

Mary Kingsley – Travels in West Africa

1897; National Geographic 2002

Extracts AJM Dec 09

Ah me! If the aim of life were happiness and pleasure, Africa should send us missionaries instead of our sending them to her – but, fortunately for the work of the world, happiness is not. 114



Institutions

Kiva, it seems, long time ago had a transaction in re a tooth of ivory with a man who, unfortunately, happened to be in this town tonight, and Kiva owed the said man a coat. Kiva, it seems, has been spending the whole evening demonstrating to his creditor that, had he only known they were to meet, he would have brought the coat with him—a particularly beautiful coat—and the reason he has not paid it before is that he has mislaid the creditor's address. The creditor says he has called repeatedly at Kiva's village, that notorious M'fetta, and Kiva has never been at home; and moreover that Kiva's wife (one of them) stole a yellow dog of great value from his (the creditor's) canoe. Kiva says, women will be women, and he had gone off to sleep thinking the affair had blown over and the bill renewed for the time being. The creditor had not gone to sleep; but sat up thinking the affair over and remembered many cases, all cited in full, of how Kiva had failed to meet his debts; also Kiva's brother on the mother's side and uncle ditto; and so has decided to foreclose forthwith on the debtor's estate, and as the estate is represented by and consists of Kiva's person, to take and seize upon it and eat it. It is always highly interesting to observe the germ of any of our own institutions existing in the culture of a lower race. Nevertheless it is trying to be hauled out of one's sleep in the middle of the night, and plunged into this study. Evidently this was a trace of an early form of the bankruptcy Court; the court which clears a man of his debt, being here represented by the knife and the cooking pot; the whitewashing, as I believe it is termed with us, also shows, only it is not the debtor who is whitewashed, but the creditors doing themselves over with white clay to celebrate the removal of their enemy from his sphere of meretricious activity. This inversion may arise from the fact that whitewashing a creditor who was about to be cooked would be unwise, as the stuff would boil off the bits and spoil the gravy. There is always some fragment of sound sense underlying African institutions. Kiva was, when I got out, tied up, talking nineteen to the dozen; and so was every one else; and a lady was working up white clay in a pot. ... Fortunately for the reader it is impossible for me to give in full detail the proceedings of the Court. I do not think if the whole of Mr. Pitman's school of shorthand had been there to take them down the thing could possibly have been done in word-writing. If the late Richard Wagner, however, had been present he could have scored the performance for a full orchestra; and with all its weird grunts arid roars, and pistol-like finger clicks, and its elongated words and thigh slaps, it would have been a masterpiece. 178-9

The Fan tribe

Such are the pursuits, sports and pastimes of my friends the Fans. I have been considerably chaffed both by whites and blacks about my partiality for this tribe, but as I like Africans in my way—not a la Sierra Leone—and these Africans have more of the qualities I like than any other tribe I have met, it is but natural that I should prefer them. They are brave and so you can respect them, which is an essential element in a friendly feeling. They are on the whole a fine race, particularly those in the mountain districts of the Sierra del Cristal, where one continually sees magnificent specimens of human beings, both male and female. Their colour is light bronze, many of the men have beards, and albinos are rare among them. The average height in the mountain districts is five feet six to five feet eight, the difference in stature between men and women not being great. Their countenances are very bright and expressive, and if' once you have been among them, you can never mistake a Fan. But it is in their mental characteristics that their difference from the lethargic dying-out coast tribes is most marked. The Fan is full of fire, temper, intelligence and go; very teachable, rather difficult to manage, quick to take offence, and utterly indifferent to human life. I ought to say that other people, Who should know him better than I, say he is a treacherous, thievish, murderous cannibal. I never found him treacherous; but then I never trusted him, remembering one of the aphorisms of my great teacher Captain Boler of Bonny, "It's not safe to go among bush tribes, but if you are such a fool as to go, you needn't go and be a bigger fool still, you've done enough." And Captain Boler's other great aphorism was: "Never be afraid of a black man." "What if I can't help it?" said I. "Don't show it," said he. To these precepts I humbly add another: "Never lose your head." My most favourite form of literature,

