

ARNOLD'S GENERAL STUDIES

# Atoms and Ancestors

F. B. WELBOURN

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SBN: 7131 1527 0

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**ARNOLD'S GENERAL STUDIES**

General Editor: M. C. MORGAN

# Atoms and Ancestors

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**Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd.**

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First published 1968

SBN: 7131 1527 0

For  
Jerome Bamunoba, Benson Kantai and Ben Kipkorir  
who have taught me all I know about  
Ankole, Maasai and Marakwet

## *General Preface*

General studies as a subject in Sixth Forms or Technical Colleges now hardly needs champions, but it does need suitable material. Young adult students, whatever their abilities, are conscious of their limited knowledge in many fields and of the folly of trying to discuss or write on topics of which they may be ignorant. They want information.

This series of booklets is designed to give essential information in a number of specific areas and at reasonable length. Each booklet, written by a specialist, discovers the bones of its subject and aims to stimulate thought and imagination. Each is open-ended in that it invites questions and leads on to some of the most perplexing problems in the subject. Throughout each booklet there are 'signposts' by way of bibliographies and other suggestions, which can help the interested student to pursue any topic in greater depth.

The booklets are so bound that they are reasonably durable—but they can also easily be dismantled and the pages punched to form part of a student's own folder or file in which he can expand and illustrate the material given here, and agree or disagree with it.

This booklet is about religion. It takes some African beliefs and practices to illustrate the idea, 'religion is what religion does'; and considers the impact on them of Christianity and Islam. In this way it opens up the whole question of religion in contemporary society.

The General Editor and the Publisher welcome comments and suggestions for further topics.

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## *Introduction*

I have called this book *Atoms and Ancestors* because western society tends to regard nuclear explosions as the most destructive force known and the understanding of atoms as the clue to the understanding of life. There are other societies, still in existence, for which ancestral ghosts play very much the same role. In 1935 Elijah Masinde was expelled from membership of the Friends' Africa Mission in western Kenya because he took a second wife. He had played football for Kenya against Uganda and was literate. After expulsion he gathered a following of men and women who were called *Dini ya Misambwa*, Church of the Ancestral Spirits. Up in 'Sion' (probably on the top of Mount Elgon) the ancestors had prepared a great store of food; and the living and the dead would shortly meet in triumphant victory over the European colonists. Meanwhile, cultivation of crops was unnecessary. Women should not use government clinics, where they would be given medicine to prevent them from bearing children. They should not send their children to school. Indiscriminate sexual intercourse was encouraged in order to swell the numbers of the sect. Elijah and his followers need fear no bullets, which would turn to drops of water if used against them.

From 1944 onwards there were numerous clashes with the authorities, riots, arson and theft. Elijah was sent to a mental hospital; but his followers continued active. They won more adherents over the border in Uganda and further north in Kenya. The movement was proscribed, other leaders were arrested. But secret meetings for sacrifice continued to be held and, even after political independence, the movement continued and is still active. It has, from the start, been impossible to separate its religious from its political aspects.

Religion is what religion does. A Goan student in East Africa told how, when as a child he had a cold, his mother would say the Creed over him backwards. This is part of East African, Goan, Christianity. But you will not find it in the textbooks. Parents,

who go Sunday by Sunday to a non-conformist church, may yet take their children for baptism in the Church of England, regarding it as a better protection against influenza. Neither is that in the textbooks. This book is an attempt to describe the religious practices of certain African traditional societies. They do not, like the so-called 'world religions', have a literature. There are no books of reference from which to test the correctness of belief or practice. All that can be done is to observe what they do or say, in a religious way, and try to understand how it fits in with their whole understanding of life.

Nor do they ask, 'Is this true?' For those societies which believe in them, the existence of ghosts and witches is as real as, for us, is the existence of electricity or magnetism—as real, indeed, as the existence of other people. This is so different from the contemporary British attitude to what we call 'religion' that it is very difficult to understand. We tend to think that the existence of God must be proved in the same sort of way as we prove the existence of a nuclear particle. For these African societies, ancestral ghosts are as ever-present and unquestioned as breathing: witches as bacteria. I know that, if other people are prevented from breathing, they die. The only way in which I can prove that this holds true for me also is by smothering myself. This is an experiment I am unlikely to undertake. If I do, and if the result is positive, I shall never (unless there is an after-life) know the answer. It would be similarly absurd to ask many Africans to neglect their ancestors. In the end, the question, 'Is it true?', must be asked of all religious beliefs—as it must also be asked of the scientific belief in the uniformity of nature; and that question will be asked at the end of this book. But, first, it is necessary to try to enter into the feelings of men who hold beliefs of this sort. Without such sympathy, it is impossible to understand their social life, their economics, their history or their politics.

This is an account of 'certain African traditional societies'. No two societies think or act alike. It is important not to generalise and talk about 'African society' or 'African religion'—still less about 'the' African (he exists no more than 'the' Englishman). So far as is possible in the following pages, beliefs and practices will be referred to the particular society in which they occur. Even the phrase 'many Africans' must not be taken to mean 'all Africans'. Not only does one African society differ from another in culture. Many Africans, from many different societies, have entered deeply into western culture. Some have international rank as scientists, judges, administrators. One of them, at least, was shocked to the core when he met an English undergraduate of Trinity College, Cambridge, who still believed in ghosts; and this book will try

to draw attention to the persistence of traditional beliefs in contemporary British society. Except, indeed, that this book is concerned with religion as a living force in contemporary society, most of the topics discussed in Chapters 1-8 might have been illustrated from early Britain, from Norse, Greek, Roman or even Canaanite beliefs.

What is religion? Nobody has yet given a satisfactory definition. All that this book can do is to describe certain actions and beliefs which are generally regarded as religious, to discuss their function in human life and to ask what is the character of other actions and beliefs, which seem to fulfil the same functions but are not normally regarded as religious. What do we mean by such statements as 'Smith makes a religion out of cricket', 'Communism is essentially a religious movement although it debunks religion'? Is psycho-analysis any less a religion than is an ancestor cult? By studying some African religious beliefs and practices we may reach a better understanding of our own society.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *The living dead—the web of kinship and the ancestor cult*

Two recent events raise a number of issues which will be taken up in turn:

A. In 1963 a traditional healer, practising not far from Kampala the commercial capital of Uganda, was consulted by the parents of a boy who was later diagnosed as suffering from acute anaemia. He advised them, 'The cause of this trouble is the ghost of the boy's paternal aunt. Take him to the Government hospital and see what they can do for him. Meanwhile I'll deal with the ghost.' It was estimated that ninety per cent of patients admitted to the children's ward of this hospital were first taken to a scientifically-trained doctor as a result of advice of this kind; and that the parents would report back to the traditional healer when hospital treatment was complete.

B. Dr. Lambo, a Nigerian psychiatrist, tells the story of a fellow-Nigerian, a graduate of a British university and raised to high rank in his own civil service. After initial success, his work began to deteriorate and he suffered from severe headaches. Scientifically-trained doctors were unable to help him. Then, one night, he dreamt that he was visited by his father's ghost, demanding the sacrifice of a hen. He made the sacrifice, his headaches disappeared and his work returned to its old efficiency.

Both these stories have a ghost as the primary causative agent of sickness. But, although ghosts are constantly used to account for sickness, and ritual directed to them is successfully used to cure sickness, this is not their primary importance. When ghost-stories are told in British society (and there are still sane and intelligent Britons who believe that, if they have not actually seen a ghost, they have at least felt its presence), there is usually an atmosphere of horror; and the ghosts are probably malicious. But in many African societies, they are felt to be an integral part of society, deeply concerned for its welfare, interfering (it is true) if they do not receive the attention which is their due, but expecting to play their part in its smooth running.

The Baganda are members of an ancient kingdom at the north end of Lake Victoria. Before the kingship developed, it is almost certain that they were organised in a number of clans, each divided into a number of sub-clans and sub-sub-clans; each division headed by a *mutaka* and living around its traditional burial grounds. Each clan, and each division, was descended through the male line from a single ancestor; and, although they were exogamous (finding their wives from other clans), all those living in a particular area were related. There was a very strong sense of social solidarity. 'Home' was always 'at ours'. 'James and I went to Kampala' became, in their language, 'We went with James to Kampala'. For a male every male clansman of the same generation was *muganda* and every female of the same generation *mwanyina*. (The only way to specify a brother by the same mother was to say 'brother of the stomach'). Every clansman of the father's generation was 'father' . . . and so on through a large number of kinship terms each defining a particular relationship on the father's or the mother's side. It was normal practice, after weaning, for children to be sent to live with a relative—they grew up as members of the clan rather than of an individual family; and the father's sister had a special claim on her son's children. She was known as 'Sir' and was an oppressive and authoritarian figure.

At death the body had to be brought—from however far away—to the clan burial grounds. The ghost was thought first to visit Walumbe, the spirit of death, and then to return to the clan grounds. The funeral ceremony varied according to the importance of the deceased. But it consisted chiefly in burial on a pile of barkcloths to provide comfort for the corpse. Mourning might last for up to six months and was ended by the *mutaka*, who also, in council with the clan, approved the heir. At the end of this time, with much singing, dancing and drinking, the heir was formally installed. The grave was thatched with grass; a man's grave was cared for by some of his widows; and a shrine was built for each ghost, supplied regularly with beer and firewood, since ghosts felt thirst and cold but not hunger.

The heir was normally appointed by the deceased before death. In the case of a man, it would probably be a nephew or grandson; and one who appointed his own son was thought to be 'disowning his clan'. It was the eldest son who became responsible for his father's other children. The heir succeeded primarily to his ritual duties—his presence was required at the children's betrothal or marriage or if they gave birth to twins. *Every* deceased person (even a child) required an heir; and failure to install him might incur vengeance from the ghost. He was formally announced as 'the heir of X, son of Y, grandson of Z'—perhaps with the mention

also of other distant ancestors and, finally, the original founders of his sub-clan and clan. He was, as it were, seen as an essential link in a three-dimensional structure which included not only the living but the dead. Without his appointment the whole structure

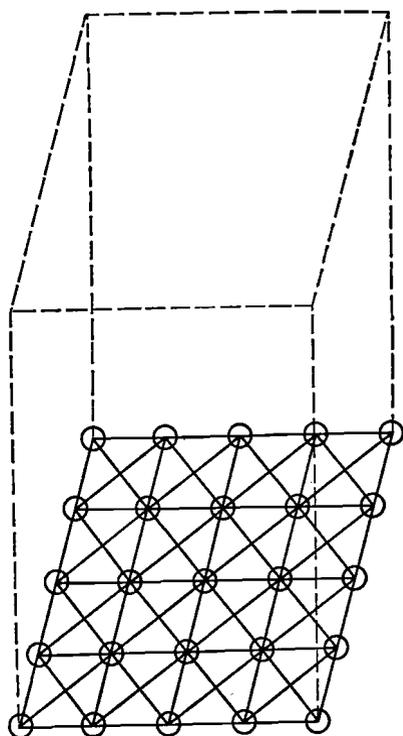


DIAGRAM 1. CLAN SOCIETY AND ANCESTORS

Circles are living individuals and solid lines are the bonds between them. If one individual is removed (e.g. by death) the whole structure may collapse.

This 'horizontal' structure is simply the base of a three-dimensional structure represented by dotted lines. Here live the ancestors; and the 'vertical' bonds between them and the living are also essential to the stability of the whole structure.

might collapse. This sense of belonging to a kinship group, of which ghosts as well as living members were integral parts—of having rights and obligations in respect to all—was essential. The group could not exist without its individual members, each playing his proper role as heir to the past. Neither could the individual exist without the group. Burial in the clan grounds was essential so that the ghost could be with its clan.

The same sense of solidarity was expressed in the naming ceremony, which was held for several families together, at the house of the *mutaka*, when the children were about two years old. The umbilical cord was kept carefully from birth and floated on a mixture of beer, milk and water to test the child's legitimacy. If it sank, the child was illegitimate; and, though it might continue to live with its mother, it could never inherit from any member of the clan. Over each legitimate child the paternal grandmother called the names of its clan forefathers until the child laughed. It was then given the name at which it laughed—a name specific to the clan—and that ancestor was expected to be its especial guardian. (Another custom, probably of later development, was to name a child, *in addition*, after an outstanding dead man of another clan, in the hope that his ghost would take the child under his protection. This departs from the principle that ghosts were very much part of the family or clan and suggests a time when the clans were coming together more closely to form a tribe. But it helps to show the benevolent character of ghosts.)

A *mutaka* was responsible primarily for allocating clan lands and for administering the rights of succession within his clan. He was the living personification of all his predecessors, so that a contemporary *mutaka* may say, 'I moved my village from X to Y'—an event which is known to have taken place four hundred years ago. Quite recently a Christian *mutaka* said to the author, 'This is where I used to make human sacrifices'—something which certainly had not happened in his life-time. At the same time, he might hold communion with his ancestors through their lower jawbones which were sometimes removed at death and kept in a special shrine. (In all cases, the lower jawbone was the part of the corpse to which the ghost particularly clung.) Through the *mutaka* the solidarity of the clan was, therefore, asserted not only in the active presence of ancestral ghosts but in historical continuity with the past.

