

'IS IT WITCHCRAFT? IS IT SATAN? IT IS A MIRACLE.'  
MAI-MAI SOLDIERS AND CHRISTIAN CONCEPTS  
OF EVIL IN NORTH-EAST CONGO

BY

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*Introduction*

'Bang-Bang' shout a group of small children brandishing make-believe guns. Their playmates, semi-naked, with leaves protruding from behind their ears, refuse to play dead. Instead they shout 'mai' and advance on their make-believe enemies, fearlessly wresting their 'guns' from them and 'shooting' them down. These children are re-enacting the defeat of the Zaïrean<sup>1</sup> government forces in north-east Zaïre from November 1996 to January 1997 by a faction of Laurent Kabilas Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération (AFDL),<sup>2</sup> the Mai-Mai. While the children play, their parents regale one another with stories of the invincible soldiers, who rely on traditional belief and magic potions rather than conventional warfare to defeat the demoralized forces of Mobutu. The triumph of the Mai-Mai gripped the imagination of those who had observed their victory. They were willing to pay tribute to the conventional soldiers whose skill and discipline had helped to rout the Zaïrean forces, but they were convinced that their success could not have been so swift and definitive had the Mai-Mai not used their supernatural powers. The population of north-east Congo attribute their liberation from the oppressive regime of Mobutu Sese Seko in large part to the Mai-Mai.

This article is a snap-shot of oral theology in north-east Congo which displays the vivacity of local Christianity as it responds to contemporary circumstances. It aims to study the response of the Christian community to the actions of Mai-Mai during the war. This response provides a window onto a host of conceptions surrounding the nature of evil as perceived by committed church attenders. An examination of the under-

standing of evil sheds light on a whole religious system, as Birgit Meyer has demonstrated in her study of Ewe Christians in Ghana, in which she states,

in order to reveal the peculiarity of African Christianity, it is fruitful to concentrate on the dark side of the Christian religion.<sup>3</sup>

Our study will present something of the particular character of contemporary Christianity in north-east Congo as it highlights circumstantial reflections on this 'dark side'.

No attempt is made at a systematic appraisal of *all* notions of evil found in Congolese Christianity. Rather, the article looks at the moral code and the figure of Satan, and emphasizes one manifestation of evil, that of witchcraft, because the practice of witchcraft was the accusation levelled at the Mai-Mai by Christians, who viewed their cultic practices with suspicion. However, they also admired their courage and appreciated the public benefits of their fight. This situation challenged the popular Christian understanding of evil as it tried to find a way through the received teaching of the Church, the customary means for gaining power to resolve problems, and recent political events which questioned firmly held beliefs.

Although the primary concern is not with the Mai-Mai themselves, but rather with the beliefs that surround them, an understanding of their impact upon the population of Congo is necessary. Thus a description of Mai-Mai warfare is given before an account of the common conceptions of evil held by Christians in the north east of the country which were challenged by the dramatic success of the Mai-Mai. As a result of these tensions some Christians attempted to make theological sense of Mai-Mai actions and their consequences by looking at the question, 'Does God use evil to carry out his purposes?' Through this process the actions of those operating in the customary domain of Congolese life are interpreted by those whose customary beliefs and actions are filtered through their Christian faith. The process described here began as a spontaneous response to a surprising sequence of events. It developed into thoughtful reflections which maintained a sense of immediacy with their context.

Congo is a predominantly Christian country, with over 90% of the population claiming some Christian affiliation.<sup>4</sup> I gathered information through conversations with people with whom I lived for four years who are 'committed Christians', that is those who see themselves as actively engaged in Christian life, which follows the strict moral codes laid down by the Church in all its denominational forms, rather than

those church-goers who are irregular in their attendance and less strict in their practice. Many of these 'committed Christians' manifest this *engagement* by joining the Youth Fellowship, becoming teachers, nurses, or pastors, rather than taking the more lucrative, but morally questionable, jobs such as those of soldiers, gold-miners, customs officials, *inter alia*. Those interviewed are members of Roman Catholic, Kimbanguist and Protestant churches of different ethnic groups, ages, sexes, in and around the town of Bunia, the district centre of Ituri. Their opinions on the actions of the Mai-Mai and the nature of evil were striking in their homogeneity, and these opinions were affirmed by that important vehicle of oral theology, popular hymns and choruses sung in Christian worship.

