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The cult of Bwiti and the ritual re-making of space: indexicality at the cosmic zenith

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The Cult of Bwiti and the Ritual Re-making of Space: Indexicality at the Cosmic Zenith

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

Anthropology

by

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The Thesis of Leanne J. Williams is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2011
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Cult of Bwiti and the Ritual Re-making of Space: Indexicality at the Cosmic Zenith

by

Leanne J. Williams
Master of Arts in Anthropology
University of California, San Diego, 2011
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People live in space-time: a space-time constructed by social relations. The social-relational base of space becomes particularly evident where cultural change has upset the environmental and kinship connections which established, and are in turn maintained, by the spatial organization which has hitherto existed. In settings of social disruption, ritual offers a site of semiotic possibility. The heightening of oppositional values at the ritual center achieves a densely layered indexicality, creating a zenith at which spatial and social structures may dialectically transform one another, and then
be extended back into the lived order of the cosmos. For the Fang who experienced such disruption, living in the Equatorial Rain Forest of Northern and Central Gabon in the late 1950s, participation in the cult of Bwiti offers a counter-active means of reinvigorating the social relations that undergirded their social and spatial structures. This paper will explore the ways in which Bwiti religious activity, by creating a ritual cosmic zenith, satisfies the desire for a movement through space that has been left wanting by a general colonial malaise and the pressure of various social forces. In ritual spatio-temporal realignment of connections with the ancestors, Fang are able to re-establish the balance of social solidarity in a strongly egalitarian, and increasingly individualistic, social milieu. In doing so, they both incorporate and challenge co-existing perspectives of their lived space, and offer a provocative setting in which to consider the ways that spatial imaginings and re-imaginings may be appropriated in ritual to address social and cultural disruption.
Introduction:

Although space is something in which, and to which, people orient themselves, its basic production lies in the social relations which establish it, and which it in turn constructs (Lefebvre 1991). This paper takes up the issue of spatial production and perception through religious practice, analyzing the ways that ritual has the potential to establish a cosmic zenith. At this zenith new social structures are affirmed and subsequently extended into the lived world as spatial order. The transformational possibility of the cosmic zenith is achieved in part through the heightening of values in opposition with one another at this climactic point, but also in the power of ritual indexicality, such that the ritual both points to the creation of its own world, and to its power to effect change in participants and their larger environment. My examination of spatial imagination in ritual focuses on the religious movement called Bwiti, which gained particular traction after World War I among groups living in the rainforest of western equatorial Africa. The discussion will center on what the Bwiti engosie ritual offered the Fang of North and Central Gabon during the late 1950s, viewed through the ethnographic work of James W. Fernandez.

In laying out the ways in which ritual makes possible the re-ordering of space, I seek to show how the rooting of Fang spatial sensibilities in social relations is directly confronted in Bwiti's night-long engosie ritual. Bwiti is a religious movement in which traditional ancestral cults of western equatorial Africa have melded and progressively incorporated Christian themes and images as they developed in response to changes in Fang social and material life. Though differing by region, Bwiti adherents in the area of Fernandez's research emphasized the imported nature of cultic
practices, its ritual songs, dances and ideology being passed on to the local community from Gabonese groups to the Northwest, and its foreignness lending its incorporation authority (1965:902).

For the Fang, introduction of wage-labor possibilities, new technologies, and forced settlement by foreign colonial administrations, gathering momentum at the turn of the 20th century, had placed increasing pressures on Fang culturally-established means of maintaining social solidarity, so also upsetting the socio-spatial orders in which this collectivity was founded (Fernandez 1982: 45-46). In response, Bwiti addresses and reshapes the fundamental shifts that have occurred in Fang experiences with the onset of colonialism. Fang feel the profound disruption of living patterns in the built environment, bonds of kinship, and gender relations most significantly as a disordering of space. What Bwiti then offers is an avenue to re-center relations of kinship, gender, and dwelling patterns on which this spatial conceptualization is built, yet without a strict return to earlier Fang spatial orders.

One of Fernandez's main ethnographic goals is to show how Bwiti performs a centering affect as it addresses changes brought about as a result of colonialism and social upheaval. I instead seek to highlight the subsequent inversion and re-extension of space suggested by the re-ordering of social relations affirmed in cultic practice. Later comparative works of Fernandez remark on Bwiti's achievement of progression on multiple axes, rather than merely centering (1986), but do not give sufficient attention to the way that ritual changes in space extend back away from the ritual center once more. Not only is the lived world drawn towards a specific point, but it
effectuates a satisfaction through ritual participation at this center, and then is cast back out into the lived world. I will extend Fernandez's argument regarding the centering function which Bwiti possesses in order to suggest that this center is more than a point of orientation. My claim is that the possibility of ritual efficacy hinges on the ability of Bwiti to generate a cosmic zenith around which that ritual activity circulates. The indexical nature of the activity here creates what Stasch labels “exceptionally dense representation of spatiotemporally wider categories and principles in an interactional here-now” (Stasch, Forthcoming 3). The ritual high point in fact establishes a cosmic zenith around which relations of spatial order may be drawn in, re-assembled, and unfolded back into the world as the foundation of new orders of kinship, gender, and collectivity.

Bwiti takes up the most basic of Fang human experiences, highlights them by placing them in opposition to one another, and then achieves a satisfaction in the wholeness of these oppositions. Making use of Richard Webner's (1989) conceptualization of zenith, I argue that the place of greatest ritual indexicality is the point at which these oppositions are brought together through change, as Fang achieve these changes via movement in space-time, symbolic conceptualization of sound as means to manipulate spatial construction, and the progressive transition in moral states which provides a means to re-establish a sense of social solidarity in a re-ordered cosmos. The discussion will conclude with a preliminary exploration of the role that sound can play as an alternate expression of ritual oppositions, playing an important role in Bwiti practice (despite the precedence Fang give to visual imagery), and in
conceptualizations of space.

_Banzie_, the name Bwiti adherents among the Fang give to themselves, possess a specific idea of the kind of world in which they desire to live. This imagined world is one marked by a group solidarity that allows for the affirmation of equality between members. It is a world in which kinship bonds permit members to retain a communion with ancestors in their quest for knowledge— a knowledge that will compete with the felt sense of ignorance they experience in the face of European and other outside forces. It is a world in which continual movement— the generation of activity— can bring order while not being constrained by regulations on settlement and migration introduced by the colonial government. _Banzie_ work actively to achieve this kind of world. In this thesis, I examine the means through which this world satisfies specific spatial desires, and how _banzie_ are able to establish lived spatial order through ritual indexicality and the efficacy of the cosmic zenith achieved in the _engosie_.

**Fang in Historical Context**

Living in the Equatorial Rain Forest of Gabon, the Fang appear in the colonial record first in 1819. Missionary contacts were not established until around 1842, when two representatives of the American Board of Foreign Missions made the trek inland. Early travelers noted what they understood to be virtuosity and some kind of innate Fang interest in morality, which resulted in continued American missionary interest in the region (Fernandez 1982:31). During the same era, the region also
garnered the attention of the French, who looked to establish a colony. Similarly impressed with Fang physical features, they declared that the dignified nature that they attributed to the Fang stood in marked contrast with those groups they had encountered on the coast.

While impressed with their physical appearance and their aptitude for theological knowledge, both missionaries and the French colonial explorers developed an obsession with the presumed cannibalistic behaviors of the Fang. Paradoxically, they also expressed concerns that the moral uprightness of the Fang was being corrupted by European evils. Tension mounted between colonial figures and local inhabitants with disputes over control of resources and trade routes. As British colonial perspectives shifted from an “era of Humanitarianism” to an “era of Imperialism” (1850, 1880), trade conflict gave rise to a change from colonial 'protection' to imperialism, control of goods and their exchange (Fernandez 1982:45-46).

During the next century, the contradictory views of colonial administrators, explorers and foreign missionaries saw perceptions shift from a civilizing mission directed at “noble cannibalism” to a “degenerate and unredeemed anthropophagy” which identified Rainforest inhabitants as confusing and dissatisfactory figures (1982:45). This contributed in profound ways to the sense of dis-placement and a felt debasement that structured Fang lived experience from this point onward. Such feelings ultimately contributed to the rise of Bwiti, a cult that wedded both the notion of European superiority and a romanticization of the African 'native.'
While the timing of Bwiti's first uptake among the Fang is difficult to pinpoint, its practice became widespread after WWI. It appears to have been introduced predominantly through dance exchanges with related Bantu groups to the Northwest, to whom Bwiti adherents still attribute expertise in ritual matters (which also aligns with the North-South hierarchy of village settlement patterns discussed below) (Fernandez 1965:902). Initially rejected by the wider Fang population as raucous and unwelcome because it was introduced by those outside the village family, it eventually spread through the exchange of Bwiti dance routines, and the establishment of Bwiti chapels. Though always a religious minority movement, by the time of Fernandez's residence in the region, some 8% of the approximately 94,200 Fang population in Gabon participated in Bwiti religious activities (Fernandez 1982:358). After the beginning of the second World War, a number of African Christian workers, trained by missionaries as priests, pastors and catechists, began to participate in Bwiti ritual. Having experienced a profound disillusionment in the face of their European training, they were attracted to Bwiti, and their involvement brought with it Christian overtones that altered somewhat the heritage of Bwiti as an extension and modification of several earlier Fang ancestral cults.