I may remark, is accounts of mountaineering exploits, though I have never seen a glacier or a permanent snow mountain in my life. I do not care a row of pins how badly they may be written, and what form of bumble-puppy grammar and composition is employed, as long as the writer will walk along the edge of a precipice with a sheer fall of thousands of feet on one side and a sheer wall on the other; or better still crawl up an arête with a precipice on either. Nothing on earth would persuade me to do either of these things myself, but they remind me bits of country I have been through where you walk along a narrow line of security with gulfs of murder looming on each side, and where exactly the same way you are as safe as if you were in your easy chair at home, as long as you get sufficient holding ground: not on rock in bush village inhabited by murderous cannibals, but on ideas in those men's and women's minds; and these ideas, which I think I may say will always find, give you safety. It is not advisable to play with them or to attempt to eradicate them, because you regard them as superstitious and never, never shoot too soon. I have never had to shoot, and hope never to have to; because in such a situation, one white alone with no troops to back him means a clean finish. But this would not discourage me if I had to start, only it makes me more inclined to walk round obstacle, than to become a mere blood splotch against it, if this can be done without losing your self-respect, which is the mainspring of your power in West Africa. 213-4



Fetish in West African tribes

HAVING GIVEN SOME ACCOUNT of my personal experiences among an African tribe in its original state, i.e. in a state uninfluenced by European ideas and culture, I will make an attempt to give a rough sketch of the African form of the thought and the difficulties of studying it because the study of this thing is my chief motive for going to West Africa. Since 1893 I have been collecting information in its native states regarding Fetish, and I use the usual terms fetish and juju because they have among us a certain fixed value—a conventional value, but a useful one. Neither “fetish” nor “ju-ju” are native words. Fetish comes from the word the old Portuguese explorers used to designate the objects they thought the natives worshipped, and in which they were wise enough to recognize a certain similarity to their own little images and relics of Saints, “Feitico.” Ju-ju, on the other hand, is French, and comes from the word for a toy or doll, so it is not so applicable as the Portuguese name, for the native image is not a doll or toy, and has far more affinity to the image of a saint, inasmuch as it is not venerated for itself, or treasured because of its prettiness, but only because it is the residence, or the occasional haunt, of a spirit.

Stalking the wild West African idea is one of the most charming pursuits in the world. Quite apart from the intellectual, it has a high sporting interest; for its pursuit is as beset with difficulty and danger as grizzly bear hunting, yet the climate in which you carry on this pursuit—vile as it is warm, which to me is almost an essential of existence. I beg you to understand that I make no pretension to a thorough knowledge of Fetish ideas; I am only on the threshold. ...

I do not intend here to weary you with more than a small portion of even my present knowledge, for I have great collections of facts that I keep only to compare with those of other hunters of the wild idea, and which in their present state are valueless to the cabinet ethnologist. Some of these may be rank lies, some of them mere individual mind freaks, others have underlying them some idea I am not at present in touch with. The difficulty of gaining a true conception of the savage's real idea is great and varied. In places on the Coast where there is, or has been, much missionary influence the trouble is greatest, for in the first case the natives carefully conceal things they fear will bring them into derision and contempt, although they still keep them in their innermost hearts; and in the second case, you have a set of traditions which are Christian in origin, though frequently altered almost beyond recognition by being kept for years in the atmosphere of the African mind. For example, there is this beautiful story now extant among the Cabindas. God made at first all men black—He always does in the African story—and then He went across a great river and called men to follow him, and the wisest and the bravest and the best plunged into the great river and crossed it; and the water washed them white, so they are the ancestors or the white men. But the others were afraid too much, and said, “No, we are comfortable here; we have our dances, and our tom-toms, and plenty to eat—we won't risk it, we'll stay here”; and they remained in the old place, and from them come the black men. But to this day the white men come to the bank, on the other side of the river, and call to the black men, saying, “Come, it is better over here.” I fear there is little doubt that this story is a modified version of some parable preached to the Cabindas at the time the Capuchins had such influence among them, before they were driven out of the lower Congo regions more than a hundred years ago, for political reasons by the Portuguese. 231-2