#### *Mai-Mai warfare*

In the elemental struggle between life and death, the influence of traditional beliefs is evident in a way rarely apparent in peace time. Studies have already been made on east and central African religious beliefs displayed during warfare. Mediums, spirit possession, ritual prohibitions and the harnessing of nature's power have all been used, and the beliefs surrounding them adapted, to provide a force for violent change which accompanies the skills of modern warfare and weaponry. The 1905-07 Maji-Maji uprising in Tanzania,<sup>5</sup> the Zimbabwean guerrillas of the 1970s<sup>6</sup> and the Holy Spirit movement of Alice Lakwena, defeated in Uganda in 1987,<sup>7</sup> all witness to the potency of traditional religion in combat against unwanted regimes. The Mai-Mai of Congo, who were also at work during the Simba rebellion of 1965, manifest similar traits to their counterparts elsewhere on the continent. Their name literally means 'water-water', *mai* being the Congolese form of the Swahili word, *maji*. The name comes from a belief that bullets can be turned to water as a result of the liquid *dawa* (medicine, potion) which is poured over the body to prevent weapons from killing and maiming. Sometimes the *dawa* itself is called *mai*. The use of *mai* is not unique to the Mai-Mai warriors. Water has a religious power in all aspects of life throughout Africa. In African Traditional Religions, in African Initiated Churches and in the Roman Catholic Church water is used for blessing and for protection.

There were two Mai-Mai groups involved in the war in Zaïre: one from the Bangilima, an ethnic group comprising three tribes in the Goma-Masindi area, and the other from the Nandi in the Butembo-Beni area. Their prime concern is the protection of their land from

other groups who would like to settle on it. The Bangilima, for example, have a long history of animosity with the Tutsis of Masindi. However, they attacked Hutu refugees who poured into Goma in 1994 after the genocide in Rwanda. In October 1996, in an alliance which eventually brought down the Zaïrean government, they joined forces with their old enemies, the Tutsis, to chase away the Hutus. The alliance was not an easy one and some Mai-Mai quickly returned to attacking the Tutsis.<sup>8</sup> The involvement of the Mai-Mai in the war as part of the complex alliance of those fighting against the Zaïrean army and its allies, the Forces Armées de Rwanda (ex-FAR) of the previous Rwandan regime and the Interahamwe,<sup>9</sup> first came to international attention in and around Goma in November 1996.

Thrown into the mix are the May May (sic) who fight anyone who gets in the way of their pursuit of land... They have a strong faith in magic. May May recruits are tattooed to bolster their invincibility, they do not wash with soap and are forbidden to have sex with women. Many fight naked or dressed with leaves.<sup>10</sup>

Their very physical appearance announced that they did not principally rely on conventional methods of warfare, but were dependant on mysterious powers, whose aid was sought through secret rites and strict observance of a code of conduct. Similar practices were observed in the Bunia area. The following tales represent the beliefs of local people about the Mai-Mai rather than the beliefs of the Mai-Mai themselves. A rigid behavioural code is adhered to before battle which, along with the *dawa*, protects the Mai-Mai from their enemies. Stories of Mai-Mai testing one another's behaviour in a trial-by-ordeal abounded; once the *dawa* had been applied prior to battle they would shoot at their fellow soldiers and if one was killed he had obviously been guilty of breaking the prohibition. The *mai* itself was also tested to ensure its efficacy. The Mai-Mai soldiers shot at the jerrycan containing the *mai*. If the bullets penetrated the can the *mai* needed to be strengthened. If, on the other hand, the can resisted the bullets, the *mai* was ready for use.

The defeat of the Zaïrean government forces along the eastern border of Congo happened with startling speed. From October to December the AFDL took an area about 700 km long between Fizi, in the hills above Lake Tanganyika, and Bunia, near Lake Albert. On 17 March they captured Kisangani, having taken the whole of the north-east of the country. The success can be attributed to the disarray and low morale of Mobutu's soldiers, the discipline and military skill of the Alliance of Banyamulengi,<sup>11</sup> Rwandan and Ugandan forces, and the terror which the Mai-Mai instilled in their enemies. Between Beni and

Bunia it was usually the Mai-Mai who advanced first and in many areas they did not need to fight. The soldiers had fled on hearing of their approach. They knew that the Mai-Mai had supernatural powers which they could not hope to combat. Civilians, seeing the government forces, who had been systematically looting the population, take to their heels, encouraged the Mai-Mai onwards. Delegations were sent to ask the Mai-Mai to take over the next village in order to stop the looting by government soldiers. The inhabitants of one village overlooked by a garrison thought that they had made a serious mistake in inviting the Mai-Mai when they saw them approaching. Five teenage boys with a strange assortment of weapons arrived in Boga at the beginning of December 1996 looking very unlikely to be able to attack the feared Katangese government soldiers who were on their way from Bunia. When the five Mai-Mai went to look for the Katangese they discovered that they had already fled because they had been told that the Mai-Mai were on their way. One Anglican church worker witnessed the battle for Geti, south-east of Bunia.