**Bwiti in Fang Context**

The relationship between Bwiti and Fang cultural practice itself is a complex mix of continuity, appropriation, and sharp rupture. While in some ways Bwiti was introduced from outside the realm of Fang cultural normalcy, and while it continues to
be influenced by Fang cultural patterns, the two do not interact as a strict dialectic between two poles. Rather, Bwiti still operates as a complex triangulation between Christian models of the self, earlier ancestral cults, and novel religious productions.

Fernandez notes that the general interpretations of Fang historical past, and its variance according to generational perspectives, lead to a paradoxical outlook. In collusion with contradictory images propounded by colonial powers, Fang views of the collective self as both haltingly inferior, as well as historically and mythologically powerful, emerged. Both of these self-reflexive perspectives are picked up and elaborated in Fang conceptualizations of Bwiti ritual. Bwiti gives to the Fang who choose it a fully empowered self that speaks to the quest in life for a “plenipotentiary self” (258) both contained within the body and outside of it, which some old Fang ancestor cults sought similarly to actualize.

I contend that, alongside these self-reflexive perspectives, some critically marked points of continuity between earlier Fang cultural norms and their incorporation into Bwiti is the attention to the organization of relations in spatial orders. It is important to note that the spatial imagining of the new world built through Bwiti is not merely a result of shifting relations between people and places. Fang kinship and gender relations were represented in spatial terms before the felt need to re-establish changes in these relations through participation in Bwiti. As such, we will look first at the ways in which Fang traditionally conceptualized gender, kinship and dwelling places as they are ordered in space, before turning to the disruptions of these patterns, and their subsequent redress in Bwiti. Two major themes traced throughout
this discussion are that of the body as metaphor, and the movement by which this
spatial construction is established. The analysis will conclude with a discussion of
conceptualizations of space in terms of collective representations. I will focus on how
spatial orders are achieved, and space thus actively produced both relationally and
through interaction with sound, in social and symbolic terms.
Chapter 1: Fang Relations in and of Space

Fang Patterns of Kinship and Gender Relations

Before the project of resolving and adding coherence to a disordered world was addressed through new religious practice, Fang views of life, activity and social relations were already inscribed in the order of the environment. The ability to locate oneself in a genealogy extended Fang in social space and time. Spatio-temporal extension was possible in part by utilizing metaphors of the body, of maternal and paternal roles in family life and brotherhood, and by marked gender quality differences (Fernandez 1982:97). Though formally patrilineal and patriclinal, lineage tracing might include both male and female figures. Strictly speaking, gender and kinship cannot be categorically distinguished in this discussion, as both are used to conceptualize the other in Fang terms.

The ndebot and the mvogabot are the two dominant categories of kin-based social units among the Fang. They are differentiated based on the group's founding member, but also by the social qualities understood to be emblematic of each group. The ndebot is the 'house family,' traced predominantly through the mother. It is marked by a sense of in-group solidarity, of “unity and common purpose.” The mvogabot is the 'village family,' traced through the father, and thought of in terms of “divisiveness, even conflict” (Fernandez, 1982:95). This conflict is marked in the mapping of the village. The traditional 'long-street' format of the village included two different village families, set up in long rows facing one another. Allegiances between
these groups was marked by movement between dwelling places next to one another, while disputes remained embedded in the physical face-off of the buildings from across the central courtyard. The tension between filial cooperation and conflict was maintained in village space until no longer feasible, at which time the village might disband and families move on to re-group and re-settle elsewhere. Both the ndebot and the mvogabot have formal definitions but can be used to encompass different people at different times based on what the person invoking them intends to achieve by their use. As such each operates as somewhat flexible terms.

The ndebot-mvogabot binary was conceptualized in kinship terms in two main ways. The two dominant mechanisms for describing lineage involved focusing on the ego and listing descendents (rather than ancestors), or by the metaphor of the body. In the former, straws were laid on the ground to plot out the potentiality of the ego to extend the lineage in space and time by relying on future descendents. The metaphor of the body involved a conceptual analogy between various body parts from the head through the fingertips, and their association with the line of kinship as various parts of the family lineage.

The notion of movement comes into play in conceptualizing kinship via the transition between life and death. The progression from newborn, through the phases of human adult life, and transition to post-death ancestor were the dominant spiritual life-cycle movement of Fang individuals. Kinship genealogy was understood as extending forward through the individual life-cycle and on to Ego's descendents, as much as it was backwards to Ego's ancestors. As such, appropriate positioning in the
line of kinship was closely associated with the ability of the individual to progress through space-time from birth to ancestral status. The disjuncture between life and death was embodied in the distinction between living humans and their spiritual ancestors, marking a break in the genealogy as a result of death.

The felt sense of discontinuity in the cycle brought about by death was, for the Fang, a strong one. Discontinuity was fed by sinfulness due in part to offenses committed against the body. Violating the integrity of another's body was inevitable, from the biology of birth and breastfeeding (a violation of the mother's body), onwards in the biological movement of life. The sin of bodily violation must be atoned in order that it be removed as a block on the transitional path to ancestral status. At the deathbed, a 'lifting of the curse' was performed in order to assure that the blockage caused by sin was ameliorated and continuity on the life-cycle path assured. But until it was, Fang remained cut off from movement in their own lineage by their biological transgression. The path from birth to death to a place in the ancestral spiritual world extended Fang in space-time through patterns of kinship structure, but movement in this direction was dependent on the ability to remove the blockage plaguing each human being on the basis of violation of another person's body (Fernandez 1982:496).

Kinship patterns among the Fang also reveal an emphasis on equality. Embedded in the kinship lexicon is a categorical flexibility that allowed for people to move across lineages for various reasons. People could be adopted into foreign house family lineages when seeking refuge during times of internecine conflict. Though initial refugee status might cause some level of discrimination, the subsequent
generations became more and more incorporated. Indeed, the Fang were sufficiently egalitarian such that members of house families or ndebo were not placed in relationships of economic obligation that prevented them from forming new bonds or incorporating new members. As such, they maintained a level of freedom in both economic and kinship terms, with the ability to move across families and attain, through time, equivalent statuses within the adopted lineage.

What such discussions of Fang kinship patterns reveal, but which Fernandez does not make explicit, is that specific social relations are a way both of conceptualizing the spatially lived world, and of constituting that very same world, which in turn undergirds the kinship relations themselves. Relations between the ndebo house family and the mvogabo village family are embedded in the arrangement of buildings in the village: close alliances are signaled by dwelling places constructed alongside one another, while conflicts are evident in the 'long-street' arrangement that place families in opposition to one another across the central courtyard. The metaphor of the human body is appropriated to represent the extension of an individual forward in time and social space. Movement in social space-time involves Ego's life progression towards ancestral status, but sequentially maps out future family structure as if laying the tiles to the road at the same time as traveling along it.

**Qualities of Gender in Space**

While the order of kinship relations and life-cycle progression was inscribed in
spatial order, Fang gender distinctions were mapped in spatial zones of activity. Places themselves were generated in the activity that was carried out in each zone. Marked gender-specific activities constructed places as female or male, frequently regardless of who could spend time in these areas. Female activities mark the place of women: the *nda kisin*, or kitchen house, is warm, and associated with cooking and the place where children spend most of their time. Ancestral shrines, the council house, central courtyard and cold forest are the place where male work takes place (Fernandez 1982:116). Even so, men are born and most often choose to die in the dark, smoky interior of the *nda kisin*, expressing the fact that it is mainly the “arena of primary experiences of men's lives” (117).

Again, the human body is an important incarnation of Fang views of relations in and of space. Fang ritual conceptualizes the *nda kisin* as a female body; as both womb and sacred space of spiritual ancestors, it is a place where people maintain a position in the circularity of spiritual progression, and it provides a center of complementary activity alongside the male ceremonial house. Just as Fang movement along the lineage cycle was projected in space and time through removing discontinuity, the *nda kisin* maintained a position in the vertical life cycle of spirit-human by connecting ancestor and human in bodily metaphor.