The difficulty of the language is, however, far less than the whole set of difficulties with your own mind. Unless you can make it pliant enough to follow the African idea step by step, however much care you may take, you will not bag your game. I heard an account the other day of a representative of Her Majesty in Africa who went out for a day's antelope shooting. There were plenty of antelope about, and he stalked them with great care; but always, just before he got within shot of the game, they saw something and bolted. Knowing he and the boy behind him had been making no sound

and could not have been seen, he stalked on, but always with the same result; until happening to look round, he saw the boy behind him was supporting the dignity of the Empire at large, and this representative of it in particular, by steadfastly holding aloft the consular flag. Well, if you go hunting the African idea with the flag of your own religion or opinions floating ostentatiously over you, you will similarly get a very poor bag. 235

However good may be the outfit for your work that you take with you, you will have, at first, great difficulty in realizing that it is possible for the people you are among really to believe things in the way they do. And you cannot associate with them long before you must recognize that these Africans have often a remarkable mental acuteness and a large share of common sense; that there is nothing really "child-like" in their form of mind at all. Observe them further and you will find they are not a flighty-minded, mystical set of people in the least. They are not dreamers, or poets, and you will observe, and I hope observe closely— for to my mind this is the most important difference between their make of mind and our own—that they are notably deficient in all mechanical arts: they have never made, unless under white direction and instruction, a single fourteenth-rate piece of cloth, pottery, a tool or machine, house, road, bridge, picture or statue; that a written language of their own construction they none of them possess. A careful study of the things a man, black or white, fails to do, whether for good or evil, usually gives you a truer knowledge of the man than the things he succeeds in doing. When you fully realize his acuteness on one hand and this mechanical incapacity on the other which exist in the people you are studying, you can go ahead. studying, you can go ahead. Only, I beseech you, go ahead carefully. When you have found the easy key that opens the reason underlying a series of facts, as for example, these: a Benga spits on your hand as a greeting; you see a man who has been marching regardless through the broiling sun all the forenoon, with a heavy load, elaborately steal round in the shelter of the houses, instead of crossing the street; you come across a tribe that cuts its dead up into small pieces and scatters them broadcast, and another tribe that thinks a white man's eye—ball is a most desirable thing to be possessed of—do not, when you have found this key. drop your collecting work, and go home with a shriek of "I know all about Fetish," because you don't, for the key to the above facts will not open the reason why it is regarded advisable to kill a person who is making *lkung*; or why you should avoid at night a cotton tree that has red earth at its roots; or why combings of hair and paring of nails should be taken care of; or why a speck of blood that may fall from your flesh should be cut out of wood—if it has fallen on that—and destroyed, and if it has fallen on the ground stamped and rubbed into the soil with great care. 'This set requires another key entirely.

I must warn you also that your own mind requires protection when you send it stalking the savage idea through the tangled forests, the dark caves, the swamps and the fogs of the Ethiopian intellect. The best protection lies in recognizing the untrustworthiness of human evidence regarding the unseen, and also the seen, when it is viewed by a person who has in his mind an explanation of the phenomenon before it occurs. The truth is, the study of natural phenomena knocks the bottom out of any man's conceit if it is done honestly and not by selecting only those facts that fit in with his preconceived or engrafted notions. And to my mind, the wisest way is to get into the state of mind of an old marine engineer who oils and sees that every screw and bolt of his engines is clean and well watched, and who loves them as living things caressing and scolding them himself, defending them, with stormy language, against the aspersions of the silly, uninformed outside world which persists in regarding them as mere machines, a thing his superior intelligence and experience knows they are not. 239-40

Religious beliefs in West African tribes

They regard their god as the creator of man, plants, animals, and the earth, and they hold that having made them, he takes no further interest in the affair. But not so the crowd of spirits with which the universe is peopled, they take only too much interest and the Bantu wishes they would not and is perpetually saying so in his prayers, a large percentage whereof amounts to "Go away, we don't want you." "Come not into this house, this village, or its plantations." He knows from experience that the spirits pay little heed to these abjurations, and as they are the people who must be attended to, he develops a cult whereby they may be managed, used, and understood. This cult is what we call witchcraft.