It is this assertion of solidarity and continuity which seems to have been the first function of belief in ghosts. If their shrines were properly cared for, they cared, in turn, for their descendants; and they might be asked to help, for instance, in obtaining a wife or finding favour with a superior. To use a contemporary word, an old-time Muganda (singular of Baganda) was fully satisfied to declare his identity as 'son of X, grandson of Y, of such-and-such a clan'; and this sense of belonging, of identity, was further reinforced by the clan name—Lion, Leopard, Monkey, Otter, etc. . . . Any member of the clan killing or eating this animal would automatically die, although members of other clans would suffer no disability. Each clan also had a characteristic drum-beat, used at

the birth of twins, the installation of an heir and other ceremonial occasions of significance to the clan.

Ghosts carried over into the next world the characteristics which they acquired in this. A man caught thieving might ask to be killed, rather than have his hand cut off, lest he should enter maimed into the world of ghosts. Thus it was not surprising that the ghost of a paternal aunt (always, in life, an oppressive, authoritarian figure) was frequently thought to be the cause of sickness. But fathers and grandfathers, in life, also expected respect; and their ghosts became angry if their shrines were not properly tended. In similar vein, special precautions were taken to avoid the ghosts of abnormalities and social misfits. Children born feet first were killed at birth and their bodies buried at crossroads. Women passing the grave would throw bits of stick or grass on the grave to prevent the ghost entering them and being reborn. Twins were buried in wasteland and their graves specially marked for the same reason. The corpses of suicides were burnt at cross roads; and sorcerers were burnt alive outside the village. Those who in this life disturbed its proprieties must be expected to continue their disrupting activities from beyond the grave. To take precautions against them was, in a negative way, to assert the solidarity and continuity of the clan which appears to have been the positive function of the ancestor cult. Diagram 1 on page 12 is a simplified scheme of a clan society of this sort.

Conceived in this way, ghosts could also be used as explanations of sickness, and the cult developed to cure such sickness. But that must be the subject of another chapter.

#### For further reading\*

*The Heathens*, Chapters X, XI  
*The Primal Vision*, Chapters 8, 11

#### For discussion

1. Try to distinguish between the solidarity of 'traditional' society and the individualism of contemporary British society.
2. What are the essential differences between the ancestor cult of the Baganda and the British beliefs in ghosts?

\* See *A Note on Books*, p. 68.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The natural and the supernatural*

Few Britons have seen bacteria. We rarely think about them unless they cause disease. Many people are ignorant that they are essential to healthy organic life. If we have to deal with them—whether to kill the malign bacteria which cause dysentery or to increase their benign activity in a compost heap—we consult a specialist. Normally, if we think about them at all, we simply take them on trust. But most of us, if challenged, would say that they are a natural and inescapable part of our environment.

No traditional Baganda have seen a ghost (Baganda ghosts are not expected to be seen. They work in other ways.). Although custom directed that their shrines should be tended regularly, the probability is that they were largely neglected unless they caused trouble. Their benign activity was so much taken for granted as to be hardly mentioned except on very special occasions. If they caused trouble, a specialist was consulted. But, if challenged, traditional Baganda would say that ghosts were a natural and inescapable part of their environment. There was nothing 'supernatural' about them. Indeed, the contrast between 'natural' and 'supernatural' cannot be expressed in their language.

The idea that religion has to do with the supernatural—with miracles and the breaking of 'natural' law—is deeply ingrained in British thinking. We think of 'natural' and 'supernatural' as two entirely different worlds—to such an extent that some of us find it extremely difficult to believe that the supernatural world exists at all. There are two folk-stories which show how differently the Baganda thought about their 'gods'.

When Kintu, the legendary first king of the Baganda, came to the country, he was alone except for his cow. He ate its dung and drank its urine and enjoyed its company. One day, sliding down the rainbow from the sky (which was ruled by a king called Ggulu), came Ggulu's sons and daughters to have a look at the earth. One daughter, Nnambi, fell in love with Kintu and determined to marry him. Her brothers told their father, who advised them to steal Kintu's cow so that he would die. But

Nnambi saw what happened and took Kintu to the sky to recover it. Ggulu set him impossible tasks: to eat 10,000 helpings of food and beer; to use a copper axe to cut a rock into firewood; to collect a pot of drinking water from the dew; and finally to find his own cow among 40,000 others. All these Kintu accomplished and drew wondering praise from Ggulu. He married Nnambi; and they went back to earth to breed the Baganda.

Whatever the moral of this story, it is clear that the wonder-worker was Kintu the man, rather than Ggulu the 'god'. They had dealings together as any suitor with his potential father-in-law in an autocratic society. Earth and sky, man and god, did not represent different, incomparable, levels of existence but were part of a single, intercommunicating, whole.

One of Nnambi's brothers, Walumbe, followed the happy pair to earth and, out of jealousy, became the spirit of disease and death. He was eventually chased away and lived in a hole in the earth. But he was finally responsible for all death; and all ghosts had to visit him before returning to their clan graveyards. On one occasion a hunter, called Mpobe, followed his dog, which was chasing an edible rat; and the rat ran down Walumbe's hole. At the bottom was a village and many people and, a little further on, an old man who was Walumbe. Mpobe was, not unnaturally, afraid; and he knelt down (but any Muganda would kneel to any chief). He explained how he had come and was allowed to go home on condition that he told nobody where he had been. Else, Walumbe would kill him. In the end, of course, he blabbed to his mother and Walumbe came to claim him. Mpobe asked if he might first sell his things, buy a cow and eat it. Permission was given; and Mpobe made the deal last over several years before he finally had to pay his debt.

There is no suggestion here that death is not something to be avoided. But Death appears not as a terrible figure but as a patient creditor—having, certainly, the last word but dealing with man almost on equal terms.

The recent experience of a Marakwet woman in Kenya tells the same story. In a dream she was visited by the ghost of her dead son, who asked her to get him his favourite fruit. This she did, leaving it at the spot he indicated. The next night he again asked for fruit. She replied, 'If you can't come home without making a nuisance of yourself, why don't you stay where you are?' So the third night he just came for a chat.

'There is nothing more natural than the supernatural'; and any attempt to understand African society must begin from a reversal

of our normal (but not particularly Christian) idea that they are different. Certainly, there is a recognition, in many African societies, of a hierarchy of power. The Creator God (if there is a belief in him) is its source, as he is the source of all things. But it is found, in descending order, in lesser spirits, in ancestral ghosts, in chiefs (who are often the focus of communication with the spirits), in witches and sorcerers, in ordinary men—but also in animals, plants and inanimate things.

Sometimes this power is personalised. The Baganda, for instance, have many stories of pregnant girls, deserted by their lovers, who gave birth to water instead of a child. The water became a river; and the girl's spirit might catch unwary travellers and drown them. Near one village there lived a leopard which kept the people in its care and warned them if other leopards were coming to steal their stock. An animal's horn, which had been filled with suitable ingredients and empowered by a spirit, could be used by its owner to do jobs for him at a distance and could speak to him.

Sometimes the power has to be put into things, as into the horn and other articles of sorcery which will be discussed later. But sometimes it is inherent. A man who killed his clan totem (the animal after which the clan is named) automatically died. If a pregnant woman laughed at a lame person, her child would be born lame. If a sheep, a goat or a dog got onto the roof of a house, the inhabitants would leave it at once, saying it was unlucky to live there. All these things were 'taboo'.

When this power was first described, it was called by the Melanesian word *mana*. The Melanesians used *mana* to explain any exceptional excellence or skill in men—the power of a chief, the success of a warrior, skill in rearing pigs or raising large crops of food. The attempt to obtain *mana* was thought to be the basis of Melanesian religion. A similar idea was later found in Polynesia, where *mana* was described as an all-pervasive psychic force behaving very much like electricity. People and things which were positively 'charged' could pass it by contact to one that was 'negative'. Unless this process was properly controlled, damage might result. A positively charged chief, for instance, might come into contact with a commoner. The chief would lose some of his power; and the commoner might be injured. (There is an example of this type of reaction in 2 Samuel 6.6f.) Therefore 'taboos' were imposed to prevent the fatal contact.

But the electrical metaphor, which was so effectively used to describe the action of *mana*, can be used to illuminate the relation between 'natural' and 'supernatural'. Sir Arthur Eddington once pointed out that a physicist's description of matter in terms of

electrons and protons might easily give the impression that a chair consists largely of wide-open space—hardly a suitable support for sitting. The common-sense account is entirely different. Common sense can normally disregard the electrical basis of matter. Electrical forces become of concern to common sense when they are not properly controlled—when lightning strikes, for instance—or when they are harnessed to human welfare to produce effects which are impossible without them. To harness them requires specialist skill; lightning may be extremely frightening. But we do not therefore regard electricity as supernatural. It is an inescapable part of our natural environment with special powers for good or ill. It is very much in this way that traditional peoples understand the power which operates in taboos and magic, through the ghosts and the spirits. It underlies all life; but 'common sense' can normally disregard it. When out-of-the-way things happen, or when a man needs special power for a particular purpose—to deal with misfortune or to seek unusual success—he becomes aware (as we become aware of electricity) of something which he believes to be around him and available all the time.

But a word of warning is necessary. Electricity can be dangerous as well as useful. The *Doctor Who* stories suggest how the popular imagination fears electricity when it gets into the hands of men who use it for their own evil ends. An electric iron may give a fatal shock. So a man who can control *mana* may be feared as well as admired. If he can use it to improve his own crops, he can equally well use it to do harm to others. Among the Lugbara of Uganda, a man who consistently has better crops than his neighbours is liable to be accused of witchcraft and punished. Among the Maasai, to draw attention to a girl's beauty may bring misfortune upon her. It is dangerous to be excellent.

There are three ways in which men have looked at the universe (other ways may be possible). One is that of materialism, which sees all phenomena as matter organised in less or more complicated forms but, because it is matter, ultimately subject to control by man. The second, which has been described in this chapter, sees all phenomena as the expression of a mysterious force (which may or may not be personalised) which men may try to control for their own advantage but to which they are ultimately subject. The third divides phenomena into 'natural' and 'supernatural', the one subject to man's control, the other wholly mysterious. In order to understand the 'religions' described in this book, it is necessary to try and suspend judgement as to which of these views of the universe is true and to enter as fully as possible into the point of view of the second.

**For further reading**

*The Heathens*, Chapter III  
*The Primal Vision*, Chapter 6

**For discussion**

1. 'There is nothing more natural than the supernatural.'
2. Are there 'taboos' in contemporary society? Can you explain them? Is it a 'taboo' not to take drugs? Or is this prohibition of a different sort?

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Things go wrong—witchcraft and sorcery*

When things are going well, few people bother to ask the reason why. It is only fairly recently that medical scientists have started to study health rather than disease; and, up to the eighteenth century, the pioneers of the natural sciences were often accused of being in league with the devil. 'Curiosity killed the cat'; and, even in our own day, there are vastly more people who enjoy driving a car than know the theory of an internal combustion engine. That is one reason why it is almost certainly wrong to regard religion as a primitive way of trying to explain how the universe works. Curiosity of that sort is found in only a small proportion of the population. At least in a traditional society, religious beliefs and practices are common to all.

The first chapter dealt with religion as an expression of group solidarity and continuity. Another function is that of dealing with disease and misfortune. The two stories at the beginning of Chapter One illustrate how ancestral ghosts may be regarded as the agents of disease. Another cause may be a curse—especially of a father or of his sister. A curse must be justified—that is to say, the one cursed must have done genuine harm, or shown disrespect to the curser. If it is unjust, it has no effect on the cursed and may rebound on the curser or his relations. If it is just, it may cause the illness or even death of the cursed and can be active even after the death of the curser. Thus, one who knows that he has been justly cursed will try and make amends, and have the curse removed, before the curser dies. After that, there is no hope. Among the Maasai, an undetected murderer or thief may be publicly cursed; and many stories are told of criminals who suffered such hardship as a result of the curse that they confessed their crimes and took the appropriate punishment.

Another cause of disease may be the 'evil eye'. This is something which tends to run in families. Its owner has only to look on somebody else for that person to become ill. Such power may, of course, be used by its owners for evil purposes; but, often enough, its

possession is regarded as a misfortune. Among the Marakwet, one who 'has eyes' will warn the inhabitants of a house he visits so that they may take the necessary precautions. The evil effects may sometimes be counteracted either by the owner spitting on the victim or by somebody with 'stronger' eyes.

Witches and sorcerers are found almost universally; and it is now usual to distinguish between these two types. Either may be male or female; and in some societies male witches predominate. The Azande believe that a man can transmit witchcraft only to his sons, a woman only to her daughters. Witchcraft is an innate power, which can be used by its owner only, to do harm to others. I may not know that I am a witch until, in a fit of anger, I say, 'I wish X were dead'; and X dies. Making this discovery, I may be horrified and try to get rid of the power. On the other hand, I may welcome it and begin to associate with other witches. This association may take place only in immaterial form. Witches' bodies may be soundly asleep in their beds, while their witch-souls meet with the rest of the 'coven' to perform all sorts of strange activities. Among the Pondo of South Africa, witches are supposed to have animal 'familiar' of the opposite sex, with whom they have sexual relations. Among the Nyakyusa of Tanzania, they eat human flesh—again immaterially, for the only evidence is that the victim sickens and dies. In Ukaguru in Tanzania they travelled naked, walked upside-down and smeared their skins with white ashes; and this belief expresses, more clearly than any of the others, the fact that witchcraft-beliefs are an expression of a deep-rooted fear that the normal order of the world may be disrupted, turned upside-down.