Alongside this, the longhouse suggests a place complimentary to the *nda kisin*, but is also a concentrated and privileged point at the center of the village. The *aba*, or men's ceremonial longhouse, was, by contrast and compliment, the “arena of creative imagination” (117). As the heart of village life, the male-centered activity generated
within it, by correlation, made the village itself the heart of the universe. Once the
most heavily guarded location in the village, as it was possible to view the entire
village from its vantage point during times of war, it later came to serve more as a site
for settling disputes and served as the ceremonial center.

The complimentary opposition of male and female spaces is mirrored in their
relationships with one another. Fernandez records the testimony of one Fang man who
talks about the fact that men's and women's relationships were better during their
“father's time” because the men took meals, etc., in the men's longhouse, rather than
gathering in the women's kitchen or the concrete buildings. It was a place of male
solidarity, to commiserate, and the place both for men to learn and, in teaching
younger generations, to perpetuate Fang livelihood. Thus to abandon the council
house would mean to lose a core part of what it meant to be Fang.

Just as living spaces were gendered, so too patterns of movement had distinctly
male and female qualities across the landscape. Fang conceptualize themselves as
people marked by migration. On a daily basis, this sense of movement is created by
leaving the village for the fields or for the forest. Men and women often travelled to
their separate and respective work locations for this purpose. Periodically, they would
also leave the village together for several days each month. Through marriage and
exchange, social networks were constructed that provided people and places to visit
for these periods of time. The networks that allowed for this travel were built on
exogamous marriage patterns, with accompanying exchange of bride money and
various trade goods, including things such as dances.
Trade goods themselves became gendered as they were exchanged along these routes: those goods received from the South and East had a feminine potency while those from the North and West had male value (139). This pattern fit with larger associations of migratory patterns on a North-West South-East trajectory. The qualities associated with each of these polarities, conceptualized as a progressive migration, were also connected to a directional orientation of the human body along this trajectory.

**Disordering and Disruption of Social Relations**

In part emerging out of the spatial changes occurring in the village setting as a result of larger social, political and economic forces related to colonialism and modernity, an overall sense of uncertainty and discontent became evident among the Fang during the time of Fernandez's residence. The ethnographer notes a marked element of “malaise” that increased during the historical 'transitional period' (1982:152). Shifts began to occur towards villages situated around family compounds made of more permanent and 'modern' materials, instead of the more readily moveable 'long street village' setup (158). Consequently, men were increasingly able to observe the goings about of women on a daily basis, who had once had more privacy in the activity of the women's kitchen and dwelling houses. At the same time, colonial and missionary contacts impressed on the women the view that forms of bride payment and negotiation were an affront to their own rights. This created an increasing distrust
of the bonds created through bride money exchange, and a compulsion to regain bride money because of its increasing value from inflation.

During the time of Fernandez's research (1958-1960), the lexicon of kinship was in considerable flux. Disagreements over how to define social categories were prominent, and while people were capable of naming dominant individuals in their lineage, they had considerable difficulty constructing and categorizing their kinship line as a whole. The ambiguity surrounding clan and tribal distinctions can be understood in part as a result of fissioning movements, and of the overall sense of precariousness with which Fang people lived.

Despite a strong sense of egalitarianism, confusion over social categories predominantly focused on how clan lineages should be organized. Disputes over clan grouping lead to an increasing emphasis on the individual within the larger social group. The forces leading to this increasing sense of an individual self were economic and socio-moral, and emanated from colonial administrative pressure. Fernandez cites the economic ramifications of a cash crop industry in full swing, and patterns of labor migration to lumber camps for work as two of these forces. The areas of collective kinship garden plantations that formed a ring around the village dwelling areas became less important than the small cash crop plots, maintained mostly by men, located directly outside of the smaller family homes. This only served to contribute to increasing male dominance, and the nuclearization of the family model.

Missionary teaching also had an increasing impact on this sense of individualism that caused a deterioration of clan organization. Though Bwiti did later
draw on select Christian themes and incorporated them into ritual motifs, the larger impact of Christian influence was not in the adoption of Christian narratives, worship patterns and the 'Christian God'. The significance of missionary activity in the region lay rather in suggesting to Fang the importance of individual spiritual states of the soul, in conjunction with previously held views on incorporation of the ego into a larger whole. The notion of self that emerged advocated a new model of the relationship between the divine, or Deity, and this economically and morally autonomous self.

Such changes created a sense of disjuncture in strongly egalitarian Fang social patterning. It was becoming increasingly difficult to manage the kinship-independent individual within the larger mvogabot context. Traditional modes of witchcraft could defend the potency of individual capacity, but also threatened the increasingly precarious solidarity of kinship groups. The physical closeness of ancestral skulls within the village's central reliquary house was to be emblematic of the similar social affinity amongst kin-groups (266). The ancestral cults had sought to harness the power in anti-witchcraft projects, and so defend the maintenance of collective solidarity. As the cults waned and the reliquaries were dismantled, ancestral bones became available for individual use, undermining the social function of lineage connection through collective ownership and use of ancestral power. One of the two dominant early cults, the Bieri cult, addressed various social paradoxes, such as that between male and female. While most of the cult activity was carried out by men, many of the reliquaries were female (258). The craniums making up the reliquary
were conceived to structurally draw together the male and female halves of the person, symbolically evident as the two halves of the skull grown together as it matured. Maintaining an oppositional tension was where the power of the ritual cult ceremonies had been located. The maintenance of this tension inhered in an extension and dissemination of the paradoxes out across the perceived universe, where cult ceremonies were held in the open forest to expand the capacity of participants beyond the ability to participate only in village activity (258).

There is a cyclical element to the patterns of movement in the ancestral cults that seems intuitively to contradict this outward extension that seeks to resolve the problems of oppositional values. Initiates into the cult were moved from the village through the space of the forest, then back to the village, and through the duration of the night, back to the dawn and towards daylight. While these “saving circularities” (Fernandez 1982:268) could bring about a sense of movement so desired by Fang participants, they ultimately lost the satisfaction of the ‘oneheartedness’ and sense of social collectivity that served to knit people and ancestors together. Dissatisfaction stemmed from an inability to achieve a place of participation in wider kinship life patterns because of the absence of means of group-centered connection to the ancestors. With the dissemination of ancestral bones, the power of the ancestors, sought through the cults, could be wielded as a source of personal power. It could no longer fully maintain a sense of pulling together people living in a strongly egalitarian setting. These cult practices were not to be used to invoke the power of the ancestors to deal with personal problems. As dominant problems became increasingly personal,
these earlier cults proved unsatisfactory to address dominant concerns in Fang life.

The increasing concern for individual protectionism is evident in the dismay expressed by Fang at increasing rates of divorce. Exchange of bride money offered one of the foundational means through which relationships between settlement groups was maintained. It offered a form of wealth redistribution through various ceremonial obligations between in-laws. With the introduction of the currency of the colony, the Franc, and its decreasing value from rapid inflation, those who had entered into marriage exchange obligations were increasingly motivated to sever marriage ties so that bride money could be returned with higher value. Added to the economic factors driving divorce rates was the very high rate of sterility among Fang women. This was in part a result of the increasing rates of sexually transmitted diseases, protracted by migrant male workers in lumber camps, and brought back to Fang villages. The importance of carrying on ones lineage as a form of spiritual progression was forestalled by increasing sterility, creating even greater levels of tension between the sexes.

The culmination of disruption in kinship lexicon, dissolving of network ties made and maintained through bride money, increasing economic individualism, prevalence of sterility and moves made toward nuclear family farming plots altered Fang perspectives on the organizing of the world in social relations. A view of the immediate world as a place where land is owned by clan groups centered on villages, with layers of lineages embedded within it, shifted to a view of the mvogabol, or village family, as the largest social group, with the displacing of the village as social
and economic center. The result was a missing sense of genealogical belonging among the Fang. The rootedness in clan membership had been disrupted. The feeling of a lack of residential permanence or belonging marked them as a person without family. This, accompanied by an increasing sense of the death and sin-induced break of continuity internal to the life cycle progression towards ancestor status and completion of lineage circularity, served to increase the sense of displacement in genealogical space and time.

**Horizontal and Vertical Movements: Built and Orientational Space among the Fang**

Fang space is constructed in part out of qualities associated with oppositional spaces. Movement across these spaces offers a vitality that supports these qualities and maintains for the Fang a sense of satisfaction within their lived world. This progression is conceptualized as mutually supportive movement along both the vertical and horizontal axes. The locatedness of Fang was based on the watercourses running through the forest with which they associated themselves and their social/kinship groups. This involved a general orientation along an up-river and down-river axis.

The vertical axis was the one rooted in human-ancestral life cycles that extended kinship lineages into space and time. While the vertical movement conceived by Fang in cosmic space involved an upward progression, its cyclical structure saw men move through a series of ancestral, human, and spiritual cycles that
meant a continual regeneration and repetition. Ideally, humans were born of the earth, lived upon it, ascended to the spiritual realm of ancestral residence, and then returned once more to be born of the earth. By contrast, the horizontal progress was “linear and noncircular” (Fernandez 1982:105), conceived as both a migratory pull from the savanna homeland, to the current dwelling place of the equatorial forest, and finally towards the sea, as well as upstream and on a North-East South-West latitude.