As I am not here writing a complete work on Fetish I will leave Nani on one side, and turn to the inferior spirits. These are almost all malevolent; sometimes they can be coaxed into having creditable feelings, like generosity and gratitude, but you can never trust them. No, not even if you are yourself a well-established medicine man. Indeed they are particularly dangerous to medicine men, just as lions are to lion tamers. And many a professional gentleman in the hill bloom of his practice, gets eaten up by his own particular familiar which he has to keep in his own inside whenever he has not sent it off into other people's. I am indebted to the Reverend Doctor Nassau for a great quantity of valuable information regarding Bantu religious ideas—information which no one is so competent to give as he, for no one else knows the West Coast Bantu tribes with the same thoroughness and sympathy. He has lived among them since 1881, and is perfectly conversant with their languages and culture, and he brings to bear upon the study of them a singularly clear, powerful, and highly-educated intelligence, I shall therefore carefully ticket the information I have derived from him, so that it may not be mixed with my own. I may be wrong in my deductions, but Dr. Nassau's are above suspicion. He says the origin of these spirits is vague—some of them come into existence by the authority of Anzani (by which you will understand, please, the same god I have quoted above as having many names), others are self-existent—many are distinctly the souls

of departed human beings, "which in the future which is all around them" retain their human wants and feelings, and the Doctor assures me he has heard dying people with their last breath threatening to return as spirits to revenge themselves upon their living enemies. He could not tell me if there was any duration set upon the existence as spirits of these human souls, hut two Congo Français natives, of different tribes, Benga and Igaiwa. told me that when a family had quite died out, after a time its spirits died too. Some, hut by no means all, of these spirits of human origin, as is the case among the Negro Effiks, undergo reincarnation. The Doctor told me he once knew a man whose plantations were devastated by an elephant. He advised that the beast should he shot, hut the man said he dare not because the spirit of his dead father had passed into the elephant.

Their number is infinite and their powers as varied as human imagination can make them; classifying them is therefore a difficult work, hut Doctor Nassau thinks this maybe done fairly completely into:

1. Human disembodied spirits—*Manu*.

2. Vague beings, well described by our word ghosts: *Abambo*.

3. Beings something like dryads, who resent intrusion into their territory, on to their rock, past their promontory. or tree. When passing the residence of one of these beings, the traveller must go by silently. O with some cabalistic invocation, with bowed or bared head, and deposit some symbol of an offering or tribute even if it be only a pebble. You occasionally come across great trees that have fallen across a path that have quite little heaps of pebbles, small shells, &c., upon them deposited by previous passers-by. This class is called *Ombwiri*.

4. Beings, who are the agents in causing sickness, and either aid or hinder human plans—*Mionde*.

5. 'There seems to be, the Doctor says. another class of spirits some- what akin to the ancient Lares and Penates, who especially belong to the household, and descend by inheritance with the family. In their honour are secretly kept a bundle of finger, or other bones, nail-clippings, eyes. brains, skulls, particularly the lower jaws, called in M'pongwe *oginga*. accumulated from deceased members of successive generations.

Dr. Nassau says "secretly," and he refers to this custom being existent in non-cannibal tribes. I saw bundles of this character among the cannibal Fans, and among the non-cannibal Adooma, openly hanging up in the thatch of the sleeping apartment.

6. He also says there may be a sixth class, which may, however only be a function of any of the other classes—namely, those that enter into any animal body, generally a leopard. Sometimes the spirits of living human beings do this, and the animal is then guided by human intelligence, and will exercise its strength for the purposes of its temporary human possessor. In other cases it is a non-human soul that enters into the animal, as in the case of *Ukuku*.

