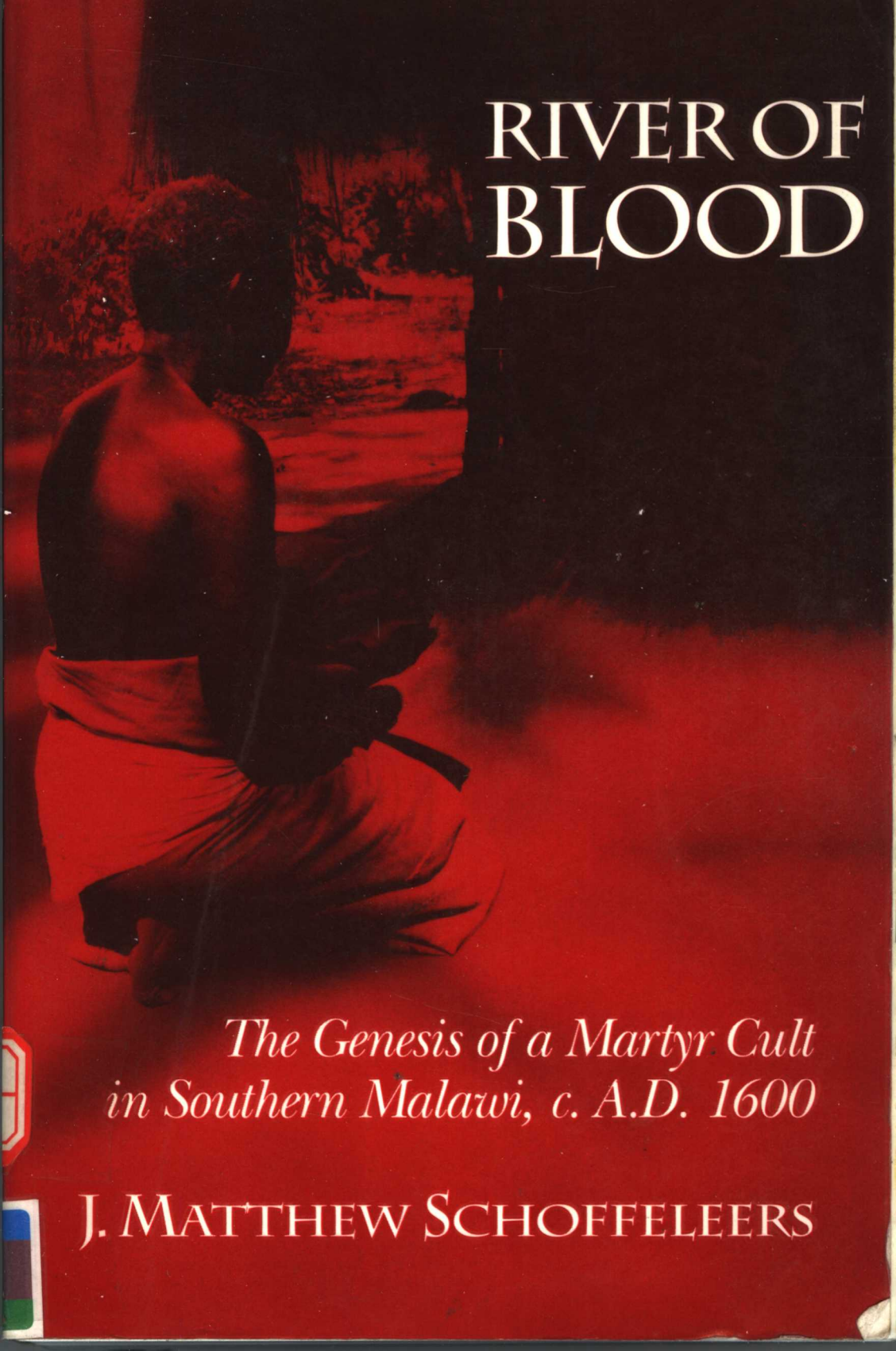

RIVER OF BLOOD

The Genesis of a Martyr Cult in Southern Malawi, c. A.D. 1600

J. MATTHEW SCHOFFELEERS

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When Mbona was killed, blood flowed in profusion and, splashing to the ground, it turned into a dark stream, a river of blood.