We saw . . . something unbelievable but true. . . . They [the Mai-Mai] were only three people, they had a spear and a knife. There were 700 government soldiers and they had rockets and canon and everything. The battle took six hours and they had not defeated one another . . . On market day. . . . [the Mai-Mai] said to the soldiers, 'put down your weapons'. The soldiers said, 'Who do you think you are?' and they fired many bullets at one of them. They shot him many times, paff, paff, here [points to rib cage] but the bullets didn't go in, they just dropped to the ground. . . . [Later the same day] the soldiers fired bullets at them. They simply said 'Mai' and no bullet did anything. . . . [Early the next morning] the soldiers fired bombs over Geti. Everyone ran outside. The Mai-Mai heard the noise of the bomb, they stood up and said, 'Mai, victory is ours'. The bomb broke up high in the sky . . . and did not do any harm . . . Was it witchcraft (ulozi)? Was it Satan? I don't know, but it was a miracle.<sup>12</sup>

Stories such as these spread rapidly through the civilian population. Admiration mingled with fear. The young Mai-Mai had freed towns from the constant looting by government troops and gave hope for a new regime in the country. They did so in a dramatic way, relying on supernatural forces far more powerful than conventional weaponry. Many teenagers in the towns in the east enthusiastically signed up to help Kabila continue his push for Kinshasa.<sup>13</sup> They talked of catching grenades in their hands and of invading towns by becoming invisible or turning into animals rather than of machine guns or military techniques.

*Christian acknowledgement of Mai-Mai power*

Among the committed Christians, as well as the population at large, there was great admiration for the Mai-Mai, mingled with relief at the speed and efficacy of their victory. For a brief period of six or seven months, those reticent to speak openly of traditional beliefs and practices talked frequently and animatedly of the Mai-Mai cult. Their implication in death and suffering might have made the Mai-Mai morally suspect had not the brutality of the government forces been so great and the need to stop their destruction so urgent. In the end loss of life was much less severe than had been anticipated because of the Mai-Mai's swift action, a sure sign, for the majority of the population, that God was protecting civilians and accepting the conquests of the AFDL. There was a euphoric sense of freedom as a result of their victories. Christians saw divine significance in the capture of certain strategic towns; Bunia was 'liberated' on Christmas Eve; the AFDL pronounced that they would 'liberate' Kisangani, the third city, before Easter, and they took it on Saturday 15 March, a week before Palm Sunday; Kinshasa, the capital, was taken on Saturday 17 May, the eve of Pentecost. During 1997 the three major Christian festivals were celebrated in the knowledge that Mobutu's régime was being decisively defeated by the successive triumphs of the *wakombosi*, liberators. This was the name used of AFDL soldiers, including the Mai-Mai, as they routed the Zaïrean forces. The verbal association of *wakombozi* with *Mukombozi Yesu*, liberator or redeemer Jesus, was exploited and served to enhance the sense of the miraculous in the victories.

Within the Christian community, however, admiration for the Mai-Mai and the celebration of their timely victories had to be reconciled with a belief held as deeply as that of their invincibility; Christians believed that the Mai-Mai power was evil. There was no doubt in their minds that the beliefs and rituals of the Mai-Mai were effective but they were equally sure that they were satanic. The tension caused by this belief is crucial. For most committed Congolese Christians power connected with customary religion is considered to be opposed to power connected with Christianity. The relation between traditional belief and practice and Christian belief and practice is extremely fluid, as Wyatt MacGaffey has demonstrated in his study of western Congo;<sup>14</sup> 'bureaucratic' and 'customary' spheres are inhabited at different times by the same people, depending on which requirements can best be met in which sphere. Nevertheless, Christians remain suspicious of customary practices. The use of secret rites and unknown herbs by the Mai-Mai

were considered clear signs of occult association. The covert nature of their rites, performed exclusively by Mai-Mai soldiers, suggested their involvement in evil practices. In another study, on syncretism and Kimbanguist and Ngunzist Churches, MacGaffey underlines this fear of occult involvement and notes the distinction between the frank and visible actions of the Ngunzist prophet and the covert and mysterious actions of the magician. The prophets use ‘plain water instead of herbal concoctions in palm wine’, they wear white, a sign of transparency, to demonstrate their ‘commitment to openness and publicity, as opposed to the particularism and murky secretiveness of . . . magic.’<sup>15</sup> Christians from all denominations claim that their own rites are public and straightforward, that they are performed for the communal good and are thus productive in society, whereas mysterious rites performed in secret or at night are suspected of being for private gain at the expense of others and so are destructive.

Just as sorcerers, *walozi*, are charged with secrecy as part of their evil doings, so the mysterious acts of the Mai-Mai were open to the same accusations. There was little desire from the Christian community to investigate the details of Mai-Mai belief. The knowledge that the Christians did possess was enough to convince them that Mai-Mai practices were evil. They believed that, through the secrecy of their rites, the exclusiveness of their membership and their use of unknown herbs, Mai-Mai displayed a trust in forces considered alien to those on which Christians could rely. One Christian observed that:

Mai-Mai do *ufumu*, they make *dawa*, the foundation [of their activities] was their *dawa*. It is the same path as the *walozi*. There is no difference. *Mulozi* makes *dawa* as well.<sup>16</sup>

Their rites had nothing to do with the God of Jesus Christ. Rather they were associated with *ulozi* and, as such, they were to be aligned with Satan and evil spirits. Therefore, while Christians could admire the astonishing Mai-Mai victories and revel in the stories of supernatural power, they wanted to keep their distance from such a power because, to them, it was clearly evil.