Spirits are not easily classified by their functions because those of different class may be employed in identical undertakings. Thus one witch doctor may have, I find, particular influence over one class of spirit and another over another class; yet they will both engage to do identical work. But in spite of this I do not see how you can classify spirits otherwise than by their functions; you cannot weigh and measure them, and it is only a few that show themselves in corporeal form. There are characteristics that all the authorities seem agreed on, and one is that individual spirits in the same class vary in power: some are strong of their sort, some weak. They are all to a certain extent limited in the nature of their power; there is no one spirit that can do all things; their efficiency only runs in certain lines of action and all of them are capable of being influenced, and made subservient to human wishes, by proper incantations. This latter characteristic is of course to human advantage hut it has its disadvantages, for you can never really trust a spirit, even if you have paid a considerable sum to a most distinguished medicine man to get a powerful one put up in a *ju-ju* or *monde*, as it is called in several tribes. The method of making these charms is much the same among Bantu and Negroes. I have elsewhere described the Gold Coast method, so here confine myself to the Bantu. This similarity of procedure naturally arises from the same underlying idea existing in the two races.

You call in the medicine man, the "oganga," as he is commonly called in Congo Français tribes. After a variety of ceremonies and processes. the spirit is induced to localize itself in some object subject to the will of the possessor. The things most frequently used are antelopes horns, the large snail-shells, and large nutshells, according to Doctor Nassau. Among the Fan I found the most frequent charm ease was in the shape of a little sausage, made very neatly of pineapple fibre, the contents being the residence of the spirit or power. and the outside coloured red to flatter and please him— for spirits always like red because it is like blood. The substance put inside charms is all manner of nastiness. usually on the sea coast having a high percentage of fowl dung. The nature of the substance depends on the spirit it is intended to be attractive to—attractive enough to induce it to leave its present abode and come and reside in the charm.

In addition to this attractive substance I find there are other materials inserted which have relations towards the work the spirit will be wanted to do for its owner. For example, charms made either to influence a person to be well disposed

towards the owner, or the still larger class made with intent to work evil on other human beings against whom the owner has a grudge, must have in them some portion of the person to be dealt with—his hair, blood, nail—parings, &c.—or, failing that, his or her most intimate belonging, something that has got his smell in—a piece of his old waist-cloth for example.

This ability to obtain power over people by means of their blood, hair, nails, &c., is universally diffused; you will find it down in Devon, and away in far Cathay, and the Chinese, I am told, have in some parts of their empire little ovens to burn their nail and hair clippings in. The fear of these latter belongings falling into the hands of evilly disposed persons is ever present to the West Africans. The Igalwa and other tribes will allow no one but a trusted friend to do their hair, and bits of nails and hair are carefully burnt or thrown away into a river; and blood, even that from a small cut or a fit of nose-bleeding, is most carefully covered up and stamped out if it has fallen on the earth. The underlying idea regarding blood is of course the old one that the blood is the life.

The life in Africa means a spirit, hence the liberated blood is the liberated spirit, and liberated spirits are always whipping into people who do not want them.

Charms

Charms are made for every occupation and desire in life—loving, hating, buying, selling, fishing, planting, travelling, hunting, &c., and although they are usually in the form of things filled with a mixture in which the spirit nestles, yet there are other kinds; for example, a great love charm is made of the water the lover has washed in, and this, mingled with the drink of the loved one, is held to soften the hardest heart.

Some kinds of charms, such as those to prevent your getting drowned, shot, seen by elephants, &c., are worn on a bracelet or necklace. A new-born child starts with a health-knot tied round the wrist, neck, or loins, and throughout the rest of its life its collection of charms goes on increasing. This collection does not, however, attain inconvenient dimensions, owing to the failure of some of the charms to work.

That is the worst of charms and prayers. The thing you wish of them may, and frequently does, happen in a strikingly direct way, but other times it does not. In Africa this is held to arise from the bad character of the spirits; their gross ingratitude and fickleness. You may have taken every care of a spirit for years, given it food and other offerings that you wanted for yourself, wrapped it up in your cloth on chilly nights and gone cold, put it in the only dry spot in the canoe, and so on, and yet after all this, the wretched thing will be capable of being got at by your rival or enemy and lured away, leaving you only the case it once lived in. Finding, we will say, that you have been upset and half-drowned, and your canoe-load of goods lost three times in a week, that your paddles are always breaking, and the amount of snags in the river and so on is abnormal, you judge that your canoe-charm has stopped. Then you go to the medicine man who supplied you with it and complain. He says it was a perfectly good charm when he sold it to you and he never had any complaints before, but he will investigate the affair; when he has done so, he either says the spirit has been lured away from the home he prepared for it by incantations and presents from other people, or that he finds the spirit is dead; it has been killed by a more powerful spirit of its class, which is in the pay of some enemy of yours. In all cases the little thing you kept the spirit in is no use now, and only fit to sell to a white man as “a big curio!” and the sooner you let him have sufficient to procure you a fresh and still more powerful spirit—necessarily more expensive - the safer it will be for you, particularly as your misfortunes distinctly point to some one being desirous of your death. You of course grumble, but seeing the thing in his light you pay up, and the medicine man goes busily to work with incantations, dances, looking into mirrors or basins of still water, and concoctions of messes to make you a new protecting charm. 241-6

