

Basil Davidson : The Africans – an entry to cultural history

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Excellent and informative attempt to outline the history and prehistory of Africa prior to the arrival of Europeans – gives a helpful insight into cultural assumptions and practices (many still prevailing) which make perfect sense within the African context but seem odd to Westerners. These notes consist of extracts.

1. Africa's world
2. Social charters
3. Structures of belief
4. Mechanisms of change
5. The deluge and today

Creation legends

How great was the African isolation? The evidence that we have, still fragmentary and tentative, points insistently to some kind of 'common fund' of long ago. Peoples separated by vast distances have similar ideas which suggest the same Stone Age source. Creation legends offer a good example.

Among the Dinka of the southern Sudan, latter day descendants of those 'blameless Ethiopians' whom Homer praised, it is held that long ago in a golden age God lived among men and was in no way separate from them. Separation came to this African Eden when a woman with her eagerness or greed for cultivation happened to hit God with a hoe, whereupon God withdrew into the heavens 'and sent a small blue bird to sever a rope which had previously given men access to the sky and to him. Since that time the country has been "spoilt", for men have to labour for the food they need, and are often hungry ..' At which point, for good measure, Death came also into the world.

Several thousand miles away, in the forests of Ghana, the Akan have much the same idea, though there is nothing to suggest that they ever knew any contact with the ancestors of the Dinka or with neighbours of the Dinka who tell the same general story. 'Long long ago', says the Akan legend, God lived on earth or at least was very near to us. But there was a certain old woman who used to pound the fufu [cassava] mash, and the pestle used to knock up against God. So God said to the old woman, 'Why do you always do that to me? Because of what you are doing I am going to take myself away up into the sky.' And of a truth he did so. 37

Work ethic

As, for example, with the Bemba. This people began farming in the grasslands of north-eastern Zambia soon after 1650. These grasslands are poor in soil fertility and other resources. Bemba farming equilibrium has required them to move a garden every four to six years at best; even then the yield capacity of the land may support no more than about ten people to a square mile. Another reason why they have had to move their gardens every few years is that they could cultivate successfully only if they fertilized with wood-ash. Their habit, consequently, has been to lop and burn trees around their gardens. Once the trees are cut the possibilities of fertilizer will be exhausted for a decade or more, and the garden must be left fallow.

Apparently very wasteful for the visiting expert: but what else could he have done in Bemba shoes? In contrast to what Polly Hill has called the 'generalized nonsense' that is often written about African economic conditions, there is the judgement of the good Bishop Mackenzie among the Chewa, neighbours of the Bemba, a hundred years ago. 'When telling the people in England,' he wrote, 'what were my objects in going out to Africa, I stated that among other things I meant to teach these people agriculture; but I now see that they know far more about it than I do.'

Those who find shifting cultivation feckless must therefore show what other or different forms of cultivation could have yielded more food. They will not find it easy. Of shifting cultivation in forest areas, the soil scientists Nyc and Greenland, who are among the few who have yet devoted serious attention to the matter, reply that 'so far as we know the system is the best that could have been devised'. Even in grassland areas, such as where the Bemba live, Nyc and Greenland question how far it really 'squanders the resources of the land'. It certainly 'checks the growth of shrubs and trees and encourages erosion on all hut gentle slopes'. Yet 'the systems of cultivation and cropping are in general well adapted to

produce the means of subsistence with the minimum of labour'. And the 'minimum of labour', no doubt, is what all peoples have striven towards, but especially the Africans with their ethos of 'enough is enough'.

For the ideal balance always supposed enough but not much more: enough for a given community in a given place, taking it for granted that whenever the community grew too large for local sustenance, for the achieved balance, some of its members would find new land elsewhere. This attitude may be miles away from the accumulation drive of our own industrial societies with their drumming emphasis on 'more than enough'. But it had its own moral consistency. The puritan fathers of the industrial revolution may have felt that God desired them to burn the candle of labour at both ends: not the Africans. 'The ideal for them — if with many exceptions, especially in those societies which became more acutely stratified and hierarchical, notably in West Africa — has been 'conformity to the life led by one's fellows, seeking little or no wealth and position' in a carefully egalitarian world where personal gain above the level of the accepted norm would be a source of unhappiness or danger, since exceptional achievement could be only at the expense of one's neighbours.