Sorcery, on the other hand, involves the use of material objects. There may be specialists, who have learnt their trade by apprenticeship or by being called by a spirit. But their goods are available to anyone who can buy them; and, in principle, anybody can learn the trade. There is no question of an innate power. Sorcerers may work for good, as well as bad, purposes; and it is extremely difficult to distinguish the techniques, except by 'intention'. But good and bad sorcerers are usually called by different names. At the same time it is recognised that a man who has achieved the power for good ends may be tempted to use it for evil.

The methods which they use are often called 'magic'; but if that word means the use of materials which cannot be scientifically demonstrated to produce the intended effect, it is almost certainly the wrong word. 'Magic' is, in fact, the art practised by the Magi, who were Persian sorcerers; and some sorcerers certainly know poisons which are pharmaceutically effective, although they do not distinguish them from other substances supposed to cause death

but pharmaceutically neutral. At the other end of the scale, herbs used to cure disease may be pharmaceutically ineffective but may, on the other hand, contain ingredients which can be isolated and used in scientific medicine. Digitalis was discovered by taking seriously the use of foxgloves by English 'sorcerers'.

Herbs are widely used for curing disease. Knowledge of how to use them may be inherited; or it may be revealed in dreams; and there is ample evidence of one herb being preferred to another because it has proved, in practice, to be more effective. But perhaps more typical examples of sorcery are the use of haircuttings or nail-parings or faeces to work harm to the person from whom they came. For this reason, Baganda were extremely careful to bury these objects. More exciting were the charms which could be obtained only from specialists—to make a woman fertile, to preserve a man's life in war, to make a thief invisible. There were also the horns, mentioned in the last chapter, which could be used to bring luck to the owner or to harm an enemy at a distance.

Traditionally, a convicted witch or sorcerer was liable to meet an unpleasant end. In Buganda, sorcerers (there were no witches) were burnt alive. But, under British colonial rule in Africa, the practice of witchcraft and bad sorcery was made illegal (because of the difficulty of distinguishing between good and bad sorcery, this often meant both forms); and accusations of either, unless they could be proved to the satisfaction of a court of law, were also punishable. Such proof was almost impossible; and there is a widespread belief that the practice of both has therefore increased. In Ukaguru in Tanzania it is said that, since Christian wives cannot divorce their husbands if they tire of them, they now kill them by witchcraft instead.

This suggests that, however much these practices may have been hated, they nevertheless had a very definite social function. The fear of a curse was used to impose proper respect within a family. It was wise to fulfil one's obligations to a neighbour. Otherwise he might employ sorcery to get his rights. A suspected witch should not be offended for fear she might retaliate with her mysterious power. Outward relations, at least, were therefore kept smooth. A man who was more successful than his neighbours—with stock or crops or women—might be suspect of using sorcery to his own ends. There was therefore a pressure towards equality. In a small, intimate, society, with few technological resources for the material betterment of all, such sanctions might be important to preserve peace.

At the same time, the beliefs offered the opportunity of putting on others the blame for misfortune, and thus relieving the frustrations which misfortunes inevitably bring. After the Aberfan

disaster in 1966 it was very noticeable that many people were concerned less with the impersonal, technological, causes than with the possibility of finding one man on whose carelessness the blame could be firmly placed. Similarly, it is not uncommon for examination candidates to blame their failure on the examiners who are said to have set 'unfair' questions. During the first three centuries A.D., Christians were commonly accused of being atheists, eating their own children and practising incest. During the Middle Ages, Christians made similar accusations against the Jews. Many Englishmen regard coloured immigrants—without any objective evidence to support them—as behaving contrary to all the accepted standards of English society. Like witches in Ukaguru, they are an 'inversion' of the normal order of things.

This is not, of course, the same as attributing to them a mysterious, immaterial, power; and this significant difference must be discussed later. But, given the fact that our society tends to think in terms of invisible electrical forces, while other societies think, rather, in terms of *mana* or its equivalent, there is here the same human need to put the blame on something outside ourselves, to find other persons (and not merely impersonal causes) who can be held responsible when things go wrong.

#### **For further reading**

*The Heathens*, Chapters IV, VII

#### **For discussion**

1. What are the contemporary forms of witchcraft belief? Think out concrete examples.
2. What, quite frankly, is your attitude to being cursed? or simply to your father being angry with you? Has it anything in common with African attitudes to the curse?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Putting things right—diviners and herbalists*

Story *A* at the beginning of Chapter One tells how a traditional healer diagnosed certain symptoms as being caused by the ghost of the patient's paternal aunt. He advised the parents to take the patient to the Government hospital, while he would deal with the ghost. It is easy enough to interpret this advice as sheer dishonesty. He knew he could not cure the child's symptoms. But he did not wish to miss the chance of making money. So he took the safe course of sending the child to hospital while inventing a reason for keeping himself in the picture.

But this interpretation is to misunderstand the traditional approach of many African societies not only to sickness and other crises but to the whole of life. In many parts of Africa it is widely known that malaria is caused by the bite of a mosquito and that the most effective cure is an injection obtainable in hospitals. But the question remains, 'Why did the mosquito bite me and not the other fellow?'; and this becomes, 'Who sent the mosquito to bite me?' It may be a ghost or a witch; and, unless the malevolent force can be appeased, it will send another mosquito to bite the patient as soon as he is released from hospital. The appeasement must come first; and for this a specialist must be consulted.

Again and again, what is called 'natural causation' is recognised. A rock stands precariously at the top of a steep slope. Eventually the supporting soil is eroded by rain and the rock falls with a crash to the bottom. So long as nobody is hurt, no questions are asked. The 'natural' explanation is accepted. Curiosity is not aroused by an event which has no personal consequences. There is no urge to look for religious, or for deeper scientific, explanations. But, if in falling the rock hurts a man, some personal cause will almost certainly be invoked to explain why natural causes intervened at this particular point in his personal history. Again it may be a ghost or a witch. It may be the spirit of the rock, which has in some way been offended. But impersonal terms, such as 'bad luck' or 'accident', are felt to be wholly inadequate.

So with death in general. The Baganda, for instance, recognise the 'natural' causes of death—disease, physical accident, war, or simply old age. But in every case—and this is still true for large numbers of Baganda, even of those who call themselves Christian—no real satisfaction is felt unless an act of sorcery, the ill-will of a particular individual, can be invoked to explain why this natural cause produced the death of this person at this time.

A useful illustration of this approach to events is the man who cuts his finger while chopping firewood. He will use some effective material means of stopping the bleeding, of healing the wound. It will be known to most adults; and it is more than likely that it has been selected, over the centuries, as the most effective of several possible means of cure. If he cuts his finger several days running, the material treatment is still required. But, *in addition*, it will be supposed that an evil, personal force is making him do this. He will go to a 'diviner', a professional who—by a variety of means which will be discussed later—names the spirit or the witch responsible and prescribes a ritual by which the evil force can be neutralised. There is a third possibility—that the man cuts his finger right off. In that case, no cure is possible. But the evil force must still be dealt with, lest the patient cut off yet another finger.

It is extremely difficult to know how to define the difference between these two types of treatment and the kinds of causation which they imply. Neither 'natural and supernatural' (Chapter Two) nor 'scientific and magical' (Chapter Three) are satisfactory. Moreover, recent tests have shown that the value of some modern pharmaceutical drugs depends on whether or not doctor and patient believe in their efficacy. It is extremely difficult to distinguish this kind of medicine from traditional sorcery. Equally, there is ample evidence of Africans (and even of some Europeans in Africa) whose sickness has defeated the skill of scientifically-trained doctors but has yielded to traditional practitioners who interpreted it in terms of witches and ghosts. The existence of these entities must, in all fairness, be regarded as a hypothesis which, in certain circumstances, works. The question remains open whether, like the aether of the nineteenth-century physicists, it is a hypothesis which can be discarded in favour of a more general concept; or, like the alternatives of the wave and particle theories of light, is applicable in certain contexts but not in others.

Perhaps the least unsatisfactory terms are 'physical' and 'psychic'. This corresponds to a distinction which is recognised, for instance, in the language of the Baganda, though they could not easily define it. In western terms, 'physical' events can be located accurately in space and time (though that is hardly true of an

electron). 'Psychic' events cannot be located by physical methods and do not obey any known physical laws. On the one hand are phenomena, such as ghosts and extra-sensory perception, which are considered by 'psychical research' and are regarded by most contemporary Britons as superstitions. On the other hand are such concepts as 'consciousness' and 'the unconscious', which are the field of 'psychology'; and, apart from behaviourist psychologists, most contemporary Britons regard both these processes as having 'real' effects in the physical world. From the immediate point of view, this ambiguity in the use of the root *psych-* is an advantage. It can be used to refer to a number of alleged, non-physical entities, without discussing whether or not they 'really' exist.

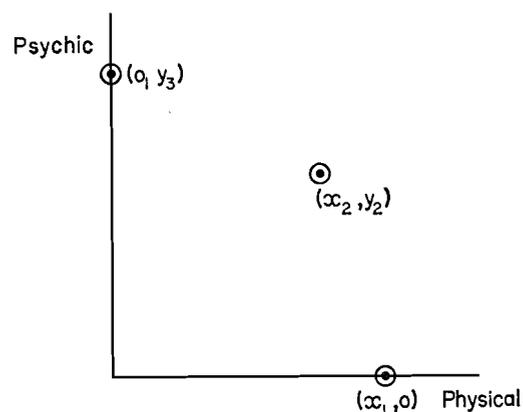


DIAGRAM 2. THE COMPLEMENTARITY OF PHYSICAL AND PSYCHIC  
(EXTERNAL)

This should be compared with the three-dimensional diagram in Chapter One.

In the case of the cut finger, the three possibilities of treatment can be plotted in relation to co-ordinate axes, of which the  $x$ -axis represents physical, and the  $y$ -axis psychic, causes (see Diagram 2). In that case, the simple cutting of a finger has co-ordinates  $(x_1, 0)$ ; cuts on successive occasions has  $(x_2, y_2)$ ; and cutting a finger off has  $(0, y_3)$ . The physical and the psychic are not *alternative* but *complementary* factors in every event. The simple cutting *may* have a psychic component, though in this case it is regarded as sufficiently unimportant to be disregarded. With the development of physical skills, a means *might* be found of restoring the finger which has been cut off. In that case the new means would be used; but it would still be essential to neutralise the evil psychic force.

It was said earlier that many traditional African medicines have been proved and improved by experience. A diviner—whose primary function is to discover the psychic cause of trouble—may himself be also a medicine man. (The term 'witch-doctor' should be used to refer *only* to one who hunts out witches.) It is just as likely that, having divined the psychic cause, he will send the patient to another specialist for physical treatment; and there are specialists not only in herbal medicine but in bone-setting and highly-skilled trepanning without anaesthetics or antiseptics. It is, therefore, not surprising if some of them have recognised that, at least in some cases, western medicine is physically superior to their own. There are still some cases where they maintain (not without evidence) that their methods are better than western methods; and when it comes to dealing with psychic forces, western men know nothing. But, in an increasing number of cases, they have come to regard western medicine as the best method of dealing with physical causes, while they themselves deal with the psychic aspects. The traditional healer, in Story A, was behaving in just this way. He kept in his own hands the dealings with the aunt's ghost. For medical treatment he referred his patient to the best specialist available—in this case the Government hospital. Similarly, the patient with malaria might very well prefer treatment in hospital to any traditional herbal remedies. But no hospital could prevent another mosquito being sent to bite him. That aspect of the case needed psychic measures.

One way of understanding the difference between 'physical' and 'psychic' is to say that every event has both general and unique characteristics. It can be put in a class with other events and seen to be subject to general laws. Or it can be seen as unique and non-repeatable; and every event is, in fact, unique. This is true even of a controlled laboratory experiment because the time factor is always different and the personal factor can never be wholly eliminated.

It is, perhaps, more strikingly true of such events as death from lung cancer or from road accident. It is possible to say, with a high degree of statistical accuracy, how many people of particular ages, sexes, occupations will die from these causes in a particular year. It is not possible to say which individual will so die; and perhaps the only difference between ascribing it to 'luck' or 'fate' and holding a witch responsible is that one response is less personal than the other. In both cases there is the recognition that general causes show themselves in unique effects.

By and large, the majority of contemporary Britons tend to emphasise the importance of general laws and to attribute their unique effects to impersonal causes. The majority of contemporary

Africans still tend to be more concerned with the uniqueness of things and to think in terms of personal causes. When Britons, during Hitler's war, thought that they would be hit by a bomb only if it 'had my name on it', they were adopting very much the same attitude. 'It won't happen to me. I'm different' is a fairly common way of expressing the converse of this attitude. Although natural causes hit everyone else, I have some mysterious quality which will enable me to enjoy them.

#### **For further reading**

*East African Christian*, pp. 30-41, 95-100

#### **For discussion**

1. How much of the practice of western 'scientific' medicine is, in fact, 'sorcery'?
2. Can you locate your own 'consciousness'? What evidence is there that it exists?

