

Wyatt MacGaffey. *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986) xi, 295 pp., \$45.00; \$16.95 paper.

MacGaffey, professor of anthropology at Haverford College, has based this carefully crafted book on twenty years of fieldwork and archival research. This is the first systematic study of BaKongo religion. But the study is far more than an analysis of the religion, as MacGaffey demonstrates how BaKongo social structure and power relationships are embedded in its very fabric. Dividing the study into three parts, MacGaffey first focuses on a discussion of BaKongo cosmology, then describes BaKongo ritual and power, and finally deals with issues of change in the BaKongo religion and society. Taking the perspective of the BaKongo themselves, MacGaffey explains the significance of BaKongo cosmology and how it is reflected in their myths and rituals, and in the life cycle of the BaKongo people themselves. The cosmology serves as the model upon which marriage alliances are based and the religion is the basis for the sacred and secular power held by priests and chiefs.

The Portuguese first reached what is now Zaire in 1483; in 1485 the king of the Kongo was converted to Roman Catholicism. MacGaffey devotes the third part of the book to an analysis of continuity and change in religious movements among the BaKongo from 1485 up to the present period. Considerable religious syncretism has taken place between the indigenous BaKongo religion and Christianity in its many forms. This is particularly true for the numerous indigenous independent churches which emerged in Zaire beginning with the church founded by Simon Kimbangu in 1921.

The subjects with which MacGaffey deals are complex—cosmology, ancestral cults, magic and witchcraft, religion as a political system—but he makes them accessible to readers who have a basic knowledge of African cultures and societies. The study is an excellent contribution to our understanding of the major ethnic group in Zaire. One minor disappointment was finding the term “man” being used in the generic sense (“man in his world” (42); the “cycle of man’s life” (45); “the life of man” (51)) when it would have been more appropriate to simply refer to the “BaKongo people.”

The text, comprised of nine chapters divided into three parts, also has a chronology, notes, references, an index and glossary, twelve plates, five figures, two tables, and two maps. It is highly recommended to individuals interested in religion, culture change, and African cultures and societies.

—Dennis M. Warren
Iowa State University