This migratory urge and the need for regenerative social processes was earlier fulfilled by continuing visits to kin in other villages, but also by the uprooting and shifting of entire villages, or different grouping of families to make new villages. Village deconstruction and cultural rebuilding occurred about once a decade, sometimes as a result of disputes, leading villages to move sites in their entirety. This had been a productive process of recreating and reinvigorating structures and social activity. It was a means to continually battle the forces drawing social and spatial relations outward and away from the central point of Fang life.

Within this spatial ordering process, the contrast of village and forest is key. The village is important as the place where social activity can be the main mark of human pride. The forest stands in sharp contrast to the traditional human-built structures of the village, which is fundamentally a center of human activity. While the ancestral shrines and the mens' council and longhouses are male areas, the cold forest is also conceived as a place where male work is carried out, a place of both power and of “alien uncertainties” (109). The daily movement from village to forest involved crossing of “threshold[s]” as various zones were traversed, from the small cash crop
and family farm plots close to the women's house, to the larger plantations of corn and manioc, to wild fruit trees and the place of ancestor cult activities and secret societies, and finally into the layered zones of the forest itself. As a place where both women and men worked the land, the plantations in a sense are where the male-dominated and female-dominated places of activity meet.
Figure 1.1:
Fang Village Layout
Modified from Fernandez 1982: 403
So while the forest could be a place of good hunting and where people would periodically sit to confess sins and commune with the ancestors, as a place of power, and potential threat, the forest is also implicitly connected to the village. As the source of its raw building materials, the forest lies within the village. The houses and building of human activity may be in the village, but they are made of the forest. The activity which generates the forest space remains a stark contrast to that which generates village space, but the forest yet became immanent in the village. Thus both the back-and-forth traverse between village and forest, and the use of building materials marked as 'of the forest' in village structures, situates each spatial zone alongside one another, while implying that each remains immanent within the other.

The Dislocation of Space and Place

Just as the “centrifugal influences” (100) took a role in dislocating Fang kinship and gender relations in social space, they also forced apart the sense of real space. Where once people had oriented themselves along a migratory path from savanna, to forest, to sea, as well as along the North-East South-West axis, strong de-centering processes caused profound shifts in social directionality. Fang were discontented by the upset of relational orders and by the stifling of their mytho-migratory self-conceptualization. As wage labor and the draw of emerging townships and construction of colonial roadways took root, younger men, most notably, shifted towards a self-orientation that looked towards these cities and towns. Even for those
Fang not so notably engaged or intrigued by the power of economic activity in these cities and along these roads, the de-centering process still had an impact in the disruption of village construction patterns.

The domestic and ceremonial spaces of the village, as places in which the forest was implicit, and enlivened by human activity, are at the same time a metaphoric and lived embodiment of spiritual and corporeal realities (115). Where the aba or male council house at the end of the 'long-street' village pattern was displaced from being the axis of village life, 'cold houses' built of modern material shifted spatial structure and priorities. Just as its place as microcosmic center was shifted, by the same measure the village, as center of human activity, was bumped from its position at the heart of the universe on a macrocosmic scale. This 'de-centering' continued to occur as people began to orient themselves towards colonial centers, and as wanderlust drove them along road systems towards modern centers of economic activity. This was another means of fulfilling this desire to travel, but did not prove to be sufficiently satisfying. As colonial forced settlement, and the building of permanent 'cold houses' took hold, this desire for movement and possibility of cultural, social, and spatial reinvigoration was cut off: “[w]hile formerly Fang could revitalize themselves by recreating their old culture with new buildings in new space, in the late colonial period, as their villages opened up, they were confronted by the necessity of extending themselves to meet an alien culture in alien buildings in an alien space” (121).

While the ancestor cults of the Fang past once offered a marriage of the paradoxes of life cycle movement and some resolution of various disparate features of
Fang human experience, these eventually came to be unsatisfactory. As continual “de-centering” and a sense of disenfranchisement pervaded Fang conceptions of self and social relations, the old ancestral cults did not suffice. The powerful movement of life to death to life, from and across various parts of the body, from below to above, and from savanna to forest to sea was missing.

Neither were new missionary introductions sufficiently satisfying. Missionary projection of time was too much about structure, it was “predictably regular” which was not satisfactory to the need for “periodically intensifying” time that the Fang favored (276). Still, things like the alarm clock to regulate time in the passage of events and dances in the chapel show an appropriation of missionary images and symbols for different purposes. Rather than suggesting an alternate cosmos in which to live, missionaries merely offered Fang new ideas by which to re-model the pre-existing Fang cosmological outlook, while the Fang themselves appropriated the new symbolic vocabulary brought by foreign Christians.

Village movement itself had been “an important kind of microcosmogony” (125), so that the power and importance lay not only in the building of space and structure, but in the movement across and within these structures, given life by shifting them, and made dynamic and given value/meaning by the activity carried out within them. Yet now Fang social order was continually being pulled apart, and the overwhelming sense of dissatisfaction in the new uncertainties of life was inscribed in the drawing out of the space around them. The arrival of Bwiti offered an immediate alternative to the continually dislodged spaces which had hitherto patterned relations.
We turn now to a discussion of the spatial re-ordering which Bwiti enables, and the reconstruction of a new kind of spatially imagined cosmos.
Chapter 2: Cosmic Zenith and Ritual Indexicality in Bwiti Religious Practice

The potential for a re-organizing of the universe suggested in Bwiti emerges from the highly involved execution of the nightlong ritual at the core of cult activity. At heart of Bwiti religious practice, the *engosie* allows for shifting relations in and of space. In order to understand the sophisticated means through which Bwiti addressed the insecurities of the Fang situation discussed above, I turn first to the organization of Bwiti ritual space within and around the Bwiti chapel, and then to the details of the ceremony, the *engosie*.

**Bwiti Chapel Space**

Located at the end of the village courtyard, the Bwiti chapel occupies the space once reserved for the men's council-house. It even assumes the name *aba eboga*, the first label being that of the men's longhouse, and the second referring to the hallucinogenic drug consumed during the *engosie*. The *njimba* is the origin place, where the *engosie* begins, and is located at the far end of the village courtyard. In front of the chapel itself stands the *otunga*, which serves as a point of transition for ancestors coming into the chapel. In this sense, it makes possible the horizontal spiritual progression into the chapel. The *otunga* is simultaneously understood as a “ladder” (406). It offers a means of vertical movement on the spiritual plane, either as ancestors descending to be born, or as the Christ figure, Eyen Zame, who ascended to heaven.
The built structure of the Bwiti chapel is aligned on two major axes, and serves to create oppositions across which participants may move throughout the ritual. The axes which cuts across the length of the chapel distinguishes the female side, associated with birth and with its accompanying qualities of “soft[ness]” and “tranquility” (380), and the male side, which is the “hard” side of “agitation” and the side on which the “death” exit is placed (381). The appropriate entrance to the chapel, then, is that which lies to the left of the central pillar, and the appropriate exit is that to the right, when facing the length of the chapel from the altar situated at its far end. The axis which cuts the width of the chapel distinguishes the area of the altar as the world “beyond,” while the location of the entrance is rooted in the side of the chapel connected to this world (381). As participants move through the chapel they progress from the area of the chapel associated with life to that connected to both death and achievement of knowledge of the “unseen” (381). They are thus able to enact the desired move successfully from life to death. Various Bwiti chapels compete for distinctive decorative paintings and wall hangings which depict the ultimate goal of the engosie: “to bring Banzie over the land of the dead and to return them” (383).

Much as Stasch's observation given above indicated, Fernandez also highlights the multiple means through which Bwiti creates a “thickness in...representation,” particularly in the meanings attributed across the chapel layout (383). Male and female chambers on either side of the far end of the chapel signal again gender-specific separation along a central axis. One of the core themes used to conceptualize the chapel is, as in the case of the women's kitchen nda kisin, a corporeal one. This
too serves to highlight the multi-layered meanings brought to bear in the *engosie*,
which is discussed in further detail below.