This is why, as we shall see, exceptional achievement could be interpreted as a sign of social malice: as the workings of destructive witchcraft. 'Among the Bemba,' Gluckman adds, 'to find one beehive is good luck, to find two is very good luck, to find three is witchcraft'; and he recalls knowing a man who had given up living in a hen house he had built 'because he believed that he had become the target of envious witches'. Whoever failed to live the good life according to the ideal balance, or became the recipient of favours beyond the average, might well be thought to have set himself against the norm. And it was the norm of the ideal balance, however battered by individual ambitions or dimmed by social stratification, that shape morality through the years. 66-67

Traditional religion and social control

Eg Kalabari in S Nigeria. There are 3 sorts of spirits:

1. Founding heroes who first settled here
2. Secondly, there are the ancestors of different Kalabari lineage segments, 'considered as instruments of collective descent-group welfare'. These are capable of being opposed to one another in defence of their respective living descendants, so that conflicts at this level may have to be referred to the spirits of the founding heroes.
3. Thirdly, and in a way that the modern world may find attractively subtle and realistic, there are 'freelance spirits' — 'water-people' who are thought to live at the bottom of the Kalabari creeks and who 'cater for individualistic competitive aspirations'. The water-people are ready to confer their benefits on all corners according to the offerings made to them. They are not associated with any of the permanent social groupings in the community.

Though with many cults and much individualism, the Kalabari system is neither arbitrary nor chaotic. It consists in a triangle of forces: with the spirits of the lineage ancestors 'underpinning the life and strength of the lineages, bringing misfortune to those who betray lineage values and fortune to those who promote them'; secondly, with the spirits of the founding heroes 'underpinning the life and strength of the community and its various institutions'; and, thirdly, with the spirits of the water-people as 'patrons of human individualism', as 'the forces underpinning all that lies beyond the confines of the established social order'.

Thus the Kalabari apprehension of reality — their religion and what has followed from it — has composed a theoretical model of the workings of their world according to observed and meditated experience. A given people, that is, entered a given environment — the founding heroes of the Kalabari settling in the delta — and there adjusted themselves to the needs of social growth. These needs they have codified in terms we call religious. And if we ask just why Kalabari thought should have taken a religious form we are simply confused by the terms of our modern dichotomy: science—supernatural, reality—religion. In traditional thought the dichotomy was not there because the apprehension was a total one. It was concerned not only with what was, but also with what ought to be and with why it ought to be. It was mandatory as well as explanatory. Things being as they were, such and such actions or ambitions were permissible, while others were riot. As organic aspects of the same necessary truth, means and ends were indivisibly conceived. Today in modern societies we have torn means and ends apart; and the price of our progress has become a split consciousness. Science tells us what can be done but not what ought to be done or why it ought to be done. The mandatory moral issues are necessarily eluded, and scientists who raise them are likely to be chided for speaking out of turn. Otherwise the mandatory issues, the moral issues of choice that govern behaviour, are left to the promptings of whatever feeble residue of our own traditional morality may still exist, or else to sectional decisions about the 'national good'. And so we have a situation in which science predicts disaster with the continued spread of nuclear weapons, but

the spread continues despite all lamentations because the mandatory moral force to stop it is no longer there Whereas in African apprehension, persistently, the explanatory-mandatory duality of thought possessed its ultimate satisfaction in what was also its ultimate sanction. Conformity to prescriber.! behaviour became the only way of doing what was 'right and natural', of belonging to the 'community of the blessed', of flowering from the isolation of the one into the communion of the many. 115-16

Witchcraft and its social context

Every old civilization contained them [beliefs in witchcraft] and more or less violently wrestled with them. A fairly early but characteristic European example occurred in AD 1080 when King Harald of Denmark was told by Pope Gregory VII that 'he must no longer tolerate among his people the gruesome superstition according to which Christian priests or wicked women are held answerable for bad weather, storms, unfruitful years, or outbreaks of plague'. But King Harald had to tolerate it, for this was what a great many people continued to believe for centuries.