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *A diviner at work*

About twenty-five years ago a young Muganda was awarded a scholarship for higher study in Britain. On his way to the airport at the start of his journey, he suddenly went blind and his head began to ache terribly. He was taken home and consulted a diviner. He was told that he had been chosen by a spirit to be its medium and that, unless he accepted the choice, he might go mad. Many Africans—though not always so highly educated—have had similar experiences; and, in Buganda, their initiation takes some such form as follows.

On the appointed night, he and his relatives went to the shrine of a diviner, where a fire was kept burning throughout the rite. They were washed with water from Lake Victoria; and the juice of leaves was smeared on their heads. They were given branches and spears to hold. The diviner's assistants started to beat drums in a peculiar rhythm, shake rattles and sing special spirit songs. After this had been going on for some time, the initiand started to shake. The drumming and singing grew wilder. The shaking affected him more and more violently until he rose and started to dance wildly. The drumming and singing became more and more excited. He danced in the fire, apparently without being burnt, till at last he fell on the floor and started speaking in a strange voice. This was said to be the voice of the spirit which had chosen him. It said it had been neglected by the family and promised that, if all the right ceremonies were carried out, and the initiand set aside as a diviner, it would give to the whole family wealth, a successful life and many children. From now on, the initiand was to be known by a new name. Then it left him and he once again behaved normally.

Next day a goat and hen were killed and eaten at a feast. Then the whole party returned to the shrine. There was drumming and singing and the spirit again entered the initiand. But this time there were no violent movements. Since he was a Christian he was given a Bible to read to ensure that the spirit would have no objection to his going to church; and the spirit once again spoke of the good things it would bring to the family. On the third day the young man was given his equipment as a diviner—a bark cloth

to wear, a knife and cowrie shells. He continued to live in his own home (and, as success has brought him wealth, he has been able to build a well-constructed brick house for himself).

For his work as a diviner he built a shrine of grass, where a fire burns day and night, whether or not he is in session. There, when he is being consulted, he sits on a goatskin with a bark cloth wrapped round him. Some diviners smoke a long pipe; some chew tobacco; some do neither. Stored in the shrine are parcels of dried plants which are used as medicines to anoint, or to be drunk by, the patient. There are also dry bones and other parts of animals and birds to be used as charms. Of one such diviner it was told that, every Saturday at midday, he would dismiss any patients whom he had not yet seen with the words, 'Now I must iron my clothes ready to go to church tomorrow.'

Of all ancient practices, that of divination has survived perhaps more actively than any other. It may be defined as the discovery of the psychic aspects of events. It may be used to find out whether or not the psychic forces are favourable to a proposed venture—war, a hunt, a proposed marriage, a business undertaking. But much more commonly it is used to discover why things have gone wrong—why this man is sick, that woman has no children, why X has lost his job or Y has failed in his examinations. It has already been said (Chapter Four) that a diviner may also be a medicine man. But his primary function, *as a diviner*, is to unravel psychic causes; and he may well hand over to another specialist for physical treatment. It is, perhaps, worth noticing that, in England, the common practice is to go first to a physician, who may refer a patient to a psychiatrist. In Buganda, it is the psychic expert who is the general practitioner. But the woman who gazes into a crystal ball at a fair or (for wealthier customers) in an Oxford Street office; the astrologer who writes columns in the newspapers; the spiritualist medium who investigates a haunted house—all these are catering to a contemporary British desire to get below the surface of physical events. Whether the desire is rational or irrational is entirely another matter.

In Africa the methods used by diviners vary very greatly, though most of them depend on the pattern in which certain objects arrange themselves. For instance, in Buganda, nine flat pieces of leather may be thrown onto a cowhide. Cowrie shells or coffee berries might be thrown in the same way. Powdered herbs, or nine twigs, might be thrown onto water in a pot, which was rocked and the arrangement then studied. The arteries in a hen's throat might be cut and the diviner counted the number of spurts till the blood stopped flowing. An even number was a bad sign, an odd number good. A hen might be cut open from throat to tail

and the omens judged by examining the arrangement of the fat round the entrails and the marks on them.

From Ankole comes this detailed account of a session. The patient arrives. The diviner (who, in Ankole, is quite likely to work in the open air) spreads his hide on the ground and throws the cowrie shells onto it. He examines them to ensure that his spirit is favourable to a divination. ('He who divines', runs a proverb, 'begins with himself'.) He tells the patient to spit on the shells. The patient does so and explains that she has a terrible backache and thinks she is going to die.

*Diviner*: She dies that her name may disappear. Her garden let another take. She is dead. These are her mourners. *Throws pumpkin seeds onto cowhide and examines them*. But you don't seem about to die. If you are dying, what is this heap of seeds for? Spit again. *Patient spits on seeds*. It looks as if you are troubled by a spirit.

*Patient*: It is the spirits! They broke my back. They want to take me out of this world. I die and go to the grave.

*Diviner*: It is the spirits! It is the spirits which intend to kill this child. But have you a guardian spirit, O woman? Spit!

*Patient spits on seeds*: It is Mugasha (*one of the Ankole spirits*), our Mugasha. It wants a cow.

*Diviner*: It is Mugasha and it demands a cow. *Throws seeds again and examines them*. It is true! This seed is Mugasha. Go and give it its own. It wants beer. But that other seed seems to be yet another spirit.

*Patient*: Let me go and buy beer, call the people, men and women, We will sacrifice to Mugasha. I will bring a cow too, so that I am kept from my enemies.

*Diviner*: She is healed. *Throws and examines seeds*. You are healed. Mugasha, go! It has agreed. Take this seed and say, 'Tomorrow I will bring sacrifice'. *etc., etc.*

During the whole of this scene the diviner is supposed to be 'possessed' by his spirit. It may be that very often this 'possession' is feigned. But there are plenty of genuine cases where the diviner goes into a trance and may not remember, when he returns to normal, what happened while he was in the trance. Sometimes, in order to encourage the trance, diviners smoke strong tobacco or take a hypnotic drink. Others can become possessed without any physical help of this sort.

What is called 'possession' may, in fact, take widely different forms. At one extreme is that described earlier in this chapter, during the first stage of initiation, when the initiand behaved like teenagers at a pop-concert or new converts at a Pentecostal meeting. At the other extreme is the mild state of a diviner in action, similar to the effect produced by drugs or by sleep-walking. In

contemporary Britain, conditions of this sort are normally described in terms of drugs or of a psychological disturbance—of something *inside* the individual. In many traditional African societies, they are attributed to a psychic force entering the individual from outside and taking over his body for its own purposes. When it enters a diviner, these purposes are good—they are directed towards healing his patients. But there are many other cases when it enters a person to show its annoyance at being neglected; and almost any unusual behaviour—talking wildly (as, for instance, when a person has a high fever), behaving strangely (as many people do under the influence of strong emotions), or simply a failure in muscular co-ordination—may be attributed to ‘possession’. It is then the job of a diviner to discover which spirit is responsible and how it can be prevented from doing further harm.

Whether or not this form of diagnosis is acceptable to scientific thought, it is essential to remember that it is often successful in effecting a cure. One reason may be that a great deal of both sickness and lack of success in life may be due to psychological causes or to being on bad terms with one’s relatives or acquaintances. The man (Chapter Four) who was constantly cutting himself at work was ‘accident-prone’; and this may well have been due to some anxiety or worry or quarrel. Western doctors are becoming increasingly aware of this factor in disease; and some of them spend a great deal of time in trying to discover the psychological causes of a physical trouble which no medicine seems to cure. A man may suffer from headaches because he is on bad terms with his wife. In Britain this may be very difficult to put right without, at the least, many discussions by both parties with ‘marriage guidance counsellors’. In Africa the headaches might be interpreted as due to interference by the wife’s ancestral ghosts; and, because both parties believe this explanation, a ceremonial sacrifice might do the trick. On the other hand, it might be said that the wife was practising witchcraft against her husband; and that would be equivalent to advising divorce.

An example may illustrate this suggestion. A boy was sent to live with an uncle in Kampala in order to attend secondary school. Another uncle, jealous that his sons were not having the same chance, began to pin notes on the door of the house, saying that the boy would die if he continued to live there. Every time the boy returned to his uncle’s house, he had severe stomach-aches till he could stand it no longer. In the old days, the solution would have been a charge of sorcery against the uncle. The contemporary solution was to provide the boy with a bicycle so that he could live at home and cycle daily to and from school.

**For further reading**

*The Heathens*, Chapter VIII  
*Primal Vision*, pp. 144–51

**For discussion**

1. What really happens when a spiritualist medium in contemporary Britain claims to speak with the voices of dead people?
2. Go and have your fortune told, observe carefully everything which the fortune-teller does and says and then compare notes. She will probably tell you a lot that is true. How does she manage to do it?

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Chiefs and kings*

People are most aware of psychic forces when things go wrong. But, if things go right, it is because the psychic forces are functioning smoothly. Every event potentially has a psychic, as well as a physical, co-ordinate. (Freud said that even the most rational activity of the mind has its unconscious, non-rational, counterpart.) This is as true in the sphere of politics—the art of ordering a good society—as in individual matters. Indeed, in a traditional society, politics (understood in this fundamental sense) is the more important of the two.

A simple society does not require much in the way of specialisation. Both social behaviour and technology are governed by custom. Fathers can keep order in their own families—if necessary invoking psychic forces like a curse or the help of the ghosts. In larger matters, involving several families, there is probably a council of elders; and the clan head, or in some cases a religious specialist, acts as the channel of communication with the psychic forces on behalf of the whole group. This, indeed, is his primary function. He is important because he is the living keystone in the three-dimensional structure which includes the psychic forces as well as living persons. He rarely has to make 'practical' decisions.

This is well illustrated by the case of the Maasai, a nomadic, cattle-keeping people, who believe in one God and have no belief in ghosts surviving death. Government was by agreement between the elders of each tribe; and, in rare matters affecting the whole people, representative elders from each tribe might meet to take council. Each tribe had a *laibon* (pronounced 'liebone'), a hereditary office; and there was a chief *laibon* for the whole people. Each was a powerful sorcerer, who rarely used his power for anything but good. But his chief function, as a diviner, was to mediate between God and men in the great matters of society. In these he had to be consulted. But he could do no more than reveal the will of God. He had no political power to enforce it. His authority rested in the conviction of the whole people that, if the will of God were not obeyed, things would go wrong.

When, at the beginning of the century, the British wished to

make a treaty with the Maasai, they made the mistake of supposing that the chief *laibon* had power to act for his people. Having made the treaty, they enforced it. But the Maasai felt very bitter. The elders had not been fully consulted. The *laibon* had authority to say whether or not a treaty was according to the will of God. The elders alone had power to conclude it. The idea of a chief with executive powers was wholly foreign to their custom. The *laibon* proclaimed the will of God but could not enforce its execution. The elders, as a group and not as individuals, made laws, acted as judges in both civil and criminal cases and carried out their joint decisions. But, at least in great matters, they would consult the *laibon*. Only the physicists could foretell the likely effects of dropping an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Only the politicians could decide whether or not to do so.

A similar mistake was made with the Agikuyu of Kenya, among whom seniority in age was a measure of closeness to the ancestors and therefore of wisdom. Political power rested with the council of elders; and the senior elder of a group acted as channel of communication with the ancestors. Looking for a chain of command which, like the hierarchy of power in an army, ran from individual to individual, the British would choose the spokesman of an elders' council and give him individual executive powers. Judging by western standards of efficiency, they often went on to give chieftainships to younger men who, through education or individual merit, showed greater executive competence but had no traditional authority, as elders, either to exercise authority or to communicate with the ancestors. Matters became worse when such men, on the basis of the power given to them by the British, began to claim authority also in the psychic field. It was as though, in a hospital, the lay administrators, having financial control, gave instructions to the doctors and even claimed the right to perform operations. Not only in Kikuyu, but in many other parts of Africa, colonial administrators ran into difficulties because they failed to recognise that a 'chief' was primarily not an executive but a mediator with the psychic forces and that political power was effective only because it had psychic sanction.

In Buganda, however, the administrators thought they had found a system with which they were familiar. Here the early clan system had developed into an efficient, centralised monarchy. Under the king, the country was ruled by administrative chiefs arbitrarily appointed, and equally arbitrarily dismissed, by him. They had no psychic status. As in Britain, 'religion' seemed to be in the hands of specialists with no political significance. The clan heads were still honoured but seemed to have lost political power. Much of this 'seeming' was only on the surface. Both priests and clan heads

could still, at times, have political influence. But there was a deeper source of misunderstanding. When the English beheaded King Charles I, they thought they had done away with any claim of kings to have a 'divine right'. The king in council now had political power only. Psychic affairs were confined to the Church. The fact that other kings might still have psychic, as well as political, significance was forgotten.

The king of Buganda seems to have been regarded, in the early days of the kingship, as one among many, equal, clan heads. Whether through personal ambition, or because the clans had to band together, under a common leader, for purposes of defence, the king became known as 'head of all the clan heads'; and, by a number of measures, he gradually established his superiority. Centralised government needs representatives in the provinces, if only to gather taxes and raise armies. For this purpose the king seems, at first, to have used the clan heads. But their loyalty was primarily to their clan ancestors; and he gradually replaced them with administrative chiefs owing loyalty only to himself.