**The Engosie**

“In each *engosie* there is a cosmogony” (Fernandez 1986:312). The nightlong
Bwiti ceremony, the *engosie*, forms the centerpiece of Bwiti activity and serves to
move participants through regenerative transmutations of the natural world, and of
human beings themselves. Indeed, each *engosie* creates a microcosm of the larger
cosmos as part of the key project of Bwiti. The opening movements at the 'origin spot'
(the site of the creator god Muye) involve a circular enactment of the Bwiti sign of the
cross. To do so, Banzie touch their forehead with the right forefinger to signify Father,
then move to the heart, signifying the Son, and then touch the stomach to indicate the
Holy Spirit (313). After touching the ground, where they make a cross in recognition
of the human grave, they finally rise with their fingers pointing to the sky, before
taking up their instruments. Fernandez points out that the crouching and rising
sequences that follow the making of the cross are intended to represent the sequence
of spiritual life, from the ground, to the earth and back. The cross, then, is particularly
spatially indexical of the vertical movement Banzie conceptualize as the cycle of birth,
life, and ancestral status.

The *engosie* begins with the auditory call of the antelope horn, drawing people
to the chapel at the central point in the village courtyard. All aspects of the ritual are
Figure 2.1:
Bwiti Chapel
Modified from Fernandez 1982: 381
carefully timed, frequently with the use of an alarm clock situated in the back of the chapel (Fernandez 1982:438). There are three phases to the songs of entrance. Generally recalling cosmological myths, the songs of entrance are used as a means to call the ancestors into the chapel. The myths are invoked as participants progressively dance their way into the building. Women enter the chapel first, followed separately by the men, who move forward in a stop start-motion. Banzie explain that this is indicative both of the difficulty of birth (particularly of the spiritual birth which moves men from life in this world to that in the ancestral-spiritual realm), and also suggest that it is simulative of male sexual entrance into the female body (of the chapel). Both interpretations speak to the engosie's ability to address problems of progression on the path of life of death, as well as infertility amongst its members (389).

The njimba is the next point in the liturgical cycle, occurring both at a point during the early evening, and again near the end of the ritual in the morning hours. This is a time when the banzie gather together; at night they prepare ritual attire and offer individual prayers, and in the morning they share a meal (464). The phase that emerges out of the activity at the njimba is known as the "Path of the Harp" and invokes both birth and origins. Along this path, singing and dancing commemorates the entrance of human beings into the world, and particularly that of Eyen Zame's (Bwiti’s “Christ figure”) son (464).

Fernandez terms the "Midnight Interlude" the songs of prayer offered to ancestors, which serve to reinforce 'oneheartedness' (464). Song types throughout the cycle moves back and forth between melodic accompaniment of the harp, and a kind
of chanting punctuated by sharp rhythms and quick movements (449). Following these prayers banzie troop together into the forest to call back any remaining ancestors, in order to complete the “unification of membership” at their return to the chapel (464). Within this cycle is also the very short but metaphorically dense sermon which the chapel leader gives. The images and words of which this sermon is composed come from a series of visions that he has during the decreased activity of the Midnight Interlude. This cycle is closed with Yombo songs sung by women in the women’s chamber of the chapel.

Eyen Zame is once again celebrated in a return to the Path of the Harp song cycle, but this time with an emphasis on his death, and eventual freeing of ancestors through it (464). The full ritual closes out with exit songs which, in essence, signal the departure of the ancestors who have been a part of the ritual process. It also addresses the harp, understood to be the “voice of the sister of God,” which is returned to its rightful resting place in the chapel. The final njimba of a shared meal brings the ritual to its conclusion.

Presenting the liturgy of engosie in this fashion makes sense because of its carefully timed nature, but Fernandez is clear that Banzie themselves do not describe the ritual based on this temporal progression. Banzie will speak of the ritual as a 3-day event, distinguished as three types of engosie, representing three different paths. Fernandez casts these as “moving from the qualities of cold and inert isolation through turbulent confusion to final spiritual tranquility” (465). While this may be the reflexive explication offered by ritual participants, the ethnographer claims that
ultimately each engosie, regardless of type, “undergoes much the same progression” (465). The analysis here will rest on his interpretation of the engosie in these terms.

From dusk till dawn, the ritual advances in temporal and spatial progression. The circular dance and song sequences that move the members into the chapel at the commencement of the ceremony are themselves elaborate, and mirror myths of creation and birth. As dancers advance into the chapel, they move up and down between squatting and standing positions, indexical also of the vertical life cycle of the spirit. The horizontal movement is microcosmic of the forest to village movement, from the origin spot conceptualized as the place of Fang primordial life deep in the forest, a place of stillness and coolness, into the heated generation of human activity in the heart of the chapel.

Movement through the chapel marks movement through the cosmos, from the place of human birth, towards the 'world beyond,' which lies in the sea, past the altar at the far end of the chapel. This is the dwelling place of spirits, as well as the site of communion with ancestors. The chapel is divided lengthways as the male and female sides, and width-ways as the separation between this world and the world beyond. Fernandez describes these based on vertical and horizontal axis. Yet in complex ways, ancestors 'above,' and ancestors located 'beyond' are mapped over onto one another, and I would argue that they thus flatten the vertical cycle into the horizontal progression of the dancers towards the world of the ancestors beyond. This collapses the seemingly redundant representation of movement towards the ancestors on both the vertical and horizontal planes into an embodied physical and spiritual progression
on the path towards the final satisfaction of ritual achievement. After the initial birth-
creation song cycles, *banzie* together move out into the forest to call back the
ancestors who have not made it to the chapel. In this, too, I see a spatial completion:
by locating ancestral spirits at both the origin and the altar site, *banzie* close the gap
between birth and death in ritual and cosmological senses, suggesting a closure of the
cyclical movement between states.

Bwiti members, particularly leaders, have a specific idea of the kind of world
they want to live in (one marked by specific senses of movement and built in myth and
song) and they work actively towards creating that kind of world. Leaders think of
their work in terms of a “reconstructive revitalization” (1965:903): through ritual
activity they are finding their way to a life-giving order to replace and rebuild that
which has been dismantled and disposed. Fernandez treats the *engosie* as laying at the
heart of these efforts to achieve re-ordering in a ritually constructive way, which offers
Fang a sense of aesthetic satisfaction by highlighting specific qualitative values of
primary life-experience. My claim is that this achieves still more: *banzie* move
through space, and in doing so re-establish specific kinds of social relations, which in
turn is what creates the foundations of a new spatial order.

**Re-establishment of Order in Social Relations of Gender and Kinship in Bwiti**

The cult of Bwiti is markedly egalitarian. Bwiti offers order out of a strongly
sensed disordered nature in the upsetting of kinship, dwelling and gender relations. In
it, an order is laid out which is organized around a set of well-developed images in a
structure of relations to one another. These images provide the avenue to ameliorate a strong sense of precariousness emerging out of the old Fang universe. The division of space and ritual activities in Bwiti directly addresses the problem of genealogical displacement, and declining social solidarity and gender equality. The main site of Bwiti religious activity, the chapel, has appropriated the metaphors of both the ritual bodily significance of the nda kisin, the women's kitchen and living space, and the centering power of the aba, or men's council house. In doing so, it has encompassed both male and female zones of activity, and thus promotes a gender complementarianism within one space, offering an equalizing social force.

Bwiti both directly and indirectly addresses the concern over increasing marriage breakdown as an indicator of imbalances in the opposition between the sexes. The perception of Bwiti as a partial remedy to this problem is validated numerically by the state of marriages among its members. Fernandez points to quantifiably lower divorce rates among Bwiti adherents in comparison to the wider Fang population. The cult ritual speaks to gender difference by allowing practitioners to better balance gender-group allegiances and kinship obligations, through affirming the ritual roles of male and female both separately and together. Where the repayment of bride money and disruption of traditional male/female role differentiation caused marital strife, Bwiti re-incorporates gendered activity in space, while affirming equality among its members. It offers moral distribution as a partial answer to the problems of material distribution.

During the major overnight Bwiti ritual, men and women both move together
into the forest to call the ancestors back to the chapel, despite characterization of the forest as a place of male activity. At the conclusion of this nightlong ritual, men and women participate in a kind of tug-of-war. The incorporation of women into the body of worshipers is partially embodied in this playful activity: men and women push against each other, but if one or the other groups falters or relieves pressure on the rope, the other will also fall, and both groups would fail (Fernandez 1982:425).

The sidedness of the chapel, so Fernandez argues, does not serve to create a completely disjunctive opposition between men and women. The location of a pool of sacred water connected by the same substance in both the men and women's chamber, and treated during ritual by male and female groups, acts to bring about a unification of the gendered sides of the chapel. Association of red powder scraped into the pool on the female side, and white powder on the male side, draws on symbolism of blood and semen (394). Thus is reinforced the significance of simultaneous gender unification and egalitarianism in the achievement of fertility, and of progression in the spiritual life-cycle.

While such strong emphasis on equality of members could potentially lead to an increasing individualism among the Bwiti collective, this equality is instead used to achieve and maintain a sense of solidarity. Attempts to generate solidarity in old ancestral cults were proving ineffective. An increasing sense of individualization among colonial subjects and missionary-representations of an egocentric moral self posed a challenge to Fang thinking. Bwiti achieves greater solidarity in part through seeking a kind of dwelling with ancestral powers. The desire for communion with the
ancestors is less a matter of worship of a deity, than a matter of access through kinship to more effective knowledge of the 'unseen.' Bwiti is able to address concerns from the mounting of these ‘anti-social forces’ (267) in ways more satisfying than the traditional ancestor cults.