So long as the Age of Faith held firm, superstitions of this sort seldom much bothered the Church in Europe. Beliefs in wizards and their powers were generally treated in the ecclesiastical courts as more or less harmless forms of heresy, inseparable from peasant ignorance, and were punished as such. Although persons found guilty of witchcraft in thirteenth-century Germany were sometimes burned to death by the civil authorities, the Church itself approved 'only of disciplinary punishments against these offences and expulsion of the offenders from the communion of the Church', and refrained in this early period from calling in the 'arm of secular justice for the bodily chastisement of those accused of sorcery'. Even for a later Scotland, severe on such heresies, there is the record of a wayward Celtic parson who was allowed to keep his benefice even though he was believed to have danced his flock around the phallic figure of a god. Things grew harsher when the supremacy of the Church began to be seriously challenged as the unique explainer of the world, and thus the necessary upholder of its social order. Early in the thirteenth century the great heresy of the Albigenses in southern France required a holy war to put it down. Other challenges followed: soon there were new signals of alarm. In 1310 the Synod of Treves found it wise to renew 'with increasing severity the old Church decree: "No woman shall give out that she rides about at night with the goddess Diana, or with Herodias and an innumerable company of other women, for it is diabolical imposture."

Throughout the fourteenth century the Age of Faith was increasingly threatened, while men sought explanations of the world in terms which conflicted ever more sharply with the teachings of the Church. As this continued, the condemnation of witchcraft or what was considered to be witchcraft or confessed to be witchcraft, flowed into and filled the minds of men. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries presided over a tidal wave of witchcraft superstition and repression; and it is not difficult to see in this a consequence of profound cultural and social tensions.

Janssen, a careful if Catholic historian, has put the matter in terms that are very suggestive for the later African context. 'Things assumed a different shape' from the relative tolerance of earlier times, he writes, 'after the belief in demons and in witchcraft was strengthened by the appearance of Gnostic-Manichaean sects which taught that there were two conflicting equally powerful principles co-existing from eternity, a good principle and a bad principle, and that the bad principle was lord and ruler of the material world.' Whatever the social influence of such sects might really be, heretics began to be regarded as allies of the bad principle and were accused of terrible crimes: the devil, adjured with certain formulae of prayer visited them during their assemblies and led them into every imaginable vice.

'The Black Death, which in the fourteenth century carried off almost a quarter of the population of Europe, was largely regarded as the work of diabolical powers: the general consternation rose in countless cases to frenzy.' Thus a report of 1484 by a Rhineland clergyman claimed that 'magic potions for protection against the Black Death were brewed at secret, nocturnal gatherings, dissolute banqueting was carried on, and the old heathen belief in manifold, occult, magic arts and the "flights of witches gained increased strength'.

After 1500 these frenzies carried all before them. In 1532 an imperial decree made sorcery a serious crime throughout the Holy Roman Empire. In the 1570s the Elector of Saxony went so far as to decree that fortune-telling was to be punished by death. An English law of 1563 condemned to death all who were found guilty of 'invocations of evil spirits, and of sorceries, enchantments, charms and witchcrafts . . . whereby any person shall happen to be killed or destroyed', a draconian act which spoke volumes not only for the existence of these beliefs among ordinary people, but also among the potentates who made the laws. Elizabeth's successor James (1603-25) went further still by unleashing a plague of witch-burnings, especially in Scotland.