– Headman Mphamba

Wherever violence threatens, ritual impurity is present. When men are enjoying peace and security, blood is a rare sight. When violence is unloosed, however, blood appears everywhere – on the ground, underfoot, forming great pools. Its very fluidity gives form to the contagious nature of violence. Its presence proclaims murder and announces new upheavals to come. Blood stains everything it touches the color of violence and death. Its very appearance seems, as the saying goes, to "cry out for vengeance."

– René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*

Myth, then, is a dramatic shorthand record of such matter as invasions, migrations, dynastic changes, admission of foreign cults, and social reforms. . . . A proper study of myths demands a great store of abstruse geographical, historical and anthropological knowledge; also familiarity with the properties of plants and trees and the habits of wild birds and beasts.

– Robert Graves, *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*

To a much greater extent than many historians realize, oral traditions provide indirect evidence of the nature of historical events; they are "witnesses in spite of themselves."

– Steve Feierman, *The Shambaa Kingdom*

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INTRODUCTION

THE PERIOD between the middle of the sixteenth and the middle of the seventeenth centuries was a particularly dramatic one in the history of northern Zambesia. It all began with the murder of the Jesuit missionary Gonçalo da Silveira at the Monomotapa's court in March 1561, an event which provided the Portuguese with a pretext to dispatch a large armed force to Zambesia. Due to funding problems and political chicaneries, the army arrived there only eleven years later, but from the very beginning it was incapacitated by illness and famine. By the end of the year 1572 only a handful of soldiers were still alive, and the venture had to be called off. But despite the fact that the expedition itself was an outright failure, it heralded the beginning of a new policy in regard to the white settlements in the interior. The latter, instead of continuing to place themselves under the protection of local rulers, as had been the custom, now began to transform into independent Portuguese enclaves. Forts were built, and before long the captains of these forts became powerful local rulers.

In this situation slavery also took on a new significance. Due to the growing number of settlers and the expansion of their holdings, the slave population kept steadily growing. As a result the number of fugitive slaves also increased, one of their favorite hideouts being the Shire Valley on the north bank of the Zambezi.[1] Some of these slave groups built fortified settlements from which they raided the countryside. It is within this context that one has to understand the origin of the much-discussed Zimba army, which twice defeated a Portuguese force and which wrought havoc in much of northern Zambesia in the closing decade of the sixteenth century.

It is probably true to say that prior to 1590 one cannot speak of sizable centralized states immediately north of the Zambezi. The impression created is rather one of a collectivity of relatively small chiefdoms, bound together by regional trade and shifting alliances. Statelets which controlled trade routes were at an advantage, however, and could, given the right conditions, grow in size and importance. One such was the Lundu kingdom in the Shire Valley, which from 1590 onward managed to extend its

influence from Tete on the middle Zambezi to the east coast.[2] This feat was achieved with the help of the Zimba, who for a decade operated as a mercenary army in the service of the incumbents. Not only did they help subject neighboring peoples, but they were also instrumental in keeping the population of the kingdom itself in subjection. This involved the eradication of the principal sources of resistance, among which were the secret mask societies and an influential rain shrine. Like similar shrines elsewhere, the rain shrine functioned as a rallying point of popular resistance against the increasing power of the political elite. Local oral traditions suggest that many inhabitants lost their lives on account of this campaign, while others took refuge elsewhere. The shrine was restored some time after Lundu's defeat in 1622, but with a different organizational structure and a different theology. Instead of its being dedicated to Chiuta, the High God under his python manifestation, as were the other regional rain shrines, its patronal deity became a human martyr, Mbona, who above all symbolized the suffering of the commonalty. The story of Mbona's life and death has been transmitted in a number of versions, and the present study shows that despite their legendary character they constitute an important source of information about the religious and political transformations which took place at the time of the Zimba campaigns.