Skin marks

Tattooing on the West Coast is comparatively rare, and I think I may say never used with decorative intent only. The skin decorations are either paint or cicatrices—in the former case the pattern is not kept always the same by the individual. A peculiar form of it you find in the Rivers, where a pattern is painted on the skin, and then when the paint is dry, a wash is applied which makes the unpainted skin rise up in between the painted pattern. The cicatrices are sometimes tribal marks, but sometimes decorative. They are made by cutting the skin and then placing in the wound the fluff of the silk cotton tree.

Initiation

The great point of agreement between all these West African secret societies lies in the methods of initiation. The boy, if he belongs to a tribe that goes in for tattooing, is tattooed, and is handed over to instructors in the societies' secrets and formulae. He lives, with the other boys of his tribe undergoing initiation, usually under the rule of several instructors, and

for the space of one year. He lives always in the forest, and is naked and smeared with clay. The boys are exercised so as to become inured to hardship; in some districts, they make raids so as to perfect themselves in this useful accomplishment. They always take a new name, and are supposed by the initiation process to become new beings in the magic wood, and on their return to their village at the end of their course, they pretend to have entirely forgotten their life before they entered the wood; but this pretence is not kept up beyond the period of the festivities given to welcome them home. They all learn, to a certain extent, a new language, a secret language only understood by the initiated.

The same removal from home and instruction from initiated members is also observed with the girls. However, in their case, it is not always a forest-grove they are secluded in, sometimes it is done in huts. Among the Grain Coast tribes however, the girls go into a magic wood until they are married. Should they have to leave the wood for any temporary reason, they must smear themselves with white clay. A similar custom holds good in Ok5ion, Calabar district, where, should a girl have to leave the fattening house, she must be covered with white clay. I believe this fattening-house custom in Calabar is not only for fattening up the women to improve their appearance, but an initiatory custom as well, although the main intention is now, undoubtedly, fattening, and the girl is constantly fed with ft -producing foods, such as fou-fou soaked in palm oil. I am told, but I think wrongly, that the white clay with which a Calabar girl is kept covered while in the fattening-house, putting on an extra coating of it should she come outside, is to assist in the fattening process by preventing perspiration. The duration of the period of seclusion varies somewhat. San Salvador boys are six months in the wood. Cameroon boys are twelve months. In most districts the girls are betrothed in infancy, and they go into the wood or initiatory hut for a few months before marriage, in this case the time seems to vary with the circumstances of the individual; not so with the boys, for whom each tribal society has a duly appointed course terminating at a duly appointed time; but sometimes, as among some of the Yoruba tribes, the boy has to remain under the rule of the presiding elders of the society, painted white, and wearing only a bit of grass cloth, if he wears anything, until he has killed a man. Then he is held to have attained man's estate by having demonstrated his courage and also by having secured for himself the soul of the man he has killed as a spirit slave.

The initiation of boys into a few of the elementary dogmas of the secret society by no means composes the entire work of the society. All of them are judicial, and taken on the whole they do an immense amount of good. The methods are frequently a little quaint. Rushing about the streets disguised under masks and drapery, with an imitation tail swinging behind you, while you lash out at every one you meet with a whip or cutlass, is not a European way of keeping the peace, or perhaps I should say maintaining the dignity of the Law. But discipline must be maintained, and this is the West African way of doing it. 308-9

Alison Morgan

www.alisonmorgan.co.uk

www.resource-arm.net