Janssen has summed it up:

After the outbreak [of the Great Schism] belief in the power and the arts of the devil became universally widespread, and the demoralization resulting everywhere from the religious, social and political movements and struggles, especially

favourable to the development of the witch-superstition, procured for it an extension undreamt of before, and led to the most barbarous procedure.

The words are not too strong. Hailed as the 'dawn of modern reason', which in some respects it certainly was, the sixteenth century also became the great epoch of magical superstition. Large quantities of 'magic books' were published. Vast numbers of magicians trod the countryside as 'wondermen, ring-slippers, mist-makers, illusionists, mandrake-hawkers, quacks, howlers, spider-eaters, conjurors, benison—healers, hare—catchers, bullet-stoppers, sure-shots, stab-proofs, sword-dancers, love—compellers mice—drivers or sat—leaders, spear and sword doctors'. The records make all this sound like mass hysteria. Countless women, mostly of advanced years, confessed to being witches and to having committed fearful crimes. They were burned without mercy, however obviously impossible their 'crimes' must now seem. 'A midwife confessed that she had killed as many as 170 children, twenty-two of whom were related to her. An old man confessed to having said that if he had not been arrested three days before he would have destroyed ever', thing for twenty-five leagues round with hail and gravel-stones ... The seventy-five-year-old woman, Anna Ottlin of Zeilitzheim, confessed that she had committed over one hundred murders, and begged that, as she was old and feeble, she might be allowed three days' respite, when she would tax her memory and tell of each separate crime in detail.'

Where voluntary confessions were not available, appalling tortures were applied 'with racks, thumbscrews and the Boot, an iron frame screwed ever more tightly to the accused a foot. 'Another witch, who had been several times tortured but had always recanted everything after being set free, was finally, after still severer torture, brought to confess that she had dug up the bodies of sixteen children, boiled them and made witch salve out of them.' To the stake went numberless people with bodies so broken or torn that they could no longer stand upon their legs. Typical was the fate of the landlady of the Crown Inn at Nordlingen, Marian Hollin, who was tortured no fewer than fifty-six times in the most agonizing way; or the little girl of Ratisbon who confessed to lawyers and clergy that 'the devil entered her in the shape of a fly, and that she had often been in and out of hell with the devil', whereupon two jurists 'were of the opinion that she should not be punished by death by fire, but only stretched [on the rack] a few times by way of warning, then be put in a pillory, have her cheeks burned through and sent into perpetual exile'; or the dozen witches of Spalt who were burned in a single day; or the fifteen hundred of Ellingen who were burned in a single year; or the thousands of others, bemused, bitterly tortured and finally burned, who died in holocausts during those mysterious times.

It is obvious, then, that pre-scientific Africa need make no apologies to pre-scientific Europe. Beliefs in magic, moreover, were a long time a-dying in Europe even among men of science: Sir Isaac Newton, Fortes has remarked, 'held beliefs about occult powers that would seem thoroughly sensible to a modern Melanesian or pagan African'. Even in 1967-8 the European Christian community in Rhodesia was exhorted by its leaders to pray for rain. Over and beyond such points, however, there are difficulties in making Afro-European parallels: we need, in fact, a general sociology of witchcraft that has yet to be attempted.

Most observers seem agreed that witchcraft fears have much increased in Africa over the past fifty or a hundred years, and also that these fears are less controlled than they used to be by social restraints or other in-built protective mechanisms. As will be seen later, the reason appears to lie in the disintegration of traditional structures and systems since the 1880s: in the passing of Africa's age of faith, and consequently in a growth of personal anxiety and alienation, No longer checked by the dykes of traditional precedent, witchcraft fears have fed on new or greatly increased mental and social strains. 126-8

Explanation and prediction

When you walk along a bush path and are bitten by a snake or twist your ankle on a root, you will not fail to know the immediate reason for your pain. Disbelieving in coincidence, however, you will want to know more than this, Why was it in your path that the snake or root happened to be lying? Why this particular conjunction of cause and effect?