The first time I heard about the Mbona cult was in 1959, the year I began work as a missionary in the Shire Valley. When paying a visit to the Nsanje station in the southern part of the valley, I was told by a senior colleague that there was a shrine a few kilometers away, dedicated to a rain god bearing the name Mbona. The same person also told me that a woman, said to be Mbona's wife, lived at the shrine and that she, like a cloistered nun, was not allowed to leave the premises. The missionary who gave me this information had never been there himself, and neither had his predecessors. He thought that such a visit would not be appreciated by his congregation. But this apart, he did not think the cult had much influence, and one might as well ignore it. True enough, in the station's journal, which went back to the early 1920s, I came across Mbona's name only once, in connection with some exceptionally heavy rains in December 1945. The journal contained no indication that the missionaries had taken a more than superficial interest in the cult.

Since it would be pointless to seek contact with the cult organization without at least some knowledge of the Mbona traditions, I began recording such bits of information as came my way, when making the rounds of the wattle-and-daub village chapels and "bush schools" which in those days were my responsibility. From time to time I even asked school children to put in writing what they knew about Mbona. Although I did not learn overly much that way, the occasional gem made the effort worth-

while. One of the children described Mbona as "a huge white hippo with blazing eyes, who made his way up the Chikwawa escarpment to build the city of Blantyre." The boy said he had this information from his grandmother. I have often thought about the meaning of this remarkable piece of imagery, which continues to intrigue me. A few details seem easy enough to explain. The hippo as a water animal would be an obvious symbol of a rain god. As an aquatic mammal he could also be seen as a mediating figure between water and land, or between the dry and the wet seasons, keeping the two in balance. White is the color of the spirit world of which Mbona forms a part. But what of the blazing eyes and the building of what the old grandmother thought of as the largest city imaginable, though she had probably never seen it? I decided in the end that the blazing eyes suggest power and determination, and that Mbona as the builder of a city with its glittering shops and imposing buildings is the modern equivalent of the culture hero of old, who brought fire and introduced various crafts.

From the more knowledgeable, however, I learned that Mbona had been a rainmaker of great renown, who many generations ago had taken refuge in the valley from some enemies from the north who sought his life. Although he had been able for some time to elude his pursuers, he was in the end nonetheless tracked down and killed. After they had killed him, his murderers cut his head off, tossing it in a forest patch, while leaving the body behind at the place of the crime. Miraculously, however, blood kept gushing from the body in such quantities that it formed a small lake and finally a river. A few days later, according to one line of traditions, Mbona manifested himself in a storm wind and made it known through the mouth of a medium that he wanted a shrine dedicated to his name. The local villagers obeyed his command, buried his head, and built a shrine over the place. In time that shrine became known over a large area, and people from far and wide came to worship there.

It was clear that people saw Mbona as a counterpart of the biblical Christ, referring to him as their Black Jesus. As some explained it, God had two sons, the one white, the other black. The white one was to look after the Europeans, the black one after the Africans. According to the more radical section of the community, this meant that Christianity had no business in Africa. Although both sons were at first equally powerful, Christ had become the more prominent because the whites were more cunning than the Africans. Despite the antiwhite sentiments which transpired from some of these folk theologies, most people had little problem participating in both cults. As I was to find out later, some of the Mbona officers were practicing Christians as well. In time I even made the acquaintance of a prominent teacher and church elder who used to make the rounds of the local shops to collect contributions for the annual rain ceremony.

The older generations of missionaries also noted intersections with Christianity. A hundred years before my investigations Anglican missionaries had made a dramatic but unsuccessful attempt to establish contact with the cult. The account of that event and its aftermath, which was published in the United Kingdom a few years later, stimulated the interest of later generations of missionaries. One such was Joseph Booth, who was to make a name for himself as a critic of the colonial government and as the mentor of John Chilembwe, the nationalist and revolutionary.