Along with this, one of his titles became 'head of all men'. He was beginning to see Buganda not as a federation of clans but as a unitary state. Just as each clan had its founder, of whom all members were 'grandchildren', so all Baganda came to be known as 'grandchildren of Kintu' (the legendary first king). Just as the *mutaka* was the personification of all his predecessors and at the same time in communication with their ghosts, so the king was the personification of all his predecessors back to Kintu. His jawbone and his umbilical cord were, at his death, kept in a special shrine, where they were guarded by one of his sisters and an officer of his court and became the means through which his successor could consult him in affairs of state.

His burial was on a grander scale than that of other Baganda, with representatives of the clans playing the parts normally played by relatives. Certain of his wives and domestic officers (e.g., the chief cook, chief brewer, chief herdsman) were killed to take care of him in the other world. The installation of his successor was, again on a grander scale, like the installation of any heir; and representatives of the clans again played the parts usually allotted to relatives.

During his life a fire was kept always burning outside his residence. At his death, it was extinguished and its guardian strangled by the fireplace. For, with his death, 'the fire of Buganda had gone out'. 'A wild state of disorder ensued, anarchy reigned, people tried to rob each other, and only chiefs with a strong force were safe, even the smaller chiefs being in danger from stronger chiefs, who did as they liked during the short interregnum' (J. Roscoe, *The*

*Baganda*, pp. 103 f.). For this reason the death was kept secret as long as possible to give the chief minister time to decide on a successor and to arrange for the security at least of the capital. The whole structure of Buganda society was in danger of crumbling because its keystone had been removed. It could be restored only by the installation of his heir—an heir perhaps more to his psychic than to his political future.

Buganda has been, in many ways, a Christian country since 1889. But those of us who were there in 1953, when the king was deported by the British colonial government, felt something of the sense of deflation and collapse which overwhelmed almost all Baganda. A highly respected doctor said, 'We have never before been without a king. Tell us what to do'; and this was typical. When the explorer, J. H. Speke, visited Buganda in 1862, he was told, 'No one can say he has seen Buganda until he has been presented to the king.' So in 1953 there was an intense feeling of shame. By losing their king, Baganda had lost Buganda. They had failed to be themselves. They could not again be true Baganda till the king was restored.

This is not to say that the king of Buganda was a 'god'. He was greater than any living Muganda. His ghost was greater than any other ghost. He had become the keystone of Buganda society, without which it could not exist. His psychic significance was greater than his political activity. As the ghosts stood for the solidarity and continuity of clan society, so the king stood for the solidarity and continuity of Buganda. Because Baganda felt so intensely about him, they may well have had no need for a creator god (certainly there is evidence that they paid very little attention to that aspect of things). But he did not himself have power over the forces of nature. He had to consult diviners like any other man; and sorcery could be effective against him. He was not a 'god'. But he may well have taken the place of God in the affections of his people.

#### For further reading

Read again Chapter One and compare a *mutaka* with the king of Buganda

*The Heathens*, pp. 39 f.

*Primal Vision*, pp. 135-44

#### For discussion

1. Has the contemporary British monarchy any 'psychic' significance (a) for teenagers, (b) for the older generation?
2. Has contemporary British society any effective symbol of solidarity and continuity?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *The sport of the gods*

Psychic forces are important, at one end of the scale, in individual sickness and misfortune: at the other in preserving the whole structure of society. They are equally important at every point of life. Skill in agriculture, in managing stock, in war and hunting is necessary. But, if the psychic forces are not favourable, no amount of skill will avail. In contemporary terms, anybody can 'have a day off'. He may be world-famous; but, if he is suffering from emotional strain, he may easily do bad work, or lose his match to an inferior player, or have a car accident. There are British rituals connected with all these activities—shaving and dressing well to suggest smartness at work; singing hymns at football matches; carrying a Saint Christopher medal on the car keys. Although they may be psychologically important (psychic causes have real effects in the physical world), it would be difficult to show that any of them has a direct bearing on the skills required.

So, among the Marakwet, when a crop was ready for harvest, a few ears were plucked and rubbed in the hands over the fire so that they burst with a characteristic plop. To ensure the health and increase of his stock, a man crushed the root of a plant with salt-lick and water. The mixture was sprinkled over the stock (preferably by a daughter aged about thirteen) every morning for four days; and, during that time, no visitor might enter the homestead nor eat food prepared in it. Before setting out for war, a diviner was consulted as to the likely prospects. If he was not available, there were ordinary people who 'had feet'—they could foretell the immediate future from whether, as they walked, their toes struck stone, wood or soil. If the rains failed, a sacrifice of a spotless black sheep was made to *Ilat* (lightning). Only men and women whose first-born children were girls might take part. The tail of the sheep, mixed with blood, bones and the contents of the stomach, was burnt on a fire of green wood; and, as the smoke rose, the participants danced round the fire, praying, 'Man of the Waters, rescue us! Save us! Why do you let the land grow dry? Send us rain!' *Ilat* was conceived as a personal being with power over lightning and water and acting as the agent of God in the detection

of thieves. It is to be noticed that he had no specialist priests to offer him sacrifice. About fifty per cent of adult men and women must have been entitled to take part.

A rather more specialised system was found in Buganda. *Ggulu*, the spirit of the sky, and *Walumbe*, the spirit of death, have already been mentioned (Chapter Two). *Ggulu* controlled the rain and, through his son *Kiwanuka*, the lightning. *Kitaka*, spirit of the earth, was consulted by the king whenever somebody was to be put to death. *Kitaka* would capture the ghost of the victim so that it did not trouble the king. *Musisi* was spirit of earthquakes. *Katonda* was 'creator'; but very little attention was paid to him; and he does not seem to have been regarded as more important than any of the other spirits. Far more important was *Mukasa*, spirit of Lake Victoria, who gave increase of food, cattle and children and healed both the bodies and the minds of men.

Of these, *Musisi* and *Mukasa* were said to have been originally men, belonging to a family which lived on the Ssesse Islands in Lake Victoria. Indeed, one Muganda authority, who had ample opportunity to know the old customs and beliefs, wrote that 'all spirits were originally merely men. Because of their excellence in this life, they were given special powers when they died.' This is probably an exaggeration. It seems much more likely that the Baganda originally personified the powers of nature and that to these they added legendary heroes who had done exceptional deeds in life. For some reason or other, they came to feel that the organisation of society was more important than the struggle with nature and thus that all spirits had a human origin.

The story goes that, when the eighth king was at war with the neighbouring Banyoro, he sent for help to Ssesse and obtained *Kibuuka*, who was the brother of *Mukasa*. *Kibuuka* floated in a cloud and was able to direct operations from that vantage point. Unfortunately (like Samson) he got entangled with a Munyoro woman captive who learnt his secret, escaped and told her people. Next day, they shot their arrows into the cloud and killed *Kibuuka*. His body was buried. But his ghost started speaking through one of those who had buried him. A shrine was built for him, where his ghost was treated with almost as much honour as a king. He was regularly sent human sacrifices; and his mediums (men through whom he was supposed to speak) accompanied the armies to war to advise the generals. Other spirits of war were *Nende* and *Kirabire*, said to be sons of *Mukasa* and brothers of *Musoke*, spirit of the rainbow. *Mukasa's* great-uncle, *Wanga*, was said to have restored the sun to the sky (presumably after an eclipse) in the reign of the sixteenth king. There is obviously something wrong with this chronology; but chronology is a relatively sophisticated concern.

Another spirit was *Ddungu*, who seems to have been imported from Bunyoro. He was particularly concerned with hunters, who offered him beer and left their spears overnight in his shrine. (Another custom of hunters was that, if a buffalo were killed, a shrine was built for its ghost outside the hunter's house, lest it kill him on his next expedition.) *Kawali* and *Kawumpuli* were responsible for smallpox and plague—that is, for epidemics rather than individual sickness. One was the son, the other a nephew, of kings. *Kawumpuli's* nurse, *Nabuzaana*, became the guardian spirit of women and her living attendants acted as specialist midwives. *Nalwanga*, mother of *Mukasa*, assisted childless women to bear children. Two other female spirits, *Nagadya*, mother of *Kibuuka*, and *Nagawonyi*, interceded with *Ggulu* and *Musoke* in time of drought. (When the rain was very heavy, or the lightning severe, smoky fires were burnt to keep the clouds from falling; and drums were beaten to draw the attention of the spirits to the presence of people who might be hurt by the elements.)

These are only a few of the many spirits recognised in Buganda. Each of them had one or more shrines supervised by 'priests' who were in charge of administration and offered sacrifices when occasion demanded. Very few of them expected bloody sacrifice—whether of men or animals. But, often, large estates were associated with the shrines and gifts of many kinds might be given—of men or women to act as attendants, of cows and goats to swell their herds, of beer to drink or cowrie shells to use in decoration. At least the more famous of them were treated with the same honour as the ghosts of kings; and it might be difficult for an outsider to distinguish between the shrine of a spirit and that of a king's jawbone. The kings were dependent on them and might suffer for offences against them. But they were also dependent on the king. A shrine might not be built, nor the successor to a priest be appointed, without the king's permission. A king might, in anger, burn down a shrine or kill all the attendants. There is the impression that kings and spirits were very much on equal terms: and that, just as kings, in life, were superior to all men, so their ghosts were superior to the spirits.

It is not clear whether in Buganda belief in spirits had its origin in the personification of natural forces or in giving special honour to the ghosts of exceptional men. But it seems to have developed into an attitude which treated all spirits—whatever their origin—as though they were ghosts who had obtained especial power and therefore deserved especial honour. They were ghosts who, instead of being of concern only to their own clan, and ceasing to be active after the third or fourth generation, had attained a tribal status and continued their activity from one far generation to another. Kings

and warriors and famous sorcerers continued to exercise, in a ghostly way, the functions of their earthly life. It is very doubtful whether they can, in any proper sense, be called 'gods'.

It is important not to give the impression that all societies, which believe in numbers of different psychic forces, organise their beliefs in the same way as the Baganda. *Ilat* in Marakwet corresponds very closely to *Kiwanuka* in Buganda. But he is clearly a nature-spirit; and there are no hero-spirits to complicate the picture. Of the Nuer of the Sudan Professor Evans-Pritchard has suggested that the large number of nature-spirits recognised are regarded rather like the colours of a spectrum which forms when the white light of one God is refracted through the varieties of human experience. Much the same seems to be true of the Dinka of the Sudan and the Yoruba of Western Nigeria. The total picture is one in which natural forces are felt to be personal in their action. On the other hand, once given the belief in ghosts, men who have been exceptional in life might well be expected to be exceptional in death also.

But it is important to remember also that they are not regarded as being concerned only with the exceptional things which are most likely to be remembered or to call for special action. If *Ggulu* withheld rain, or sent too much, it was because he was displeased. But, if the rains fell normally, it was because he was satisfied. In the same way, if the king was pleased, he gave gifts. If he was angry, he put men to death. It was important to keep him contented all the time. If I keep my car in good condition, it will give me good service. If it stops, I may blame my wife for not reminding me to fill up with petrol, or the garage mechanic for not servicing it properly. Or I may blame myself for forgetfulness or carelessness. In the first case, I am throwing the blame on a person outside myself: in the second, on my own psychology, something which I cannot locate in space. If I combine the two processes, I blame a psychic force outside myself. I may even be so angry with the car that I hit it. I may even be so fond of it that I call it 'she'. I am not far from inventing a spirit world of my own.

#### For further reading

*The Heathens*, Chapters XIII, XIV

#### For discussion

1. Try and think of examples where we almost personify inanimate things.
2. What is your feeling in the face of (a) exceptional men, (b) natural grandeur, (c) technological power?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *One God*

Each morning, as a Maasai elder leaves his house, he prays, 'Enk Ai, God of our fathers, continue to look after us, to take care of our children, and to drive away diseases alike from men and cattle. Keep evil away from us.' Each morning, as a Maasai woman milks her cows: 'Enk Ai, I pray you to give me life, children and food to support life.'

When accused of theft, a Marakwet may take an oath and say, 'Look on me, *Chebet*. O, tell me whether I stole this thing or am falsely accused.' If he wishes to let his flocks go untended for a day, he may say, 'It's *Chebet*'s turn to look after the stock today.'

Each morning, the senior wife in an Ankole homestead, before the others had risen, would take a dry spray of a plant which, in the vernacular, is called 'protection'. Sprinkled on the fire it gave a pleasant smell. Then she squeezed the leaves of another plant called 'good fortune' and, letting the juice fall in the fire, prayed to *Ruhanga*, 'Let me smile in good fortune. Let my children smile in good fortune. Let my home smile in good fortune. I do not eat what is not mine. I do not steal my neighbour's goods. I always wish good health to others. I am never in debt. He who hates is unjust. I am always smiling in good fortune.' Before making an offering to a ghost or a spirit, the officiant, again using herbs to symbolise his meaning, would pray, 'Let my home be pure. Let this house be spared. Keep away my enemies. . . . These are yours, O Creator; and yours, O Giver; and yours, Lord of the Sun. O give me life.'