These are the questions that may worry you, for they clearly point to the witchcraft that interrupts the ideal flow of daily life, you will proceed for advice to a diviner : prudently, since if someone's witchcraft has caused you to be bitten (be a snake today) what still more dangerous hurt may not await you tomorrow? Consulting his oracle, the diviner will explain that you are the victim of witchcraft either because you have sinned — gone against the rules — or because, though innocent yourself, you have attracted the malice of someone else who has sinned, In either case he will tell you what to do, so as to avert a worse misfortune in the future.

If worse misfortune still befalls you, it will not follow that the diviner was wrong in his prescriptions or advice. He may have been wrong. Everyone knows that some diviners are better than others. Maybe you will think it well to consult two or more of them — provided, of course) that you can raise the necessary fees, But the reason for continued misfortune may also be that you have yourself continued to offend, failed to make adequate amends to indignant ancestors, or

broken some other rule that you had overlooked or set aside as more important. The system, in short, is a total one. It protects itself against predictive failure.

These attitudes towards misfortune vary from people to people. In some cases they seem to be more consistently developed than in others, Generally, however, Fortes's dictum about the Tallensi holds good for all in varying degree. In African traditional thought 'everything that happens has material causes and conditions, but [these] are effective only by grace of the mystical agencies which are the ultimate arbiters of nature and society': the agencies, that is, which are thought of as having given birth to society and shaped its manner of survival, Whatever interrupts this ideal pattern of life is thus to be referred to some breakdown in conduct which has human and therefore controllable explanations. If the controls fail to work, this is not because the diagnosis is worthless or the methods of treatment ineffectual, but because they are inadequate or fallibly applied. 140-41

The danger within – conflict in families

Fear of divine punishment and love of Good for its own sake may be powerful conductors of behaviour. But fallible mankind has never found them enough. Africans, like others, have required less mystical deterrents to sin. Public opinion has been one of these, youthful training another.

In Chewaland, for example, notions of ideal character and behaviour have supposed that 'the good man is the meek one who pleases all, gives offence to none, and is wise, generous and sociable'. This is what public opinion has required of Chewa who want to enjoy a pleasant reputation. And although it is obvious that public opinion will often have failed to induce wisdom, generosity or sociability, its force was considerable in these small -scale societies where it was always difficult for a transgressor to 'move away to where the neighbours do not know'.

There was also training by initiation schooling and other rites de passage designed to instil the ideal by 'setting up values and behaviour patterns both for emulation and detestation'. Cautionary tales and fables did the same. They consistently opposed the companionable human order of the village to the outcast wilderness of the bush, equating the one with hope and the other with despair, and employing a rich symbolism to drive home the Contrast.

Yet Chewa have found public opinion and youthful schooling, even when backed by mystical sanctions, nothing like enough to keep them on the path of righteousness. Individuals have continued to invite the attentions of the Devil by coveting their neighbour's wife or husband, pushing their own careers, fornicating with forbidden relatives, breaking out in acts of violence, and generally doing what they know they should not do. As well as a moral order, they have required a legal one; and there is plenty to suggest that they have been deterred from transgression as much by their jural institutions as by anything else. Yet it is precisely here, in considering the limits of jural sanction, that one finds another clue to the place of witchcraft belief, and to its often concealed connections with the social order.

It happens that the Chewa social order is matrilineal. They trace descent, and therefore succession to property and office, through mother's brothers and not through natural fathers. So litigation among the Chewa 'is generally between one person supported by his [mother's kin] and another supported by his'. But in these family matters the jural system breaks down. Criminal and civil law fall away, as with many African peoples, before conflicts within a given family grouping; and 'you have to go home and settle your quarrel there'.

