believer were to ingest the normal amount of *iboga*, as custom requires them to do, and at the same time such action was also in accordance with their conscience, they would act right concerning the social customs and morally well. A Christian should act customarily

⁷⁴ Andrew West, 'After Virtue and Accounting Ethics,' 21–36.

⁷⁵ Aristotelés, *Etika Nikomachova*, 131–133.

⁷⁶ Hans Haselbarth, *Christian Ethics in the African Context* (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 2004), 41–44.

⁷⁷ Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 65–74.

right and morally well, but if they find themselves in a conflict between customs and morality, they must choose as detailed above.

However, the imperative to treat one's life and health responsibly also comes into play, so that what has just been said is given yet another level of evaluation. On the other hand, the fact that the tradition of the *Bwiti* initiation in Gabon belongs to the national identity⁷⁸ and is extremely important for Gabonese must be accepted. The theological-ethical assessment of the syncretism of *Bwiti* and Catholic Christianity thus remains a complex issue where black-and-white perspective cannot be used. Nevertheless, the author dares to conclude that the syncretism of *Bwiti* and Catholic Christianity, in his judgment, does not fundamentally contradict the theological and theological-ethical premises of the Christian life, but the specific ethical and moral harmony must be judged by each individual acting alone.

Conclusion

Although the observed syncretism of the indigenous African religion *Bwiti* and Catholic Christianity in Gabon is a combination of two relatively distant religious traditions, the author has come to the conclusion that there is no major contradiction at the level of Catholic theology, and the syncretism is consistent with general Catholic theology. The same applies to the Catholic liturgy. At the level of theological ethics, after taking a closer look at possible conflicting points, it was concluded that consuming smaller doses of *iboga* does not contradict the premises of Christian ethics. On the other hand, in the case of the *Bwiti* initiation, a large amount of *iboga* is ingested, leading to unconsciousness of the initiated. Here, it is necessary to consider three levels of the moment: the customary, the moral (the conscience of the acting person), and the scientific, where human life and health must be respected as God's gift and treated responsibly and accordingly. From these views, which may be contradictory in the practical life of the Gabonese believer, it follows that it is necessary to be careful and honest in the assessment. One cannot make precise (as it were surgical) cuts in theological ethics, and the issue of initiation in the syncretism of *Bwiti* and Catholic Christianity only confirms this.

⁷⁸ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 492–493.

Catholic Christianity has many faces in the world; this paper tried to clarify one of them, i.e. the face of Catholic Christianity syncretised with the traditional African religion in Gabon. The author believes that the key statement of the respondents of his field research, if summarised in a few words, is: extraordinary tolerance, striving for good and openness to interreligious dialogue. The question of whether the psychedelic initiation ritual in the depths of the Gabonese rainforest is in line with the theological and theological-ethical foundations of Catholic Christian life has been answered rather affirmatively, but with some caveats about the potential limits in the amount of *iboga* consumed, and with some key insights into those limits suggested.

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