When Baganda children are playing, they sometimes sing, 'Don't count me. *Katonda* counted me long ago. Don't count me. The pied wagtail counted me long ago.'

These four societies differ from one another in many ways. The Maasai are a nomadic, pastoral people. Sorcery, both bad and good, is very common. There is no belief in ghosts or spirits. But in the beginning *Enk Ai* (which also means 'rain') set Maasinda on the earth. A leather rope stretched from sky to earth; and from its lower end Maasinda communicated with *Enk Ai*. His constant desire was for cattle; and they were sent down the rope. *Enk Ai*

also spoke to him so that he became very wise. Of his four sons, Maasai alone inherited his love of cattle. The others became founders, respectively, of the forest hunters, the agriculturists and the smiths.

The Maasai migrated southwards and came to the precipitous escarpment of the Kerio river. After a long time of waiting and a hazardous ascent, only the strongest reached the top and lived to inhabit their new home; and *Enk Ai* is addressed, 'O thou who brought us up from Kerio'. In daily prayer he is addressed also, after two famous sections of the people at that time, as '*Enk Ai* of Ilkitilik and Ilkuarri'. From Kerio they moved southwards to the modern Kitale and Kinangop, which provided fertile pastures; and, in the latter area, round a particular tree, they made their major sacrifices. In 1911 a treaty with the British confined them to an area further south but made specific provision for their access to the tree for religious purposes. After two or three visits, they discovered that *Enk Ai* could be worshipped at other trees in their new homeland. There are clear parallels here with Leviticus 19.36, Exodus 3.6 and Psalm 137.

*Enk Ai* is actively involved in their lives at every point. (The present tense is used because few Maasai are yet Christian.) He preserves order and punishes injustice. Through him a generous man becomes more wealthy, one who is mean loses his property. From him comes the blessing which parents bestow on sons who care for them. He ensures that the curse of a dying parent is fulfilled on the careless. His chief intermediaries are the *laibon* (Chapter Six). But their numbers are few; travelling is difficult; and they can be consulted only on special occasions. Every man prays direct to *Enk Ai*.

The Marakwet are mainly agriculturists, though this may be only a recent development and related tribes are still pastoralists. One day *Chebet* (which also means 'sun') was lying on the ground, along with the Moon, Man and a number of animals. He became suspicious of Man; and he and Moon escaped to the sky. The other animals left it too late, till man sharpened a stone and killed one of them. Then the rest took refuge in the forest. *Chebet* is supreme, omnipotent, the omniscient arbiter of all things and the guarantor of right. As the sun shines on all people and all things, so *Chebet* sees everything that happens on earth and ensures its proper functioning. When cursing a thief, a man might say, 'Behold my case, O *Asis* (another name for *Chebet*). Friend *Chebet*, why do you let the children suffer? O horror! May *Asis* kill the thief.' Only in such cases was he addressed directly. Regular prayers were not said to him. *Ilal* (Chapter Seven) and the ghosts, various forms of sorcery and witchcraft, were much more likely to be invoked in

everyday affairs. Nevertheless, there was a deep sense of his presence and of his ultimate responsibility for the well-being of all men.

This sense of an omnipotent God, creator of all things and all men, sustainer of social and natural order, who nevertheless is not directly concerned in affairs, comes out very forcibly in the case of *Ruhanga* of Ankole. The people of Ankole are a mixture of two groups, one agricultural, the other pastoral, with a centralised kingship in some ways similar to that of Buganda. They believed in sorcery, family ancestors and a number of spirits similar to those of Buganda. The last, in particular, demanded a great deal of attention if things were to go well, though their theoretical occupation was that of guardians of each homestead. It was these forces which were invoked to account for trouble or to give help in hazardous endeavours. In a case of sickness, where all other attempts at cure had failed, it might be said, 'Let *Ruhanga* heal him'; and, if the patient recovered, *Ruhanga* was given the credit. But, usually, the case was given up as hopeless. It was customary to draw his attention to any important activity. His presence could be felt in thunder and lightning, his fury in rainstorms and black clouds. Hailstones were his dung and water his urine. He was known as 'Creator', 'Giver', 'Lord of the Sun'. He was above all things, invisible, omnipresent, moving like the sun (and like *Chebet* of the Marakwet) across the whole earth. *Tata Ruhanga* was an exclamation of joy at the birth of a child. 'See how beautifully *Ruhanga* has made that little hill', an Ankole man might say. He gave new life, the blessings of worldly attainment and the daily needs of every man. He imposed the laws by which society was organised and preserved peace. Yet he was not thought to intervene directly in human life. The order which he had created might be thrown out of balance—a totem might be violated (Chapter Two). But the consequences were automatic, impersonal, like the swing of a pendulum restoring the balance. It was not possible to speak of offending him or to make him an offering. To say, 'These are yours . . .' was simply a statement of fact.

Finally, the Baganda in the nineteenth century recognised three spirits who may, at an earlier stage in their history, have been regarded as creator-gods. One was *Ggulu*, the spirit of the sky, who enters into the Kintu legend (Chapter Two) and was the father of Lightning and Death. *Muwanga* (which is the Buganda form of *Ruhanga* and means 'one who sets things in order') was said by some to be leader of the spirits and ruler over all things. He was frequently used by diviners as an aid in the diagnosis of trouble. *Katonda* means 'creator' and he was said to have created all things (notice the difference from *Muwanga*). The pied wagtail was his

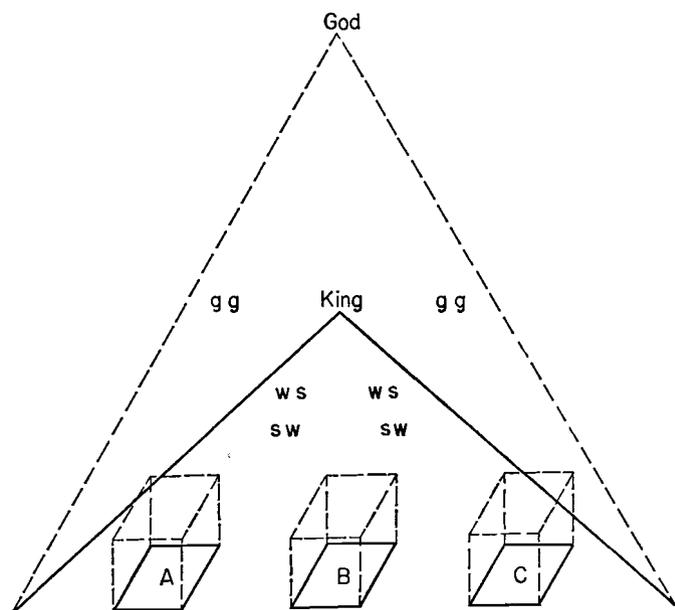
'chief minister' and used to perch on the tops of houses to count those inside. But very little attention was paid to him. It may be that, at one time, all these three were recognised as creator, and given some sort of superiority, in different parts of the country. But, by the nineteenth century, they were being treated as rather minor spirits. The attitudes which other peoples have directed towards the creator god were reserved by the Baganda for their king.

Diagram 3 overleaf tries to illustrate the shape of the societies described in Chapters Three to Eight.

Some students of early religious forms have thought that there was evolution from belief in ghosts or nature-spirits, through some form of 'polytheism', to belief in one God. Others have argued that, originally, all men believed in a single God and that belief in many psychic beings developed later. The four examples given show how very difficult it is to provide conclusive evidence for either of these views. All that can at present be said with any certainty is that different types of society seem to have different forms of 'religious' belief. For instance, it would be possible to make the following suggestions as a simple hypothesis to be tested by further observations:

- (i) pastoral nomads, like the Maasai and the Jews in the desert, tend to believe in one God, active in all the affairs of life;
- (ii) settled, agricultural people, like the Baganda and the agriculturists of Ankole and like the Canaanites of Palestine, tend to believe in many spirits;
- (iii) just as the Jews, when they settled to an agricultural life in Palestine, began to practise the cults of the Canaanite spirits (and were rebuked by the prophets), so the Marakwet, having turned from a nomadic to a settled life, are beginning to develop a cult of many spirits, while still remembering their one God;
- (iv) where, as in Ankole and Marakwet, a firm belief in one God continues to exist side by side with a belief in many spirits, God ceases to be regarded as actively concerned in day-to-day affairs;
- (v) the development of a strong, centralised kingship may, as in Buganda, direct attention from the one God to the king himself, who becomes, in effect, the focus of the most powerful religious emotions.

Common to all the attitudes seems to be a conviction that there is a stable social and natural order, guaranteed by a power which it is better to call 'supernormal' rather than 'supernatural'. This power is *Enk Ai* or *Chebet* or *Ruhanga*. In Buganda, the natural



— Relationships with living  
 --- Psychic relationships  
 A,B,C Clan societies illustrated in Diagram 1.  
 g Lesser gods and spirits discussed in Chapter 4.  
 w,s Witches and sorcerers (Chapter 3.)

DIAGRAM 3. VARIOUS TYPES OF PSYCHIC SOCIETY

The strength of any particular feature varies from tribe to tribe and might be placed on a scale from 0 to 100. The following table is only suggestive. It is not based on quantitative measurements.

	Buganda	Ankole	Marakwet	Maasai	Christians
Creator God	0	75	90	100	100
Spirits	75	75	10	0	0
King	100	50	0	0	0
Ghosts	50	50	25	0	0
Witches and Sorcerers	50	50	50	75	0

order does not seem to have been so important; but the social order was guaranteed by the kingship. In contemporary technological society the power is depersonalised and called 'the uniformity of nature'. But, whether it is the dynamic activity of *Enk Ai*, the largely passive but inescapable personality of *Ruhanga*, or the impersonal basis of all scientific activity, it is still an assertion of the primary conviction. To the very tentative five suggestions which have already been made, it is possible to add another:

- (vi) people who live in a technological society tend to disbelieve in any psychic forces outside the personality of individuals. Religious disbelief is related not so much to philosophical or scientific argument as to the nature of contemporary society.

**For further reading**

*The Heathens*, Chapter XVI  
*Primal Vision*, Chapter 7

**For discussion**

1. If you were asked to choose, would you prefer *Enk Ai*, *Ruhanga* or the king of the Baganda?
2. How far is modern British disbelief related to the structure of society rather than to philosophical argument?

## CHAPTER NINE

### *The coming of Islam*

In the sixth century A.D. the Arabs held beliefs very similar to those which have been described for Africa. But in the year 570 Mohammed ibn Abdullah was born in the important trading centre of Mecca, which drew much of its wealth from visitors to its famous religious shrines. When he grew up, he became overwhelmingly convinced that there was only one God, Allah, who had called him to be his messenger. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, he spoke openly and insistently against social injustice and fraud and against the polytheism of his people. God would shortly judge them for their wickedness; and repentance was essential. *Islam* ('submission') was the only way. The corresponding adjective is *Muslim* (the older spelling was *Moslem*); and that was the name given to his followers. They dislike being called 'Mohammedans' because it suggests that they regard Mohammed as Christians regard Christ. For them, he is the greatest and last of the prophets, but no more than that.

In Mecca he found few followers; and they were persecuted. But in 622 he was invited to become king of Medina; and from that position he conquered the Arab world in the name of Allah. After his death, Arab armies took Islam through Egypt and North Africa to Spain; through Palestine to the borders of Austria; eastwards as far as China. There seems to have been an expansive force latent among the Arabs which needed only the spark of a fierce monotheism to set alight a great imperial achievement. They did not, on the whole, convert others by force—though many of their subjects found it easier to live if they became Muslim. But there was a conviction of a divine calling which made Islam, for many centuries, a great political, intellectual and aesthetic force.

It spread into West Africa, where many of the tribes were fully Muslim before they had any contact with Europeans and where Islam—after more than a century of contact—is still gaining adherents. Probably about the eighth century A.D. Arabs began to settle on the east coast of Africa. From the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries (when the Portuguese for a time interrupted the Arab influence) there was a vast extension of trade and building of

cities. From the late eighteenth century onwards Arab trade-routes extended into the centre of the country; and they carried back gold and ivory and slaves.

Unlike most Britons, the Arabs mixed freely with the darker-skinned people among whom they were living, intermarried with them and developed a new hybrid language—Swahili—which is now the official language of Tanzania and spoken widely in Kenya and in parts of Uganda and Congo-Kinshasa. Moreover, Islam was part of their whole life. Unlike Christians, they did not employ special missionaries; but every trader took Islam with him; and it became part of the new Arab-African culture, which sprang up in Zanzibar, on the coast and wherever Arabs settled along their inland trade-routes. For an African to become 'Arabised' was at the same time to become a Muslim.

For Muslims, Allah is absolute power. The only virtue is submission to his will; and, at the Last Day (which will come suddenly), the righteous will be admitted into everlasting Paradise, the wicked thrown into unending Fire.

Allah is One. But Islam recognises both good angels, who are his messengers, and *jinn*, psychic forces which may be either good or evil. Both these beliefs can readily be made to fit traditional African beliefs about spirits. Many Muslims also continue to practise sorcery and divination; and in some African tribes they are reputed to be more skilled at these practices than any others.

The will of Allah is revealed, complete, in the *Qur'an* (sometimes spelled *Koran*), which came down from heaven in written form. It supersedes the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), the Psalms of David and the Gospels, which were earlier revelations of the same kind, and in which the coming of Mohammed is said to have been foretold.