This limit on jural effectiveness has distant origins in the settlement of intrafamily disputes. Very possibly, it stands for an expression of the supreme value of the moral order as epitomized in kinship relations: only ancestral sanctions, not legal and therefore profane ones, should regulate the affairs of close kin. However that may be, Chewa have accepted it. In what way, then, can family disputes be settled? Chewa find the answer in their witchcraft beliefs. Marwick's informants 'contended that matrilineal relatives "practise sorcery against one another" because, belonging to a close-knit group, they are unable to settle their disputes by the judicial procedures available to unrelated persons who quarrel'. Being outside the jurisdiction of the courts, disputes between close kin, and the tensions which arise from such disputes, are relieved 'not by catharsis and adjustment, but by suppression; and informants believe that the smouldering hatred resulting from suppression flares up in due course in the form of sorcery'. Wronged by your mother's brother, or by your mother's sister's son, you cannot take him to the courts. So you bottle up your resentment and eventually you hate him. Hating him, you open the gates to the entry of Evil. You have recourse, or are believed to have recourse, to the machinations of sorcery.

146-7

Answers to Anxiety

A young husband finds himself impotent not long after marriage. Applying to a traditional doctor, he is informed that his sister is a witch who has removed his testicles. Unless these are returned to him, his impotence will continue. The sister

is accordingly summoned before the doctor. She readily confesses her guilt and informs those at the hearing that she has hidden her brother's testicles in an ant hill. When asked whether the ants will not have eaten the testicles, she replies that she hid them in an empty cigarette tin. With this information the doctor and his followers move to the ant hill in question, and begin to dig. They turn up an empty cigarette tin. 'This tin is presented to the patient by the doctor, and the patient gratefully accepts with it the return of his missing testicles. Within a year, his wife is delivered of a son. Most psychiatric workers in Africa seem now agreed that suggestive therapy in cases of this kind, practised by traditional doctors deeply familiar with their milieu, has often obtained good results. The following exchange took place during a radio interview with Dr T. Adeoye Larnbo, M.D., M.R.C.P., D.P.M., a Nigerian psychiatrist much respected for his clinical work, who afterwards became Vice-Chancellor of Ibadan University:

Is it possible to say how effective these witch-doctors, these traditional healers, are in treatment?

LAMBO: Let me be perfectly honest with you Their treatment procedures and their entire management are, I think, vastly superior to what we are doing at the present moment in Nigeria.

To what you are doing?

LAMBO: To what I am doing: and probably to what some of my colleagues are doing.

Let us get down to figures, Dr Lambo: what is their success rate in your estimation?

LAMBO: About three years ago we made an evaluation, a programme of their work, and compared this with our own, and we discovered that actually they -were scoring almost sixty-per-cent success in their treatment of neurosis. And we were scoring forty per Cent — in fact, less than forty per cent.

This is not to argue that traditional methods of psychotherapy have been sufficient. Though useful in the treatment of anxiety neuroses they were and are not, according to another specialist opinion, of any help to psychotics or to people suffering from severe traumatic reactions. Within these limits, however, few modern specialists would now question the right of these methods to be regarded with respect.

It seems, indeed, that Africans long anticipated Freud and what has flowed from Freud. Their methods have been akin to modern methods: 'the order of criteria employed [by witch- doctors] to distinguish particular kinds of mental and emotional disturbance', according to Leighton and Hughes, 'are very similar to the criteria employed in psychiatry. People are said to have this or that illness according to symptoms, degree of impairment, the causes that can be discerned, and response to treatment.' Writing of Yoruba doctors, they add that 'many kinds of psychoneurotic symptoms, certain manifestations of reactive depression and a good many types of personality disorder are perceived by [these healers]'. Inaugurating the first Pan-African Psychiatric Conference in 1964, Sir Aubrey Lewis gave full recognition to the 'thesis that the psychotherapy inherent in these methods has a profound appeal and a probable validity which the sophisticated psychiatrist cannot afford to ignore, and which he will not wish to deride'.

'If it were not for the traditional healers,' a long-experienced European psychiatrist in charge of a central African mental hospital said to me one day while we were discussing these matters, 'we should be flooded out here with anxiety-neurosis cases.' And he proceeded to describe two such cases which his hospital had treated, but which, in his view, traditional healers could also have treated by their own methods and often did treat.