Paralleling the Fang metaphor of the body for understanding lineage, the body also offers Bwiti adherents a means to think about the incorporation of the individual into the body of collective kinship. A major concern of this incorporation into the body collective revolves around the quality of 'oneheartedness.' The means through which Bwiti is able to take up the issue of 'oneheartedness' bears a distinct spatial element. 'Oneheartedness' involves the dying of the initiate's concern for their own self, and a substituted absorption with communality. This quality is evident in the group-effort of Bwiti chapel construction and erection of the central pillar in the building as a shared effort. The final one-legged dance around the pillar at its inauguration (a one time event, and not a regular part of the engosie) brings together the right and left sides of individual dancer's bodies into one, just as the body of the building itself unifies the dancers. As is argued below, a key part of Fang life force comes from opposing and complimentary qualities, which Bwiti holds together, and so achieves a stabilizing world order. 'Oneheartedness' not only keeps people and ancestors together, but it brings about "unity...in the face of multiplicity" (Fernandez 1982:377).

At the same time, these relationships are as much satisfied in the power of imagery and movement that builds a veritable "pleasure dome" (532), a constructed
and fulfilling cosmos, as in the reconciliation of gods with people and with one another. Fernandez’s claim is that Bwiti activity centers on spatial re-ordering and moral progression in that space as a means to satisfy this desire for relational balance, rather than merely altering social roles and responsibilities towards one another. Where courts of arbitration once held in the men’s council house would have worked to maintain relational harmony, the upsetting of traditional dwelling patterns meant men spent more time in communal living spaces, and so displaced this traditional building as the site for resolving conflict. Instead, a specific time at the close of the all-night Bwiti ceremony is reserved for arbitration of disputes by banzie leaders. The end of the Bwiti ceremony is a time for settling conflicts when people have reached a state of emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual placidity at the conclusion of intense ritual activity. By addressing conflict at a time when people are satisfied in the re-ordering of their world, reconciliation can be better fostered as a desire for ‘oneheartedness’ has already been achieved in a ritual sense.

**Bwiti Centering in Space**

Bwiti, while taking up and heightening cycles of movement from village to forest to village, moves through the cycle of dusk to dawn in ritual ceremony. The cult has a powerful centering effect which develops a movement between qualitative states by drawing towards a point, all-the-while still maintaining a progressive migratory drive horizontally and a vertically. The ritual activity moves out across the forest, and then subsequently flips this inside out to draw the power of the forest back in to the chapel. Rather than ritual extension of the cultural paradoxes, Bwiti draws inward to a
point, which parallels in powerful ways the desire for 'one-heartedness' that the older ancestral cults were unable to maintain.

Fang self-orientation on vertical and horizontal axes results in a powerful centering process, which colonial influence and various other social transformations re-shaped into a decentering and centrifugal power. Bwiti is singular in its efforts to re-center. Bwiti thought and ritual activity extends the circularity of the vertical human-spirit-ancestor cyclical progression by removing the block of death by re-establishing connections to ancestors in the spiritual realm. It simultaneously turns the linear horizontal progression into a cyclical path that creates a closed system of continual movement.

Bwiti also takes up the forest and village contrast and in so doing makes use of the contrastive power to revitalize the lived Fang world. By containing both male and female, forest and village, the built space of the chapel offers a new cosmological center that harnesses the power of opposition and the movement across it. The power of movement across oppositional lines reinvigorates Fang social sensibilities. In doing so, it both re-centers spatial orientation, and re-invigorates the already existing relations between people and between the oppositions which are encompassed in the whole.

The centering processes by which banzie are ultimately able to achieve the aesthetically pleasing features of oppositionality through dualistic segmentation of chapel space, still allows them to maintain a sense of egalitarianism. In this sense, the model suggested by Levi-Strauss (1963) proves useful: that what appears as binary
and diametric opposition often has implicit within it a ternary opposition, and the
transitional mode between the two is a concentric binary.

In the Fang instance, the concentric or hierarchical distinctions between forest
and village, male and female, above and below, are binary oppositions which comply
with the principles of Fang aesthetics (Fernandez 1966). To understand the spatial
nature of aesthetics, Fernandez makes use of Durkheim and Mauss' assertion that
spatial organization is modeled after social structures (Durkheim 1963). From this
Fernandez argues that what undergirds aesthetics is the arrangement of values within
and across space (1966: 53). The oft dualistic nature of Fang value arrangement is
embedded in the construction of the village itself. As discussed above, mvogabot
houses are built across from one another, as the segment of clan grouping for whom
the most disputes are evident, while in the smaller household, the ndebot, families
express solidarity by building alongside one another (until alienation or waning bonds
might lead them to move). This oppositional structure is considered key to what
constitutes a village itself, and it is established in its built shape.

It is various levels of opposition that produce the vitality of Fang life:
aesthetics and sociability are each made viable by the other (Fernandez 1966:60).
Strict segmentary opposition of kinship lines is not fully apparent in Fang lineage
patterns, but it is evident in the generational connections that ascribe a female founder
to the lineage group. Traits associated with the female founder are imputed to the
ndebot (these being sense of collectivity and cooperation), alternating with those
qualities accompanying the male progenitor of the mvogabot (prone to factiousness).
Thus is emphasized both female and male characteristics in alternation and opposition as embedded in a larger social framework of kinship, which in turn dictates and is dictated by spatial organization of the village.

What *banzie* seek through this kind of complimentary dualism is to re-establish a satisfactory dynamism of movement, thus integrating both space and time. Movement is the means by which the cosmos is centered, and the process by which the unbalanced is again placed in balanced diametric opposition. The balancing project is carried out in spatial terms by taking a concentric and hierarchical space and centering it at a point that is dualistically complimentary. This is achieved both in quality terms embedded in social structure, and spatial organization that fosters the creative dynamism that satisfies Fang quest for vitality.

Marking of territory may match the human activity associated with each of these spatial zones (i.e. village as the space of female activity and forest as that of the male) but these activities themselves are embedded in social relations based on age and gender assignment. While men and women may both enter and work in many of the spaces, the specific qualities of these places are activated and conceptualized through the work carried out by those with whom those same qualities are associated. For the forest, the potential danger posed by it is associated with male appropriation and belonging. Just as the qualities of the forest are brought into the village, male activity may also be centered in male longhouses and dwelling centers. This marks a similar pulling in of male qualities of forest space back into the central spaces of the village. However, in Bwiti's creation of a chapel of simultaneous male and female
space, the zones collapse in on one another and then are flipped inside out at the heart of human activity centered in the village. Similarly, while the Bwiti congregation moves out in the forest to call back ancestors in residence there, other ancestors are already in dwelling in the reliquary house at the center of the village. In this sense the space moves back in on itself.

Bwiti realigns this male/female space into an even splitting across the length of the chapel, thus re-affirming egalitarianism through concentrating activity into two adjacent zones. The groups progress side-by-side horizontally, making their way through dance movement towards the end of the chapel where vertical spatial connection may also be re-centered as connection is made to the ancestors. Thus the intersection of movement and re-situating of gender categories results in the moving of space itself- a pulling/drawing in of the forest through both traversing terrain of spatial zones and the generated 'heat' of socio-spiritual activity which moves banzie, both in gender specificity and collectivity, through zones of the chapel and back towards the potentially threatening 'world of beyond' after the altar, which mirrors the forest but also the sea as end point on the Fang migratory trajectory. There is a parallel between the moving out through concentric circles for daily work activity, to the return of the engosie participants from the forest who lead the ancestors back to the chapel center. In so doing, they achieve both a forward progression, and a powerful centering project.
Ritual Indexicality

Fernandez points to understanding the activity and instruments of the *engosie* on a signal-sign-symbol continuum of abstraction. This continuum marks the varying degrees with which an object, activity or relation may be removed from its context (1965: 920). A signal can be a condensation of something that is part of its larger contextual situation, and operates mainly for the purpose of orienting people. Signs are similar but are distinct enough from context to be able to gain an extra emotive or affective quality. A symbol is so abstracted that it has more cognitive capital and much less affectivity associated with it. Because ritual is about movement in states and the creation of a satisfying world, as long as the ritual itself is efficacious, it does not so much matter if the signal-sign-symbol indexes specific aspects of world as long as the sign-complex indexes the ritual itself.