There are five compulsory duties—the 'five pillars of Islam':

- (i) The regular recital of the creed: 'There is no god but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet';
- (ii) Prayer and ritual washing at five set times in the day;
- (iii) Fasting, especially during the forty days of Ramadhan, when neither food nor water is taken between sunrise and sunset (on the Equator this means a period of twelve hours);
- (iv) Almsgiving;
- (v) The pilgrimage to Mecca. (This, of course, can be undertaken only by those who are rich enough; but many Muslims save up for years in order to go.)

There is prohibition of usury and games of chance, the consumption of pork or alcohol and the use of images of God. Men are allowed up to four wives, whom it is relatively easy to divorce;

and the position of women is in general lower than in Christian countries. On Fridays (the Muslim holy day) attendance is expected at the mosque, where there is a sermon as well as prayers and readings from the *Qur'an*. Circumcision is regarded as compulsory for men, though it is not mentioned in the *Qur'an*. The *Qur'an* regulates the size of dowries, the guardianship of orphans and inheritance. It provides penalties for murder, homicide, stealing and minor offences. It accepts the institution of slavery but bids masters be kind to their slaves.

The horrors of the Arab slave-trade in East Africa are sufficient indication that the provisions of the *Qur'an* were not always observed; and Africans who became Muslims—provided they observed the first three pillars—had little difficulty in fitting it into their traditional way of life. At the same time, it provided the very real ideal of a world-wide brotherhood of Muslims and thereby opened up wider horizons.

In Buganda, in the middle of the nineteenth century, there is some evidence that the traditional religious ideas were becoming ineffective. Partly this may have been because the weakening of belief in a creator God (Chapter Eight), and the emphasis on the king as the sustainer of the *social* order, left an uncertainty as to the stability of the *natural* order. But, partly also, it was due to disturbing outside influences. Arab trade goods from the coast had been entering the country from the end of the eighteenth century. The first Arab trader appeared at the king's court in 1844 and, in the name of Allah, rebuked the king for wanton massacre of his subjects. There was continuing centuries-old war with the Banyoro in the north-west and the serious threat of invasion by Egypt in the north. In 1862 the English explorer, Speke, reached the court of King Mutesa I; and there was news of other white men elsewhere in East Africa. All these events might mean becoming involved with the wider world of which traditional religion could give no account.

Mutesa himself received instruction in Islam and Arabic, read and explained the *Qur'an* to his chiefs, kept Ramadhan, ordered the building of mosques and encouraged his subjects to follow Islamic customs. But he himself would not be circumcised nor follow Islamic food laws; and how serious he was is open to question. There is more than a suggestion that he favoured Islam in order himself to gain favour with, and avoid invasion by, Islamic Egypt; and, when the explorer, Stanley, visited him in 1875, he saw a still more exciting possibility of favouring Christianity and thus gaining the favour of Britain. He asked Stanley to send missionaries to teach his people.

But, if Mutesa saw religion almost wholly in political terms,

some of the young men about his court were more serious about Islam. They began to be absent from prayers, led by the king himself in the palace. As an uncircumcised person, he was not entitled to do so. They refused to eat meat killed by the king's non-Muslim butcher. This was too much for the king. He claimed supreme authority. His subjects must pray as he told them and eat what he offered. To refuse was treason. It must be punished by death. Seventy of them were burnt to death. Perhaps three hundred escaped with Arab caravans to the coast. Perhaps, in the rest of the country, a thousand others were brutally murdered. 'They were men', says a Muganda Christian writer, comparing them with Baganda Christians martyred at a later date, 'of outstanding courage.'

Something extraordinary had happened in Buganda. In a country where absolute obedience to the king was taken for granted, a few young men had discovered that they 'must obey God rather than man'. Buganda did not become Muslim. Mutesa's request to Stanley resulted in the arrival of Christian missionaries in 1877. Between 1885 and 1887 Christian Baganda were martyred by Mutesa's son. In 1888 he tried to eliminate Christians and Muslims alike. They joined forces to depose him. Armed by the Arabs, the Muslims turned on the Christians who fled to Ankole. Armed now by an English ex-missionary, and in league with their deposed king, the Christians returned triumphant. In 1890 appeared the first British administrator with a small armed force; and in due course Buganda became a British protectorate. She had found the immediate solution to both her political and her religious problems by becoming a nominally Christian kingdom in alliance with the British.

In early days it was the ghosts who stood for the solidarity and continuity of clan society (Chapter One). At a later date it was to be the king (Chapter Six). For the next period it was to be the Christian God. But, just as the Arabs became at the same time Muslim and invincible because one man, Mohammed, held out against his contemporaries and remained firm in his deep religious conviction, so the change in Buganda came about because first Muslim, and later Christian, young Baganda were ready to be martyred for their faith.

#### **For further reading**

*East African Christian*, Chapter 5

#### **For discussion**

1. 'For an African to become "Arabised" was at the same time to

become a Muslim.' Can you imagine a situation (perhaps in the past) when it would be possible to say, "To become "Anglicised" is at the same time to become a Christian"?

2. What do you think is the relation between religion and politics?

## CHAPTER TEN

### *The impact of Christianity*

What sort of Christianity came to Africa? There are so many different kinds that a full study of Christianity alone is almost a study in comparative religion. In Egypt and the Roman provinces of North Africa it was established almost from the beginning. Both produced notable martyrs, scholars and saints. Alexandria was a great centre of Christian philosophy; and Latin Christian literature was born in Carthage rather than in Rome. In the fourth century Christianity reached Ethiopia, which is still officially a Christian country. As far south as the modern Khartoum, a Christian Nubian kingdom was conquered by the Muslim Arabs only in 1504. But the Arab advance effectively cut off African Christianity from its contacts with Europe.

In the fifteenth century the Portuguese began to adventure round the world. To be Portuguese was to be a (Roman) Catholic Christian; and part of the Portuguese hope was to convert Africans to Christianity and *therefore* to a political alliance against Islam. In 1490 Portuguese missionaries reached the kingdom of the Kongo in West Africa. The heir to the throne was baptised and ruled as an ardent and enlightened Christian till his death in 1543. But, as Portuguese interest in the slave trade began to dominate their concern for Christianity, any effective Christian influence disappeared from West Africa.

In East Africa, in 1630, the Portuguese installed, as the first Christian king of Mombasa, a native who had been educated in their Indian colony of Goa. In the following year he expelled his Portuguese masters; and all Christian converts were either reconverted to Islam or killed. It was not till the end of the eighteenth century, with the discovery of the horrors of the slave trade and the development, in northern Europe, of an interest in legitimate trade with Africa, that Christian missionaries began to arrive in earnest. They, too, tended to identify Christianity with white civilisation. They took up 'the white man's burden' of responsibility towards 'lesser breeds without law' (of which Rudyard Kipling was the prophet); and, although they utterly condemned the slave trade—whether it was conducted by Europeans in the

west or Arabs in the east—they found it difficult to see anything good in African traditional life.

Their conscious motive was the conversion of Africans, for the eternal welfare of Africans and the glory of God. For their faith they were ready to face hardship, sickness and death. (Between 1829 and 1900 the Basel Mission alone lost one hundred and nineteen missionaries and wives in Ghana). As they began to understand the material needs of Africa, they pioneered medicine; agriculture for the growth of better crops; western methods of building; schools. They reduced African languages to written form, wrote dictionaries and grammars; and because, for them, a Christian must be able to read his Bible or his Catechism, they conducted a vast experiment in adult education. A very high proportion of contemporary political leaders in Africa were educated in mission schools; and, whatever their attitude to Christianity, they publicly recognise their deep debt to their missionary educators.

Missionaries also found themselves, often to their surprise, involved in politics. This was partly because some of them felt that only by setting up Christian communities could Africans be rescued from the temptations of traditional society. They could be protected from social pressure to take part in the ancestor cult; they could be taught the virtue of hard work; they could marry according to European Christian fashion and bring up their children in the right way. Some of them, it was hoped, would learn to go out as evangelists among their own people. Within these communities the missionaries found that, inevitably, they had to act as secular organisers and magistrates as well as spiritual advisers. Sometimes, when fugitives from tribal authority sought sanctuary, they came into conflict with the traditional chiefs. Sometimes they had to organise the military defence of the community against attack from outside. In yet other cases, their reputation for wisdom came to be so respected that they were called on to help in tribal administration and justice.

Partly, also, missionaries came to think that only political intervention by European 'Christian' governments could put down the slave trade, discourage what they saw as the barbarous aspects of African society, and protect the growing Christian communities against pagan attack. Thus the Church Missionary Society played a leading part in persuading an unwilling British government to declare a protectorate over Buganda. A German missionary played a similar part in establishing the British Colony of the Gold Coast and Lagos. A French missionary persuaded the Balozi, in what is now Zambia, to request the protection of Queen Victoria and to sign a treaty with the British South African Company.

With very few exceptions, missionaries were committed to

David Livingstone's belief that Christianity, Civilisation and Legitimate Commerce must go hand in hand for the salvation of Africa. Missions, colonial governments and traders had different conscious motives for going to Africa. Nor did they always work in harmony. But they all believed, in the sarcastic words of a great French West African administrator, that 'Man must put the world in order. This determination has the compelling power of a religion, and the European is its prophet.' Missionaries were divided theologically between Roman Catholics and many brands of Protestant. Government officials were not all Christian; and, even of those who were, some thought that, at that particular stage in the development of Africans, Islam might be, for them, a better religion. Some of the pioneer traders had a deeply Christian motive in trying to undermine the slave trade and improve the lot of Africans. But, as trade became more profitable, it was followed by increasing numbers who had no Christian motive. Among Europeans in Africa there were these deep divisions of conscious motive and theological belief. But, at a deeper level, they were united by the new 'religion' of putting the world in order according to white men's ideas of what that order should be.

Moreover, from the point of view of Africans, they all had the same white faces, the same mysterious magic of reading and writing, access to the same power given by guns. Africans trained in mission schools found employment, as clerks and interpreters to government officials and traders, which gave them a hitherto unknown cash wage, social status and, to some of them, far greater social influence than they could have expected as a birthright. To become a Christian was not merely to adopt a new 'religion'. It was to enter a whole new world of education, medicine and technology, of which the white man's God was the psychic dimension, precisely as the ancestors had been the psychic dimension of the old (Chapter Four). If you became a Christian, you naturally adopted white men's ways. If, for any reason, you wished to enter into the new way of living, you become a Christian. Training for the new ways could, in any case, be had only in the mission schools. To have a Christian name was a sign of status; and the only way of getting such a name was to be baptised.

Thus it came about that the tribes in which missionaries met a ready response were those which were already ripe for change at all points. As agents of change in one dimension, government and trade—whether they wished it or not—produced a vacuum in the psychic dimension which the missionaries offered to fill with the Christian God. As living embodiments of the new ways, in intimate touch with their people—as purveyors of education and western medicine—the missionaries encouraged Africans to seek what

government and trade had to offer. Parents, who were themselves determined to stick to the old ways, nevertheless encouraged their children to reap the obvious advantages offered by mission schools. At the other end of the scale, the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania, the Karimojong of Uganda, resisted change at all points. They bowed unwillingly to the superior force of government. But they wanted neither Christianity nor education nor very much in the way of trade. Those who responded were, to some extent, rebels against the tribe. A Maasai who went to school was 'taken by the Europeans'. He might escape the piercing of his ear-lobes, the removal of his incisors. He might be circumcised in hospital instead of by the traditional rite. In any recognisable sense he had ceased to be a Maasai.

This is not to say that, for Africans, to become a Christian was simply to be associated with Europeans. The African martyrs are sufficient proof that, in many cases, conversion went far deeper: the Baganda martyrs of 1885-7; in 1896 Bernard Mizeki in Mashonaland; victims of Mau Mau in the 1950's; in 1963 Yona Kanamuzeyi in Rwanda. The East African Revival movement (which is in close sympathy with Billy Graham whom it preceded by many years) has produced many examples of deeply Christian lives.

But it was not till much later that the majority of Africans began to make the distinction between being European and being Christian. Some Europeans made no pretence of being Christian. Of those who did, some failed to live up to its standards. As governments began to run schools and hospitals without missionary aid, it became possible to have the advantages of European skill without a Christian label. The many different missions—often as hostile to one another as Roman Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland—came to be seen as a divisive influence in the tribe. Had Christianity been just a trick of the imperialists to persuade Africans to submit to foreign rule? Would a politically independent Africa want a European religion? Or, on the other hand, if Christianity is good in itself, is it not possible to have it without its European appendages?

#### **For further reading**

*East African Christian*, Chapters 4, 6-9, 16

#### **For discussion**

1. 'Man must put the world in order.' In what sense can this 'determination' be called a 'religion'?
2. How far do you think that Christianity is a European, rather than *the* universal, religion?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *A question of dignity*

Another point at which missionaries became—quite unwillingly—involved in politics was through the schools they set up. These were intended, in the very first place, to teach reading and writing and the basic principles of Christianity. But, as missionaries began to see more clearly the needs of African society, they realised that there must be both technical schools for farmers and craftsmen and more academic schools in which could be trained the future leaders of both Church and State. They hoped, of course, that not only western technical and academic skills would be learnt but good Christian character formed. They differed considerably in their ideas of what that character should be. Anglo-Saxon Protestants tended to copy the English public school system and to train for responsibility and initiative. King's College, Budo, came to be called 'the Eton of Uganda'. French Roman Catholics thought in terms of humility and obedience. Some fundamentalists suspected all academic education as tempting Africans to think too highly of themselves.