#### *Christians’ understanding of evil*

This accusation can be comprehended by considering Christian notions of evil. The way in which the Christian figure of Satan and the customary practice of *ulozi* are tied together in contemporary Congolese Christian thought illuminates the assumptions made by Christians about the nature of Mai-Mai warfare.

Christians in north-east Congo are familiar with the words *uvvu* and *ubaya*, both meaning ‘evil’ or ‘bad’, although, in conversation, they talk more naturally about the individual and concrete actions which constitute parts of the abstract term. For Congolese Christians evil is in the first place ‘doing something which does not please God’. These things form an extensive list; stealing, drinking beer,<sup>17</sup> fighting, arguing, witchcraft, insulting others, and so on. In its definition of evil deeds this list is as concerned with the mundane acts of daily life as the tapping into dubious supernatural power. This strict moral code of behaviour is held up as the ideal for all Christians by which those who fall short are judged severely. Rigid adherence to this code is expected and reveals that a person is a genuine Christian. A popular chorus lists a multitude of sins, making it clear that,

*Si tu est fumeur/buveur c'est toi qui passera.* If you are a smoker/drinker (etc.) you will pass away.  
*La Parole de Dieu jamais ne passera.* The Word of God will never pass away

Those who perform any of a long list of sinful acts will pass away, the Word of God and, by inference, those who follow it, will endure. God works through those who obey his commands. The result of this strong dichotomy between good and bad actions, in which there is no neutral ground, has been explained thus:

If the space between good and evil is reduced, one tends towards a puritan system, in which the slightest slip from the ideal is considered a grave sin and where innocence is no longer possible.<sup>18</sup>

There can be no protest of ignorance or misunderstanding, and every act clearly falls into a category of good or evil. The Christian observers of the Mai-Mai used this criterion when analysing their practices. They could not be regarded as good because they had all the hallmarks of *ulozi*, therefore they must be evil.

An individual is believed to be tempted to do wrong by Satan, who encourages people to do that which displeases God. He is seen to be behind drunkenness, stealing and lying. Often this is explained in a fatalistic way, ‘the devil tempted me’, therefore, goes the inference, I could do no other. In Congolese Christian thought Satan plays a large role. He is God’s adversary, waging spiritual war against him, the fallen angel bent on destroying God’s purposes. Sermons and songs frequently suggest a strong dualism. In the hymn book used by most Protestant churches<sup>19</sup> in Bunia the songs emphasize a clear contrast between the former life of sin and the life offered by Jesus, but they also warn that Christians constantly need to be on their guard against *Shetani* who

wants to triumph over us, who, 'like a lion, is waiting for us'.<sup>20</sup> Another song mentions the ever present menace of the devil,

Oh Satan is near, he is looking for us,  
He wants us to fall, to die, to be lost.<sup>21</sup>

That these hymns also clearly state that Jesus is the ultimate conqueror, that he will defeat the devil when he tempts us, is often overlooked in conversation. While Congolese people are ready to attribute the events of this world to *mapenzi ya Mungu*, the will of God, they also see a large role for the devil who can be accorded a power which often appears almost equal to that of God.

This strong belief in the power of Satan appears in the teaching of those who introduced Christianity to Congo, from the Catholic Capuchins in the seventeenth century,<sup>22</sup> to the conservative evangelical Protestants in the twentieth.<sup>23</sup> It suggests a fearful, those-who-are-not-for-us-are-against-us, kind of faith which comes from a view of history as a simple fight between good and evil, between God and the devil, where each victory remains uncertain and ground still has to be won or lost; a strong dualism which has often been present in Christianity since its conception. To this way of thinking any relation with local beliefs is a grave danger because it would contaminate pure religion with evil superstition. It also means that people are expected to belong to one camp or the other: this teaching allows for no middle ground. In a well-known chorus, the simplicity of the choice between the two options is made clear:

*Shetani na Yesu, unamuchagua nani?* Satan or Jesus, whom are you going to chose?  
*Mimi ninamuchagua Masiya.* I chose the Messiah.

In December 1997 a young man recited to me the teaching he had received in the Catholic church:

People don't follow the way of Satan, follow the way of God. Don't do (sic) Satan, follow the way of God. People leave *mulozi*. Follow the way of God.