It is the careful manipulation of these signals that allows for *banzie* to inhabit a similar spatial world without requiring strict adherence to concurrent symbolic meanings that they invoke within ritual activity. Social consensus is the means through which people orient to things in similar ways, while cultural consensus involves sharing of symbolic meaning (Fernandez 1965). Bwiti can achieve high social consensus, so orienting in space according to qualitative values, without the high cultural consensus of collaborative interpretation of symbolic meanings. In this high social consensus *banzie* are able to affirm egalitarian values without losing the sense of 'oneheartedness' that is so carefully sought and achieved through ritual.

Rather than maintain a strict adherence to Fernandez's order of signal-sign-
symbol, I would argue that it is the combined iconic-indexical power of the ritual activity that drives the achievement of efficacy in Bwiti activity. *Muye*, one of the leaders at the main chapel site where Fernandez conducted his fieldwork, is able to articulate the layers of meaning by which mythological and sung liturgies tell the story of creation and birth, death and destruction, and then communion with ancestors. *Muye* has a grasp on the symbolic nature of the formal elements as a result of his role of non-participant elder. Yet Fernandez points out that among the wider (and younger) active population of Bwiti participants, the ritual meanings and interpretation vary widely. This does not prove problematic if the satisfactory nature of the ritual lies in the ability of the movements and instruments to point back at the ritual itself, to construct and map larger spatial and relational connections, and to orient participants within this.

This itself points to the ability of social relations and kinds of activity to create space. If what *banzie* seek is a newly reinvigorated world, ritual efficacy does not rest in symbolic association, but can be generated in movement and the satisfaction of solidarity without relying on symbolic consensus. Reordering of space need not be carried out in symbolic terms. While those involved in the ritual activity of the ceremony need not mediate their activity in explicit meaning-making terms (by corresponding symbols and interpretation), and so can operate with symbols that act only as signs or signals, in “response chaining,” (1965:919). Those who observe the ritual (mainly elders and leaders) can continue to affirm symbolic meanings because they sit back and make intellectual rather than embodied meaning connections.
If the most significant role of the ritual state produced is that it ultimately indexes that the ritual has occurred, then the 'state' of the participants themselves is part of the ritual performative effect (Robbins 2001:594). In this instance, the social relational status between men and women, between human and ancestor, between human and knowledge, and between human and various quality states is mediated by space, and the relation of human to space in the microcosm of the chapel is indexical of the larger cosmos. The conception of, and movement in, space provides this link. While Fernandez recognizes that what was upset in colonial expansion was Fang means of revitalization and satisfaction in the maintenance of oppositional qualities in space and directional positioning (1986:362), his emphasis on orientation in movement means that he misses the fact that it is social relations of which space itself is composed. Re-establishment of relations is not merely a means to achieving a more satisfactory state in space, but is a way of establishing a new order of space by recreating the relations of which that space is constituted.

The space which emerges out of the chapel itself is not merely a return to previous orders, which Fernandez later suggests (1982), but is in fact something in which there is an important change. As Waldman contends in the case of Griqua ritual in South Africa, it is the assertion of kinship and ethnic identities that are put forward and contested in the spatial symbolism of rites. It is that “symbolic associations are intrinsic neither to material objects nor their spatial organization. It is the specific action of individuals, in relation to material objects, that invoke symbolic meanings” (654ff). I would modify this statement to include, as she suggests later in her
argument, that it is these actions in relation to other *people* as well as to objects which lends meaning to the spaces which take on significance in ritual. Griqua ritual participants draw from those cultural items that are “situated at the boundaries of cultural consciousness”- those things which are already placed within the cultural structure such that they invoke and then lay out an array of possible and potentially contradictory interpretations (Waldman 2003:673). For *banzie*, space is an already salient structuring force which may open social relations to re-organization through the foregrounding of this framework in ritual.

The convergence of what Evans-Pritchard calls “oeological” space with that of “structural” space (1968), or in semiotic terms, the indexing of oeological space in structural relations of space, is what makes the ritual satisfying in its effectual nature. Ocological space is distinguished in terms of purely physical topography, and separation in landscape. Structural space, by contrast, makes room for geographic distance, but distance is ultimately determined by values attached to social association between the groups or places in question (110). If space in itself is generated by activity, then the significance of Bwiti ritual lies in the transformative power of the ritual reordering; its efficacy lies not in the indexing of larger spaces in ritual microcosm, but in the altering of relations between people and things, between people and other people, and between people and the cosmos, that is shifted within the patterns of indexicality.

In Werbner's reading of Lévi-Strauss, the nature of social relations in the structure are such that their representation cannot be reduced to one kind of dualism.
Instead, multiple structures of representation are used to make room for “triadic or plural relations, which are serial, while conceptualizing them in terms of binary oppositions, which are simultaneous” (Werbner 1989:192). As such, it is possible to construct both a diametric (static and closed system) dualism, and a concentric dualism that is dynamic and forms an open system.

Such a conceptualization well characterizes the nature of the dialectic dualism of Fang built, social, and cosmic space. The diametric composition of chapel space is rooted in the human body metaphor that is used for the Bwiti chapel. Emphasizing its symmetrical nature, it is split horizontally along this line, and is representative of the complimentary differences of men and women, who are associated with one side or the other, in terms of opposition within similarity (Werbner 1989:193). While banzie move within the chapel, the system of space here is itself closed. There is transition for the members, but the spatial structure itself remains fixed.

The concentric forest-village structure is organized serially across the spatial zones from the wild and dangerous deep forest, across the plantations, and to the heart of human activity in the village. The opposition between these segments is marked by difference rather than sameness. This center-periphery organization remains an open and dynamic dualism. In the Bwiti instance this open dualism involves a shift from centrifugal to centripetal forces, such that space is turned inside out.

This transition and transformation of oppositions is made possible in part by location of the opposition on multiple axes. Werbner points to qualities of space among the Umeda as characterized by multiple, rather than merely two Cartesian,
axes. He argues that this is in part a feature of its being a dialectical society that requires protracted means for the cross-cutting oppositions to be represented. This could be extended to the orders of space and relations structured in Bwiti. The division of space according to horizontal and vertical axes is reflected in the organization of the chapel: it is split along its length according to male versus female, and widthwise in terms of 'this world,' versus the 'next world' or 'beyond.' There is a similar distinction made between God Above and God Below, but such is flattened into an extension of this opposition into 'immediate world' versus 'other world.' Bwiti members move in circular formation through this chapel space, and through layers of meaning and complexity made possible by the use of multiple axes.

Achieving Symbolic Zenith

Within the use of multiple axes, it is at a singular point that ritual activity generates a re-assembling of both space and of social relational orders. This point forms a zenith (Werbner 1989: 207), at which the “zenith territory” manifests those things which are of highest value, and where those territories given less value are still represented as means to organize oppositionalities. It is the place where the dense layers of symbolic contradiction reach a climax, and on which the order itself begins to turn. Stasch uses the image of a “You are here” sign in order to conceptualize the ways in which ritual achieves simultaneous macro- and micro-cosmic articulation (Forthcoming). The individual pinpointed by the “You are here” dot or arrow on the sign is both within the map image and in the wider lived world by the very location of
that map within that world. Thus Stasch points out that in ritual there may exist
“multiple “You are here” arrows, wrought in different media, but each connecting the
small scene of ritual action indexically and iconically to larger spatiotemporal orders”
(7). In the engosie, the map is re-drawn as ritual participants lay down new “You are
here” signs embedded in the social relations which are themselves being re-affirmed
through movements in space.

Michael Silverstein's (2003) close analysis of Abraham Lincoln's dedicatory
address at the Soldier's National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, suggests a
correlation to Werbner's ideas of zenith, and to the relation of ritual microcosm and
macrocosm. Silverstein's argument is that ritual has the power to give people a sense
of transformation, in part because of the thickly layered and interacting symbols
present. These symbols appear autonomous, but are intimately connected with the
external world (as in the case of Stasch's “You are here” sign); the symbols themselves
are meaningful because they represent a segment of the larger structure. If ritual
participants accept the veracity of the symbols, Silverstein's assertion is that the
premise of claims being made about the world through the symbols is likewise
accepted.

In Lincoln's speech he is able, in linguistic form, to parallel larger frames of
context (historical, mythical, nation-wide) with the immediate time and place-setting.
While connecting symbols to places and times outside of the immediate, it also gives
these symbols a meaning in and of themselves in their immediacy. Such a feat is
accomplished, in part, through Lincoln's use of “nested repetition” (Silverstein
2003:52). His use of deictic markers indicates moves that are progressively closer and more intimate in spatial degree. His statements move from pointing to the full continent, to the site of the Battle of Gettysburg, and to the specific section of the battlefield in which the current ceremony is being conducted. In similar ways, he then offers phrases of contingency, such that the ritual participants gain a sense of possible space-time that can be achieved if the ritual is effective.