One was of a wife who resented her husband's marrying again. She had become so neurotic as to be completely speechless, and had taken to firing huts. Her repressive mechanism had long since prevented her from reasoning about her condition. 'So we applied abreaction in the form of the so-called "truth drugs", and then it all came out.' She could release her hatred in words, and, in so doing, move towards relief.

The second case was of a type sometimes called in evidence, (by Europeans in Africa) to show that Africans cannot face the modern world. This was of a man living in the capital city who came into hospital with neurotic afflictions, including spasmodic drunkenness that he was ashamed of but could not control. He was finally brought to see that his condition was a product of guilt disturbance. He had a wife in the country for whom he was failing to provide as he should. The truth about this man, in short, was not that he could not 'face the modern world', but that he could not live at peace with it while continuing to meet the counter-claims of the 'old world'. The modern world insisted that he come to the city by himself and earn cash: the old world insisted that he support his wife in the country. In this case, as it happened, the man was earning enough to support her. In most 'settler colonies', by contrast, workers in the cities were regularly paid a single man's wage as a matter of policy, so as to keep African families out of the towns. The resultant strains are obvious. It was in helping to relieve strains of this kind that traditional doctors played an ever more important part in everyday African life during the colonial period.

Even so, how did their methods 'work'? Why, in the case of the missing testicles, did the doctor settle on the patient's sister as the source of trouble? The likely answer is that he did so because he was well informed about local gossip as well as about local beliefs and customs. Personalities apart, one could expect that this occurred in a matrilineal society where the sister's brother's son, if and when he was born, would inherit wealth or position within the family. The sister

will have had her own reasons for wishing her brother to be childless, and the brother will have been aware of this to the point of depressive anxiety.

But why would the doctor accuse the sister of witchcraft? Clearly, because impotence is an interference in the 'right and natural' ordering of life. Its 'cause' would therefore lie in the workings of Evil: 'with this ewe, in the deliberate manipulation of Evil. Then from where would the doctor draw his power to induce belief that the missing testicles, however invisible, were 'really' in the empty cigarette tin? Thus one enters the complex unities of traditional thought. for the doctor, though trained in his work, and even highly trained for several years, was less a secular than a religious figure: less a doctor in the modern sense than a priest whose authority was drawn from an explanatory- mandatory charter of belief. The doctor had authority because he had access to the explanations that lie beyond commonsense, the explanations by which Africans have looked for the roots of causality.

The training of doctors was a serious affair. In the past this craft seems often to have been divided into two chief sections, respectively practising in herbal cures and in divination, or other forms of religious treatment. Today there is a good deal of blurring of the lines of division, at least in the towns where mere superstition, the broken husk of any religious system, tends to flourish amid the survival of cultures now much adulterated or undermined by contact with the modern world. That is partly why recent manifestations of the healing craft can sometimes look absurd. Raymond Prince reports a Nigerian doctor's sign which read. We Cure Mad Fellows in Twenty-One Days, and another which proclaimed We Specialise in Everything.

Traditionally, specialists in anti-witchcraft followed the craft from father to son through several or even many generations, handing down their techniques and forms of training, their quintessential experience and habitual shrines where applications could be made to the spirits. Half a century ago it was observed by Rattray, who lived among the Asante of Ghana, that training for priesthood — for doctorship - was an arduous business of three years during which the trainee must observe full continence and other testing prohibitions.