Here is not only a polarity between forces of good and evil but the alliance of Satan with *ulozi*. *Mulozi*, a traditional practitioner, is in collusion with Satan, the figure of evil in Christianity. Satan is also regarded as the 'chief' of the evil spirits which can be called upon by *walozi*. He leads *walozi* into doing evil. In this way certain traditional beliefs are associated with the wiles of the devil. This synthesis of Satan with *Mulozi* is not peculiar to Congo. Meyer found the same fusion among the Ewe, as the title of her article makes clear, 'If you are a devil you are a witch, and if you are a witch you are a devil'.<sup>24</sup>

Traditional practices are judged by Christian standards but the belief structures differ. While both share a clear moral code of right and wrong, traditional religion does not have a supernatural figure who epitomizes evil, as Satan does in Congolese Christianity. Bénézet Bujo, a theologian originally from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Bunia, explains the root of evil in African Traditional Religion:

It was not God but the human who was responsible for the appearance of sin and evil. The moral order is thus seen as a matter not of the relation between the human and God, but of the relationships between human beings themselves.<sup>25</sup>

The responsibility for evil rests with humanity. *Ulozi* and evil spirits there may be, but the initiative for invoking them comes from humans. Bujo also explains how certain individuals in society have influence for good or bad over supernatural powers:

Every individual is continually preoccupied with protecting the life of self and family against the malicious attacks of evil spirits, including evil ancestors. These evil spirits can be appeased by special offerings that are connected with diviners, magicians and medicine-men. These specialists are regarded as people who are able to control the forces hidden by God in nature and to use them to help others. These people are not regarded as wholly evil, although there is a dark side to their operations. Admittedly the same forces that help humans can be used to harm them. 'Evil spirits' provoke quite different sentiments from those aroused by 'good' ancestors and Africa has developed complicated ritual systems designed to protect life against the menace represented by 'the spirits'.<sup>26</sup>

This description of the ambiguity of the practitioners of appeasement goes some way to explaining why committed Christians are so wary of certain customary practices in Congolese life. Since Christians are less interested in the subtleties of religious systems in which they feel they should no longer participate, and since they interpret them through the filter of their beliefs about Satan, a greater emphasis is placed on the 'dark side' of these 'complicated ritual systems' which are no longer fully understood.

Today among Christians in Congo there is a tendency to contrast not Christianity and African Traditional Religion but Christianity and sorcery, *ulozi*. Distinction is not always made between the three forms of customary problem-solving which Bujo mentions; healing, *ufumu*, divination, *ulaguzi*, and *ulozi*.<sup>27</sup> They may all imply, for those who are mistrustful of them, shadowy dealings with supernatural beings, who are at best ambiguous, and covert rites, hidden from the public domain, which are performed with the intention of doing harm. Many *wafumu* are simple herbalists whose aim is to cure sickness but there are some who have 'a dark side to their operations'. This complex relationship between different aspects of traditional practice is often simply labelled

witchcraft. A radical dichotomy has developed in which traditional beliefs concerning relations with the supernatural and Christian beliefs about relations with God are considered to be at opposite ends of a spiritual spectrum which has no neutral ground. The words of one person, a member of the Kimbanguist church, can serve as an example of the opinions of many:

*Mulozi* is a being of Satan. He does not walk in the laws of the Lord. An evil spirit is *mulozi*, it lives in his spirit. *Mulozi* is a bad person who acts against a good person. . . . *Mulozi* is an evil spirit is Satan. God rejects him. . . . *Mufumu* works with evil spirits. *Mufumu* knows the types of evil spirits and he searches ways to harm the souls of Christians. . . . *Mufumu* says he knows how to heal but it is only God who knows, so he must follow Satan. He forgets God and he ‘eats’ your money for nothing. . . . You will lose your way if you go to *mufumu*.<sup>28</sup>

He could not explain the existence of different words, *ufumu* and *ulozi*. For him they signified the same reality. *Ulozi/ufumu* is blamed for many misfortunes by Christians, from disturbing dreams to sudden death. In common parlance both *ulozi/ufumu* and Christian belief are powerful, and it is *ulozi/ufumu* which is evil, whereas Christianity is good. The morally neutral, even physically beneficial, practices of the *wafumu* are aligned with *ulozi* until, for many Christians, there is no longer any difference.

Traditional beliefs are held by the Congolese Church to be in conflict with Christian beliefs. African Initiated Churches, which more closely fit with traditional religious practices and beliefs than their missionary initiated counterparts, are no less likely to view these practices and beliefs as evil if they continue to operate outside the church. Despite church teaching, the two religious systems operate side by side for many people, and there is ambiguity between the widely expressed belief that traditional practices are evil and the equally widespread use of these practices. Individuals move from one to the other as best fits their need at a particular time. While theologians like Bujo are appreciative of the fact that many people find ‘more comfort and liberation in the traditional practices than in the rituals of the Christian Church’,<sup>29</sup> in many congregations those who feel the need to participate in both systems, who attend Church regularly and protect their houses with fetishes, or who are members of the church choir and seek traditional cures for their sick children, do so with great moral uncertainty. Buyana Mulungula describes the embarrassment for a Christian who has sought healing by *ufumu* in this way:

He pockets his faith and runs quickly to the *mufumu*. Once he is healed, the conflict continues in his relationships with his God and his Christian brothers. Before God

he feels guilty. In front of his Christian brothers he always has . . . shame . . . and fear.<sup>30</sup>

Such Christians often find their fears justified. They are roundly condemned from the pulpit or whispered about at choir practice. They are viewed with suspicion because they do not have absolute trust in God as understood in Christian faith and the trust they do have is shared with powers considered to be evil. Few doubt the efficacy of rites and herbs for protection, few question the influence of spirits and ancestors. Most Christians simply believe that they are at the opposite moral pole from their own beliefs in the power of God.