Silverstein describes the setting of Lincoln's address as it would have been: with the fresh graves of dead soldiers behind the audience, reaching to a central high point where the speaker stood, so forming a "somewhat lengthened and inverted amphitheatre" (59). This concentric organization comes to a vertical high point at the location of the speaker, the "cosmic axis" which leads both out in space and in time, if the ritual conditions are met (60). The speaker at this point can see out over the audience to the graves beyond, and Lincoln fits his use of deixis in ritual speech to the shape of this landscape. He is able to use parallel representation of the "official-collective" and of the "personal-spiritual meaning" of the ritual achievement- as it means both group oriented and personal activation of the ritual meanings (60).

Evident in the 'high-point' of Lincoln's Gettysburg landscape is a zenith that shares qualities with that suggested by Werbner in the case of the Umeda. In Werbner's account the zenith is the territory of greatest resource value for the Umeda, and is thus treated as their "center of gravity" (1989:206). It is that which they use to conceptualize the center-periphery territorial oppositions. Though other centers exist within the system, it is this central point at which oppositions are concentrated, and
where contradiction occurs. Contradiction may arise because of the kinds of exchanges in resources that take place here, establishing territorial exchange patterns, and giving everyone purchase in the location. The resultant problem is whether equality in both “association,” based on “reciprocity over production,” and “community,” which is instead rooted in redistribution and “equality in reciprocity over consumption,” can coexist (207). The means by which the problem is mediated, Werbner suggests, is by a tension of antitheses, symbolically overcome, at this zenith.

The Bwiti zenith is concentrated at its ritual heart: during the all-night ritual practice of the engosie carried out in village, forest, and brought to its climax in the chapel. What both Werbner and Fernandez fail to reach in their analysis is the final step in ritual achievement: that the ritual point around which centering is achieved simultaneously involves a re-extension of order back into the lived cosmos.

Fernandez does articulate that the forest comes to be drawn into the chapel, but that ritually the chapel likewise extends into the forest. He also emphasizes that the vitality achieved in Bwiti arises from movement across both of these areas (1986:399). I would frame this as activity's capacity to draw space in, and opposition's capacity to heighten its zenith quality. Yet Fernandez does not suggest that the qualities affirmed in the engosie themselves bring about extension into space of a new order. They allow for continual progression, but in his reading, the means of the qualities to effect change in social relations does not form a critical part of the new spatial order of the cosmos.

Following this, Silverstein's account of Lincoln at Gettysburg proves helpful
in moving Fernandez’s argument past mere movement across spaces: ritual efficacy arises in the opening of possibilities which are projected back out onto the landscape. For the banzie, the engosie offers an arena for the thick layering of symbols that exhibit the oppositional values of relational order indexed through representations of, and movements through, space. The ritual climax, however, is at the turning of space at the zenith, where not only is the ritual a location on the geographic map, but it is also at the “You are here” point from which it may both create and project new order. At the zenith, movement across the carefully designated zones of Bwiti chapel structure gives banzie a means to affirm egalitarian values, and to secure both fertility (and thus continuation of one's lineage) and individual progression towards ancestral status. It is not merely that use of layered indexicals at the ritual center creates a dense site of meaningful oppositions and associations, but that the changes set up at the ritual center have the potential to extend back out in meaningful transformations in the real social relations that form the building blocks of space.

**Sound in Ritual Establishment of the Cosmic Zenith**

The Bwiti zenith might be understood as the chapel, at the heart of human activation of the cosmos, and the central pillar within the chapel around which ritual movement clusters. The cosmic zenith is established at this point, in part, through the multi-layered symbol of the ngombi harp and its use during the engosie. The one-stringed instrument is one of the dominant means for communicating with Nyingwan Mebege, or the sister of God, who forms one of the three central deific figures in
Bwiti. In the opening dances of the *engosie*, the harp is associated with Noah in the biblical narrative, as a main source of the spiritual knowledge that he possessed (Fernandez 1986:445). Both male and female characteristics are embodied in the symbolism of the harp, and the instrument is thus representative of the larger *banzie* collective of human bodies.

The harp achieves its significance at the zenith of cosmic space by its storage at the central pillar of the chapel. Here, it imparts blessings from God Above to the spirits as they pass through the chapel from the entrance to the 'land beyond' at the far side of the building. It is removed from its resting site and is the means through which *banzie* are lead out into the forest to call back ancestors that are in residence there. As Feld remarks for the Kaluli of Southern Papua New Guinea, sound has a relationship with the forest that is unique because of the resonant qualities in such a physical environment (1990: 62). When moving through dense forest, sound becomes an important means of orienting oneself, when visual resources prove insufficient in finding ones way. Feld correlates this with the dark interior of the longhouse where Kaluli ritual takes place, which offers parallels to the movement of Bwiti adherents in the forest and in the chapel. Something about the nature of a forest creates a sound quality that is distinct from that in the open village. The *engosie* ceremony captures this in a sensory mode, and not purely in the construction and cognitive symbolism of the chapel. The sound of the *ngombi* harp is important for leading people from the chapel to the forest, for orienting the group within the forest, for alerting and directing ancestor spirits residing in the forest, for bringing the orientational and spiritual sound
qualities of the forest back into the chapel, and, finally, for gaining access to the sister of God Above through the chapel space. Sound provides another means by which to capture the forest and embed it back within the central point, and then gain better communion with the spiritual world by centering the point of contact.

The melodic quality of the harp music is juxtaposed to the intense drumming of the obango dances and chants. As suggested by Jackson (1968), the melody can produce continuity in space-time. Harp music is invoked for the banzie as a means to overcome the block of death and sin in order to gain access to the 'unseen' realm of the ancestors. By contrast, the driving rhythm of the drums serves better to create transitional divides between spaces and time segments of the ritual. Shifts in tempo indicate temporal or thematic changes in mythological narratives. The alternation between rhythm and melody, are another place of oppositional vitality, where the “path of the harp” (Fernandez 1986:450), which leads to revelation, is brought to life in the interplay between these two dominant sound forms.

Sound highlights the fact that space itself is something vectorial: it does not remain static beside a moving vector of time, but is itself also dynamic. Zuckerkandl (1956) argues that the act of seeing establishes and maintains the boundary between the world that is internal and that which is external, as the eye allows one to perceive while keeping oneself separate from the world. Hearing, by stark contrast, places one directly within this world, and blurs the boundaries between inside and outside: “[t]he space experience of the eye is a disjunctive experience; the space experience of the ear is a participative experience” (291). While banzie conceptualize the reaching of
satisfactory states as achieved through movement and perceived as predominantly visual access to the 'unseen' realm, I argue that sound is a vital part of this process. While they are most concerned with journeying through visions, they still rely on multi-sensory processes to achieve their centering project. This is in part because representations may be as much auditory as visual (Bull 2004).

Zuckerkandl argues that within music, we “experience space as order” (1956:302). Again, the contrast between what is achieved by sound is in stark opposition to that understood through seeing: when two things occupy the same visual space, they by necessity become something else. They cannot remain in juxtaposition in the same space. Aurally, however, several sounds may occupy the same space, as in the production of several tones in a chord that remain distinct from one another. As an auditory image, the harp in Bwiti encompasses the tension of opposing qualities in a way that brings satisfaction to the Fang, but would be not be fully complete on a purely visual plane because of the exclusivity created by the process of seeing in space. The capacity of sound to inhabit one space in multiple tones feeds the patterns of oppositionality so vital to Fang aesthetics, and is exploited by Bwiti ritual as a means to center and invert space at the cosmic zenith. In this sense, sound offers a counterpoint for means through which opposition may be achieved and appropriated in ritual, and then used to place people in space, and so in social structure.
Concluding Remarks

In a world in which religious, governmental, and economic forces are continually rending apart the fabric of Fang social life, Bwiti ritual offers an avenue to reconstruction and revitalization of relational order. It supplies an order out of a strongly sensed disorderedness in the upsetting of kinship, dwelling and gender relations. By re-aligning patterns of gender and kinship relations in built space, Bwiti adherents are able to establish a central orientational point at which to draw space in, turn it inside out, and then extend spatially-embedded social relations back out into their lived and built world. Banzie are compelled not by religious doctrine, but by the multi-sensory capacity of activity generated to constitute the order of this new universe. The ability to generate this new universe hinges on the ritual indexicality achieved within the engosie, predicated on already-present Fang conceptualizations of social life in spatial order. By making use of Fang bodily metaphors, and by holding together qualities of opposition in a revitalized whole, Bwiti perspective conceptualizes the world anew in ritual. Sound offers one example of the various modes which may work to achieve the cosmic zenith around which the orders of ritual possibility turn. The engosie alters the relations which constitute space, placing indexical focus at a central symbolically and ritually activated zenith, and thus showing how the cult of Bwiti offers another example of the means through which people create their collective experience of the world through spatial imagining.
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