

The Millennium and the Self

Jehovah's Witnesses on the Copperbelt in the '50s

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Introduction

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Introduction

For an anthropologist at work on the Copperbelt in the 'fifties, even one for whom 'religion' excited no research interest, it would have been difficult to remain unaware of Jehovah's Witnesses – or Watchtower as the movement was still more commonly known in this part of Central Africa – as one of the most distinctive groups within African urban society (cf. Mitchell 1956: 5). As Dorothea Lehmann, co-author of the study "Christians of the Copper-

belt" (1961), has observed, no other church within the country had caused so much controversy in the past or now received so much publicity. Whereas most of the other Christian denominations represented in the towns were struggling to keep a grip on their flock, Watchtower alone appeared to be gaining ground, the number of its adherents continuing to rise at an impressive rate.¹ For some time indeed this had been a development of major concern to the other churches from which many of the converts to Jehovah's Witnesses were said to have come; tension was particularly strong between the Witnesses and the Roman Catholics, reflected from time to time in minor incidents between individuals or groups of protagonists and on one occasion in a dramatic confrontation at Mufulira, news of which spread rapidly throughout the other Copperbelt towns.

But what drew my own attention to the movement was not just the alleged evangelical fervour of its members, nor their undoubted achievements in winning converts, it was also their stance on a variety of social and political questions. For example, at a time when trade unionism was beginning to take root among the African labour force, and to record its first

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¹ According to figures kindly made available to me by Mr. H. Arnott, the missionary in charge of the Society's office in Luanshya, the average number of persons taking part actively in their preaching work throughout the country in 1950 was 13,560. By 1955 these figures had risen to 24,370. These figures, it should be stressed, do not include all those who might describe themselves as Watchtower members but who were only active from time to time. Recent indications are that a high rate of growth has been maintained; Hodges (1976) gives the average number of those who were fully active in the previous year as 54,289.