As committed Christians in north-east Congo attempted to analyse the Mai-Mai, their notions of evil and, more particularly, of Satan and *ulozi*, were the criteria for concluding that the Mai-Mai's actions were evil. They were now faced with a dilemma. The warfare in which the Mai-Mai were engaged in 1996 and 1997 seemed to be to the advantage of the population. Their conquests were quick and relatively bloodless and they were bringing an end to the rule of Mobutu. These events could only be interpreted in a positive way: the Mai-Mai were acting for good. The criteria which shaped Christian analysis of the Mai-Mai were themselves put under scrutiny by this dilemma.

#### *Congolese biblical reflections*

As the political situation which gave rise both to Mai-Mai warfare and to the desirability of their victory encountered the religious beliefs of Congolese Christians, some of these Christians began to search for a theological explanation of the Mai-Mai phenomenon and the dilemma which it posed for them. They recognised a tension between the three things they believed of the Mai-Mai:

1. the Mai-Mai had liberated them from Mobutu's forces by the use of supernatural power which rendered them invincible.
2. Mobutu was evil and in freeing people from his rule the Mai-Mai had performed a good act.
3. the power the Mai-Mai used for liberation was evil, aligned to the devil rather than God.

The speed at which the question 'How can good come out of evil?' was answered suggested prior consideration and discussion. Unsurprisingly, God's intervention in the course of events was accepted without question and the Bible was used in order to find a precedent for the events they had witnessed which would help explain the use of evil forces to

bring about a good result. During the course of several conversations three biblical stories were referred to and used as the justification for the Mai-Mai actions. Their interpretation challenged both the purpose of the moral code and the prominent view of Satan as the evil one held by the Christian community .

The story of the testing of Job (Job 1:1-2:7) was cited as an example of God allowing Satan to act in a certain way. It was felt that in this story God and Satan worked closely together and the outcome was acceptable because God had permitted it. In the same way Satan could be working in the Mai-Mai but with God's permission for divine purposes. Rather than being at the opposite moral pole from God, he is God's servant, able to reason with God but not able to act contrary to God's will. The story of Job emphasizes the supremacy of God and reduces Satan to a mischievous assistant under God's authority. In doing so it served to challenge the strong dualism inherent in Congo Christian belief.

The acceptance that God and Satan might work together is a departure from the common understanding of the devil, as the explanation of one pastor shows: 'We *know* that from the beginning Satan has been the enemy of God. It's impossible that they could work together.'<sup>31</sup> In the conversations of Christians the power of Satan and the control of God over all things are frequently mentioned. A sudden death, for example, may be proclaimed at the funeral as *mapenzi ya Mungu* but whispered conversations will suggest it was, on the contrary, a result of diabolic *ulozi*. This apparent contradiction was explained by one individual thus,

People say 'mapenzi ya Mungu' and 'ulozi'. They mix the two. In the end God is the last man (sic), he is after Satan, but people don't remember this.<sup>32</sup>

Events considered to be the work of Satan often seem more frequent and easier to understand as such than the unfathomable purposes of God. They are also understood as contrary to God's will. This belief was put into question by the interpretation of Mai-Mai actions. The conviction that the Mai-Mai, despite their occult practices, were achieving a good result for public well-being challenged the previous assumption of the relationship between God and the devil. It also gave greater credence to the belief in *mapenzi ya Mungu*; God could work through things which were morally questionable, they were not necessarily outside divine control.

The second story cited as being pertinent to the Mai-Mai was Rahab's assistance to the two Israelite spies sent by Joshua to Jericho prior to

its capture (Jos. 2:1-21, 6:25). Her job as a prostitute was seen as contrary to God's ordinances, and normally she would not have been considered fit to work for God, yet she was used to bring victory to the Israelites. Likewise the Mai-Mai, whose beliefs and practices had nothing to do with proper religion as Congolese Christians understood it, were used by God in exceptional circumstances to bring the dictatorship of Mobutu tumbling down. As has been noted already, Congolese Christianity has a puritanical bent to it. Prostitutes are considered targets for evangelism rather than vital ingredients in God's purposes. In June 1997 a group of students discussing the nature of the Kingdom of God said categorically that God could not establish his reign except by using those chosen to be his servants because God would not work outside the Church. Such servants would be upright examples of Christian virtue. When I reminded them of the prevailing opinion on the Mai-Mai, that their recent actions had been judged good despite their suspicious practices, there was a burst of laughter as they realized that their interpretation of contemporary events now put into question a previously firmly held belief. The choice of Rahab as a model for understanding the Mai-Mai is startling given the rigorous moral code which is expected to be followed by committed Christians in Congo. It demonstrated a previously unobserved flexibility in the application of this code.