My direct contacts with the cult organization date from August 24, 1964, when I was granted a lengthy interview with two of the shrine guardians.[3] At their insistence our meeting took place at the Nsanje mission station and not in or near the shrine grounds, where they lived. The official reason was that, as a white person, I was not allowed to come near the shrine, at least not without first having made a formal application to the cult's principals. As it turned out, however, there was a lot more to it. I realized this only two years later, in October 1966, when I had a chance to interview some of the other officials as well.[4] To my surprise the latter made it a point to contradict virtually everything I had been told by their colleagues, maintaining that I had been lied to by these people who were only "after their personal interests" and who, "being of foreign extraction," had no right to be part of the cult organization. It was thus that I became aware of a rift which ran through the entire organization and which made it difficult to contact one section without arousing suspicion among the others. Apparently, this conflict had led my earlier informants to insist that the interview be held at the mission, since at that place they would not be disturbed by their rivals.

My next discovery was that, however much these cult officers may have been divided among themselves, they were nonetheless united in their opposition to Mbona's medium, who lived a few kilometers from the shrine. Despite his position, he was not allowed to set foot there. They hinted among other things that his possession bouts were sometimes simulated and that he caused unnecessary unrest among the villagers by speaking out on politically sensitive issues. Yet virtually no one dared tell him this to his face for fear of being held responsible should something untoward happen. Whatever the cult establishment might hold against him, the population at large regarded him as Mbona's personal representative, even if most people knew of him only from hearsay. The medium, for his part, in all the years that I knew him (he died in May 1978 and had not yet been succeeded when I was in the area last in January 1982), never ceased criticizing the officialdom for neglecting the upkeep of the shrine and making a racket of the cult.[5] Gradually I came to understand that these conflicts were a structural feature of the cult and not just something inciden-

tal. As far as the medium and the officers were concerned, they stemmed from different perceptions of social reality, and as far as the officers themselves were concerned, they stemmed from claims and counterclaims about rights and privileges which sometimes dated back many generations but which continued to be revived each time a major ritual was to be organized or an important decision had to be taken.

Apart from the officials and the medium, I or my field assistants also interviewed a great many people who had no direct dealings with the cult. We were thus able to get some indication of people's familiarity with the Mbona story. Our findings – much like those of the author of Text IV in the second part of this book – were that, whilst everybody was able to mention a few generalities about the cult, relatively few were capable of giving a coherent account, however brief, of Mbona's life. Gradually it became clear that those who were capable of providing a coherent account were usually people who had a political interest in the story, either because they were close to the ruling elite or because they were critical of it.

The Mbona traditions in their totality present the familiar three-tiered structure of so many bodies of oral tradition in Africa.[6] Thus they have much to say about the more recent period, extending in our case from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present. A great deal is said also about the beginnings of the cult, which in our case refers to the period before the middle of the seventeenth century. But there is rather less information about the middle period, from the middle of the seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth.[7] The main emphasis of the present study will be on the early period. More specifically, an attempt has been made to reconstruct some of the processes which led to the emergence of the only martyr cult in premodern Malawi. Before elaborating this point, however, it will be necessary to take a look at the Mbona cult from a sociological perspective.

TERRITORIAL CULTS

There are many cults like Mbona's in sub-Saharan Africa. One need but think of the Earth Cult of the Tallensi in Ghana, the Rain Queen of the Lovedu in South Africa, and the Mwari, Chaminuka, Karuva, and Dzivaguru cults in Zimbabwe, to mention but a few.[8] They have variously been called earth cults, rain cults, or rain and fertility cults, but I prefer the term *territorial cults*, since they are centrally concerned with the political life of a specific land area and since their constituency is a group identified by their common occupation of and rights in that land area.[9]