154-7

If a much-narrowed idea of religion makes it hard for us to grasp these attitudes, the difficulty is compounded by our similarly narrowed notion of social responsibility. A great deal of African treatment rests upon the practice of group therapy - but of one that is not, as with us, an artificial or 'organized' affair, The group therapy of Africa has been only a specialized aspect of a total situation. This has been the situation in which the thoughts, beliefs and actions of the individual are embedded deeply in the fact and knowledge of community. The suffering might be solitary, but the treatment was social even when it was also highly personal. And this could be so not only because of the small scale of these societies, but above all because of their capacity to externalize, publicly accept, and treat anxiety by open rituals carrying a sufficient power of therapeutic relief. Society, in Fortes's words, took over the burden of adjustment which, with us, falls entirely on the individual, African society could take over this burden, resolving individual tensions with personal advice or group tensions 'in a wave of enthusiasm and solidarity', because it rested upon an imperative morality. In our western world, as we live it today, any such basis for curative 'enthusiasm and solidarity' has long begun to crumble. Increasingly, whether we like it or nor, we are left with the solitary on the couch or, of course, to the shooting in the streets. Loss or gain? 'The nature of African civilization has no answer. Complete within itself, it looked no further. Progressive in its resolution of human rdnsons, it remained constrictive by the very totality of its terms. Within those terms there was nothing that it could not explain. no behaviour that it could not provide for. Only the irruption of the modern world, raggedly, unmindfully, has availed to break the mould of this most comprehensive work of social architecture. 162-3

Circumcision

Amongst the Dogon of Ogol.

Each human being from the first was endowed with two souls of different sex... In the man the female soul was located in the prepuce; in the woman the male soul was located in the clitoris. But the foreknowledge of Nummo no doubt revealed to him the disadvantages of this makeshift. Man's life was not capable of supporting both beings: each person would have to merge himself in the sex for which he appeared to be best fitted.

'The Nurrimo accordingly circumcised the man, thus removing from him all the femininity of his prepuce', while the masculinity of the woman was 'excised by an invisible hand' during intercourse with the defeminized man. 175-6

Relationship with Europeans

Initially seen as just another moving tribe to deal and negotiate with.

After about 1890 there emerged a general realization that the nature of European intentions was quite different from what the Europeans had said. Much oral tradition reflects this awakening to reality. Literary sources for contemporary African opinion are still rare outside the writings of those few Africans who had managed to secure a Christian and therefore literate education. They may become less rare as more is known about the Muslim literature of that period. No doubt the ease of al-Hajj Umar of Kete Krachi — not to be confused with the Umar bin Said of fifty years earlier — will not prove unique. Until the scholars of Ghana University came upon his trail a few years ago, nothing was known outside his own culture about this important poet and pedagogue. Yet it seems that al-Hajj Umar of Kete Krachi, a trading town of northern Ghana, was a writer of influence and talent, and well able to stand among the notables of Sudanese learning since remote times.

He wrote a great deal. Living until 1894 in Salaga, that ‘Timbuktu of the south’ which had inherited much of the old intermediary trade between the central forests of west Africa and the central Sudan, he had good reason to know about the movements and pressures of the French, the British and the Germans. In one of his poems, composed in 1900-01 he ‘enumerates their mistreatments of Africans in more than two hundred places on the coasts and in the interior of West Africa’, and says:

I’ve set out this poem in rhyme
For the profit of intelligent folk
Anyone with brains will heed it.
A sun of disaster has arisen in the West.
Glaring down on people and populated places.
Poetically speaking, I mean the catastrophe of the Christians.
The Christian calamity has come upon us
Like a dust-cloud.
At the start of the affair, they came Peacefully.
With soft sweet talk.
‘We’ve come to trade,’ they said,
‘To reform the beliefs of the people,’
‘To halt oppression here below, and theft,’
‘To clean up and overthrow corruption.’
Not all of us grasped their motives,
So now we’ve become their inferior.
They deluded us with little gifts
And fed us tasty foods
But recently they’ve changed their tune...

Anyone who probes the story of these years, as research is now beginning to reveal it, will see the themes of containment and resistance played out repeatedly by kings and chiefs and village governments who tried in several ways to reduce or absorb European penetration. In the end the Europeans were the master because they always possessed superior military means and organization, though by no means always able to bring these into action. But primary resistance was widespread, stubborn, and prolonged. And when primary resistance failed, men turned to other ways of self-defence, and tried again to defy the fate which had come upon them.

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