The third Bible story used to interpret the Mai-Mai's victory is similar to the second in that it shows an unlikely character being used to achieve God's purposes. The story is that of Cyrus, King of the Persians, a pagan ruler whose defeat of the Babylonians allowed the Israelites to return from the exile they had endured in Babylon (Isa. 44:28-45:13, Ezr. 1:1-8). Once again God uses an individual who knew nothing of the true God of the Israelites although, unlike Rahab, there is no suggestion that he ever did recognize the authority of Yahweh. Cyrus was the leader of a nation which had its own religious system, but he also had the military force to free God's chosen people from another pagan power. The words in Isaiah interpret the acts of Cyrus in a cosmic context; God's eternal purpose was being carried out by a particular figure at a particular moment in history. This story is directly linked to warfare and the machinations of political powers. The fate of a nation hangs in the balance as it did during the war in Congo in which the future of the whole country was at stake as the Alliance forces gained victories over the forces of Mobutu whom, until that moment, the population had considered invincible. With the biblical precedent of Cyrus in mind, the work of the Mai-Mai, and, by extension, that of the other members of the AFDL, is clear: they were liberating God's

people from slavery and oppression and giving them a new opportunity to live in peace and prosperity.

These three passages are all taken from the Old Testament. It has often been suggested that African Christians have a special feeling for the Old Testament and tend to turn to it as a guide to life. It is not surprising, therefore, that those wanting to provide justification for the Mai-Mai victory found support in its pages. However, in doing so, the usual understanding of evil by the Christians in north-east Congo was challenged. The received teaching on evil comes from a particular dualistic interpretation of New Testament passages which speak of Satan as 'the evil one' and 'the enemy'. This figure has been introduced to customary practices. Whereas traditional belief judges that humans are ultimately responsible for evil (that is, humans call up evil spirits, they involve themselves in *ulozi* to harm others), in Congolese Christian belief Satan, the ultimate evil one, lends his force to this destruction of human relationships. As a result of the reflection on Mai-Mai warfare this unambiguous conception of the role of the devil was disputed.

At the centre of the Christians' perception of the Mai-Mai actions and the intervention of God in them is the problem of the nature of evil. The reflections which surrounded the attempts to vindicate theologically the actions of the Mai-Mai despite the dubious nature of their cult pushed Congolese Christians to admit the possibility of a concept of evil which was more complex than the one which they had previously held. They could no longer maintain an understanding of Evil and Good at opposite moral poles, with nothing to join them together; good actions being entirely opposite to bad, and impossible to confuse. They now surmised that their relationship was less clear-cut; that some actions could be ambiguous; that what was normally considered bad could be put to positive use; and that God could use people and objects usually regarded as unfit because morally dubious or lacking in cognizance of true divine authority. Thus, God could have used the Mai-Mai to fulfil divine purposes even though the Mai-Mai themselves did not attribute their power and their success to God. They also came to accept that Satan, normally regarded as the ultimate perpetrator of all evil could, at least in exceptional circumstances, be viewed as one whose actions are permitted by a higher authority for a greater good. These ideas were endorsed after a reflection on Bible passages.

One aspect of belief which did not appear to change was the understanding of what constitutes evil action. The list of sins remained the same, and the high moral standards expected from Christians were retained. Those who were suspicious of *ulozi/ufumu* continued to regard

it as evil and continued to accuse the Mai-Mai of practising it. There was no attempt to defend their actions or to understand them in a more positive light. They had put their faith in herbs rather than God, they had participated in secret rituals and adhered to esoteric taboos rather than turning to prayer. That these private actions, suggestive of witchcraft, should have been accepted by God was astonishing and bore witness to God's greatness; in no way did it make the actions themselves right or good. The dichotomy between Christianity and customary religious practices continued.

While committed Christians possess a worldview to some extent similar to that found in traditional religion, which believes in the power of spirits at the direction of skilled practitioners, and some Christians are willing to tap into this power in extreme circumstances, the teaching which they have received and to which they continue to adhere has 'demonized' many aspects of traditional practice which were originally harmless. In Christian circles in north-east Congo *ufumu* healing is rarely acknowledged to be positive outside academic discussion, although it is often used. *Ufumu* is considered to be one with *ulozi*. The practitioners are the same and, despite their protestations, they are considered to harm rather than help people. The complexities of traditional religion are overlooked.

### *Conclusion*

The point of departure for this article was the response of the Christian population to the actions of the Mai-Mai soldiers during the war. This provided a window onto Christian understandings of evil as it related to the Congolese world view. The findings in this article cannot be considered the definitive word on the way Christians consider evil in Congo, since it has limited itself to issues of evil arising from Mai-Mai warfare. Nevertheless, through conversation with Christian men and women, from the Catholic, the Kimbanguist and Protestant churches in the district of Ituri, who were responding reflectively to a unique situation, it has given a glimpse of their changing understanding of evil. In their response they used the Bible, their African world view and their Christian faith to interpret the events they witnessed. Their starting point was that the Mai-Mai had done good in defeating the evil forces of President Mobutu, but that they had used evil means to accomplish this good. They felt that this belief could not be accepted without an explanation so they scrutinized their own criteria for understanding evil and searched the Bible to formulate a response. Biblical precedents

were found which suggested that previous understandings of evil could be modified to re-interpret the ambiguous actions of the Mai-Mai.

As the euphoria surrounding the AFDL victories dissolves, the Mai-Mai part company with Kabila's government, and people joke that 'Congo looks remarkably like Zaïre', the need by Christians to vindicate the actions of the Mai-Mai will fade. That they felt this need, however, opened up an area of Christian belief which sat uneasily with their present experience of political events. The reflections which developed as a result led to an understanding of the working of evil which was more complex and less sure of itself than it had previously been. This internal debate highlights something of the character of the Christian Church in Congo. Members find its message and its lifestyle pertinent and also flexible; they are reviewed according to circumstances and are in constant dialogue with contemporary events and traditional customs and beliefs. The assessment of Mai-Mai warfare was one striking example of this process of reflection and interpretation.

#### NOTES

1. Zaïre was given its former name, the Democratic Republic of Congo, in May 1997. Zaïre and Zaïrean in this article denote the country and its possessions before this date and those forces associated with the old regime.
2. The AFDL was a rebel group comprised of a combination of disaffected Zaïrean groups, plus Rwandan and Ugandan forces, which swept the country between October 1996 and May 1997, finally toppling President Mobutu Sese Seko when they took the capital, Kinshasa, on May 17th. Laurent Kabila, a long standing adversary of Mobutu, led the Alliance but much of the initiative came from the Rwandans. The AFDL is now the party of government in Congo.
3. Birgit Meyer, "If you are a Devil, you are a Witch, If you are Witch you are a Devil." The Integration of "Pagan" Ideas into the Conceptual Universe of Ewe Christians in Southeastern Ghana,' in the *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XXII.2 (1992), p. 121.
4. Encyclopaedia Britannica 1996—Zaïre.
5. G.C.K. Gwassa, 'Kinjikitile and the Ideology of Maji Maji,' in T.O. Ranger and I.N. Kimambo (eds.), *The Historical Study of African Religion*. London, 1972, pp. 202-217.
6. David Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*. London, 1985.
7. Heike Behrend, 'The Holy Spirit Movement and the Forces of Nature in the North of Uganda 1985-1987,' in H.B. Hansen & Michael Twaddle (eds.), *Religion and Politics in East Africa*, 1995, pp. 9-71.
8. By December 1997 the Mai-Mai were helping the ex-FAR to attack the town of Bukavu largely controlled by Rwandan Tutsis. They continue to oppose Tutsi dominated forces who began a rebellion in Congo in August 1998.
9. Interahamwe is the extreme Hutu militia group considered responsible for a large part of the genocide in Rwanda between April and July 1994.
10. *The Guardian*, 15/11/1996.
11. Banyemulengi are members of the Tutsi ethnic group who live in Congo (as opposed to those who live in Rwanda and Burundi). They played a large part in the 1996 uprising.
12. Kiiza Zaba Jacques, 22/12/1997.

13. Titre Ande, college lecturer, 20/6/1997.
14. Wyatt MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The Bakongo of Lower Zaïre*, Chicago University Press, 1986, esp. pp. 246-251.
15. Wyatt MacGaffey, 'Kimbanguism and the Question of Syncretism in Zaïre,' in Thomas D. Blakely, Walter E.A. van Beek, & Dennis L. Thomson (eds.), *Religion in Africa*, James Currey, London, 1994, p. 252.
16. Yone Bayi, gardener, 16/12/97.
17. Alcohol consumption is forbidden by Protestants and Kimbanguists. Catholics warn against excessive drinking.
18. Walter E.A. van Beek, p. 228.
19. *Nyimbo za Mungu*, Nyankunde. A collection of hymns translated from English, many from the evangelical revival tradition of Moody and Sankey.
20. Ibid. no. 203. A paraphrase of *Jesus is our Shepherd*, (Sacred Songs and Solos 1153).
21. Ibid. no. 257. A paraphrase of *Hold the Fort*, (SSS 680).
22. John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, Paulines, Nairobi, 1994, pp. 66-67.
23. Buyana Mulungula, *Conflit entre la Foi chrétienne et le Ufumu dans le Milieu Urbain: Bukavu et Bunia*, Dissertation for Masters in Theology, ISTB, Bunia, 1996, p. 28.
24. Birgit Meyer, p. 98.
25. Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, Nairobi, 1992, p. 32.
26. Ibid. p. 27.
27. Buyana Mulungula, p. 26.
28. Njango Pierre-Claver, nightwatchman, 15/12/97.
29. Bénézet Bujo, p. 31.
30. Buyana Mulungula, p. 22.
31. Kangamina Sadiki, student, 9/12/97.
32. Edward Kikonyogo, gardener, 16/12/97.