But most taught an ideal of human equality which contrasted strongly with the attitude of too many Europeans outside the schools. Men and women, who had been taught at school that merit depended on ability and that race was no barrier to personal relationships, could not indefinitely tolerate a wider society in which Africans were received only at the back door and made to feel that they were kept in inferior positions, or at lower salaries than less-qualified Europeans, simply because they were Africans.

First as clerks and interpreters, and later in more responsible positions, they began to learn the techniques of western government, to appreciate the power which it gave to its servants and to wonder why they could not exercise this power without foreign supervision. Moreover, within their own ranks, the different churches were encouraging African responsibility far faster than society at large. The Presbyterian Church of Ghana was completely free of foreign control, and had European missionaries working under its authority, seven years before Ghana obtained political independence; and there were few churches in Africa

which did not follow a similar, if a slightly slower, route. There is little doubt that experience of Church-government was an important factor in encouraging the desire for political self-government.

Moreover, Christianity itself presents an ideal of a community larger than the tribe. If only because distances were so great and communications so inadequate, all secondary schools were, until very recently, boarding schools. There pupils of many tribes met and began to think of themselves as members of African nations rather than of particular tribes. It was no accident that more than half the members of Mr. Kenyatta's first government had been pupils of the Alliance High School, Kikuyu.

Missionaries, on the whole, were not political revolutionaries. Colin Morris, writing in 1961, could say, 'over the past four years many missionaries [in Central Africa] have almost come to regard the churches in the African townships as branches of [nationalist political parties] in Sunday dress'. But this was a new development. Most missionaries, like most colonial government officials, thought in terms of ultimate self-government for Africans but believed that the day was very far-distant. Africans were 'not yet ready' to govern themselves. They still needed many years of European and missionary guidance. African politicians were snakes in the grass, turning (to use a not uncommon mixed metaphor) to bite the hand which fed them. Moreover, they were, at the least, critical of the Church: at worst, thought to be in league with the communists. Africa could not safely be left to their leadership.

There were subtle differences in the attitudes of different colonial powers; and these influenced the attitude of missionaries. At one end of the scale, Belgium and Portugal made little attempt to train Africans for self-government. Protestants in their colonies, because they demanded a relatively high degree of individual freedom, were often regarded as politically seditious.

France aimed at training a small group of highly-educated Africans, who would be wholly absorbed into the French way of living. One of these became a minister in the government in Paris. But the general experience of this group was that, in the last resort, they were not fully accepted by Frenchmen. It is among them that there arose the idea of 'the African Personality'—the assertion that Africans are *equal* but *different*. In the early days, this expressed itself in literature—novels, plays, poems—some of which is very fine indeed. More recently there has come an insistence on a rediscovery of the African past, through research by African historians, and the encouragement of traditional dancing and music. Several newly-independent countries claim to practise

'African socialism', which is said to have its roots not in Marx but in traditional African forms of community. It is not surprising if the question also arises, 'Is there an African religion?'

In the British colonies, education was offered much more widely and there was a conscious intention of teaching Africans to govern themselves—even if it was thought that the time would not come for hundreds of years. Whereas the French tended to impose French ways of life on a few, the British to some extent aimed at encouraging the development of African ways till they could hold their own in the world at large. This meant that English-speaking Africans were, to begin with, much less affected by the idea of 'the African Personality'. At the same time, because there were more individuals qualified to take over jobs from Europeans, they were all the more to feel the indignity of being kept in submission and of being denied full social equality.

Indeed, there is an important sense in which relationships between Africans and Europeans, all over Africa, became a question of human dignity. This is why the relative economic well-being of Africans in South Africa or Rhodesia is irrelevant to the political argument. They want to be treated not as economic animals but as responsible men and women. This is fundamentally a religious matter because it asks the question, with which all religions are concerned, 'Who am I?' Traditional society in Buganda answered, 'I am a member of a continuing clan which includes the living dead as well as those on earth.' Later, the answer was to become, 'I am the king's man.' Both these answers were felt to be self-justifying and provided everything which was needed to settle questions of behaviour (of morals). Islam, in the same way, said, 'I am the slave of Allah.' Christianity said, 'I am Jesus' man.' Baganda saw men, first as members of particular clans set over against other clans: later, as members of a particular tribe, set over against other tribes who were not fully men. Both Islam and Christianity were potentially for all men. Modern Africans have sometimes tended to return to a half-way position—to say, 'I am African'. What might be called *Africanism* has been set up against *both* the traditional outlook *and* the world religions, as an attempt to establish the dignity of Africans and to define their place in the world. In this sense, it is the modern religion of Africa, set over against the European assertion that it is Europeans who must 'put the world in order'.

But there had been other, and earlier, attempts to assert African dignity within the broad limits of Christian belief and practice. In 1921 Simon Kimbangu led a movement in the then Belgian Congo which (if it was largely Old Testament in its emphasis) was definitely Christian in content and was more successful than the

missionaries in turning men away from idolatry and polygamy. At the same time, Kimbangu used biblical texts to preach freedom from European control. He was imprisoned. But the Kimbanguist church, alongside Protestants and Roman Catholics, is now one of the three churches recognised by the government of Congo-Kinshasa.

All over Africa such movements have arisen, asserting emphatically that they wish to be Christian: but that it is possible to be Christian under African leadership and that there is a difference between Christianity and European ways of life. Some of them wear very colourful uniforms. They sing hymns in African rhythms, to African melodies, often accompanied by drums. Many of them lay stress on spiritual healing as an essential activity of the Church. They thus offer a Christian version of the traditional diviners and fill a deeply-felt need for a psychic dimension which seems to be absent from western medicine. Some of them refuse to take medicine of any sort and put all their trust in God. In place of the traditional 'possession' by ghosts and spirits, many of them experience what they believe to be possession by the Holy Spirit. In contrast to Kimbangu, they have often attacked the missionary insistence on monogamy as a purely European institution unsuitable to African life. Some of them, reading the Old Testament, have substituted Saturday for Sunday as their day of rest. Again in contrast to Kimbangu, they have usually avoided political action and been satisfied with independence in the church. But, again and again, this experience of independence has led individuals from the 'independent churches' to move on into nationalist politics.

There can be little doubt that, alongside the churches established by the missionaries, these independent churches have come to stay. They can no longer claim that the established churches are not led by Africans. But they have a link with traditional African ways, which the established churches have lost. In some cases, new independent churches have started *since* political independence; and it may be that they have something of the same part to play as the free churches in nineteenth-century Britain.

#### For further reading

*East African Christian*, Chapters 12, 13, 16

#### For discussion

1. Is human dignity a religious question? (Be careful over the definition of 'religion'.)
2. Is monogamy a European, rather than a Christian, practice?

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *Is there 'truth' in religion?*

There is an essential difference between the outlook of traditional Africa and contemporary Britain, which is well illustrated by the educated Nigerian who sacrificed a hen to his father's ghost (Chapter One, Story B). It is possible to interpret his experience in terms of two frames of reference.

In the traditional frame, the ghost was angry at the son's neglect of the gifts expected from him and drew attention to its needs by making the son ill. Once they were satisfied, it no longer caused trouble.

In the western, psychological, frame, the son had been impatient with his rather tiresome old father and secretly glad when he died. He felt guilty about this attitude, but repressed his guilt feelings; and these showed themselves first in headaches and finally in a dream. Despite his western education, his traditional background still had enough hold on him to make him take the dream at its face value. The dramatic action of sacrificing a hen had a purifying effect on his emotions. (Aristotle said that the function of drama was the *catharsis* of the emotions.) In psycho-analytic terms, he 'projected' his guilt feelings onto the hen. He eliminated the emotional cause of his headaches and returned to his old health and efficiency. (See contemporary examples of 'projection' at the end of Chapter Three.)

The western frame of reference lays emphasis on what goes on in the unconscious minds of individuals (Chapter Five). This is 'real'. Ghosts and witches—or, often enough, the evil intentions of other people—are just the product of our fancies. But for older societies ghosts and witches are very much the reality. To suggest to them that these forces do not exist would be just as ridiculous as to suggest to us that atoms are imaginary.

It is not possible to distinguish between these two attitudes by saying that one set of concepts is 'mythical', the other 'empirically proved'. Nobody can put his finger on an object and say, 'this is an atom': still less, 'that is the unconscious'. The best that can be said is that, by using these concepts, it is possible to make predictions and exercise control. That is what is meant by saying that

they are 'empirical'. But, in so far as the concepts of ghosts and witches can be used, in older societies, to cure illness (Chapter Four), they must also be regarded as being, in some sense, empirical; and there is no doubt that fear of reprisals through psychic means controls men's conduct towards their neighbours and kin.

It is nearer the truth to say that traditional societies use one kind of myth, contemporary western society another. Theirs assumes that the universe is peopled by personal wills acting at every point of human experience: ours that the universe is impersonal and that the only centres of personal will are individual men and women.

In the west, the changeover from one set of myths to the other was closely associated with the growth of capitalism, nationalism, Puritanism and experimental science. It took many centuries; and it is by no means complete. But, for England, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were crucial. Before this time, individuals thought of themselves as links in the body of society, wholly dependent on that body for their existence. They looked upwards, on the one hand through priests and the Pope, on the other hand through feudal lords and the king, to God. Around them were the saints in heaven, playing much the same part as ancestral ghosts in Buganda. Around them also was an innumerable host of demons and witches to account for all the arbitrary experiences of life. The meaning of life was to be found in response to God, who expressed himself in all the events of nature and history.

The change is registered by Shakespeare, when he makes Cassius say,

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,  
But in ourselves, that we are hirelings

He was expressing a recognition, then becoming general among educated men, that men must take responsibility on themselves rather than blame outside forces. Not long before, Luther had expressed the same sense of individual responsibility: 'Here I stand. I can no other.' A little later, Descartes declared, 'I think. Therefore I am.' The whole interpretation of the universe was to be based on the thinking consciousness of individuals. Political philosophers began to say no longer that individuals were parts of the social organism, but that society existed simply because it was created by the will of individuals. Nature ceased, by degrees, to be the expression of God's glory and became inert matter to be investigated, controlled and manipulated for the supposed benefit of individual men.

The universe was depersonalised; and the logical conclusion was

reached when, at the end of the seventeenth century, the French astronomer Laplace said that, in his scientific writing, he had no need of the hypothesis of God. If God was needed at all—the conclusion was drawn—it was simply as the Great Mechanic, who had made the Clock of the universe and then left it to run by its own inherent power. He was very much a 'God out there'. Individuals were left face to face with the iron laws of nature; and some of them began to wonder whether the game was worth the candle. If everything—including human love and choice—could be predicted from a knowledge of the position and velocity of atoms, was there anything left to live for?

The contribution to this question of more recent advances in physics is outside the scope of this book. But another development was taking place. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Sigmund Freud in Vienna 'discovered' the 'unconscious'. This was to say—in effect—that all the most rational conscious activities of men were suspect because, below them, lay a vast ocean of unconscious activity over which there was no conscious control. Psychoanalysis might bring to light some of its activities, help individuals to understand themselves more fully, cure some diseases which were emotional rather than physical in origin, bring under conscious control more of the total psychic processes. But—however hard Freud might try to present his system as scientific: whatever empirical success he and his followers might have in curing disease—it was impossible, for long, to avoid the recognition that, out of the death of God as a psychic force in the universe outside man, there had arisen belief in an equally strong, far less reliable, psychic force inside each man.

It is as if the outward-stretching bonds, illustrated in Diagrams 1 and 3, have been destroyed. There is no longer any overriding obligation to others—whether workmates, or neighbours, or kin. If I choose to accept such obligation, that is my own affair; but the main object in life is to look after my own interests. There is no longer any overriding obligation to God or the spirits, whose will is shown in the events of nature and of history. If I choose to be 'religious', that, again, is my own affair. It may give me some private satisfaction; but it has precious little to do with politics—with the welfare of society—or with sickness, which were the main concerns of African traditional religions. It has even less to do with the idea that nature is God's creation and that man is God's steward to develop nature according to God's will. Nature is neutral matter—a complex organisation of atoms—to be manipulated for man's enjoyment. Instead of looking outwards to other men, instead of responding to psychic forces in nature, I look inwards to my own wants.

I may perhaps begin to worry about my own 'identity', to ask, 'Who am I?' Indeed one of the signs of the change which has taken place is that individuals in traditional societies did not have to ask that question. Identity was given to them by God and the ancestors and the solidarity of living society. Today, with God in serious question, ancestors an affair of out-on-the-wing 'spiritualists', and society in a state of constant change, there can be no such certainty. If I am to find an 'identity', I have to choose it for myself. I may do so by finding in myself what I have put into nature. I also am no more than a complex organisation of atoms. Thirty years ago, this was a popular view among thinking people. It is much more likely, today, that I shall think in terms of psychoanalysis. The external psychic forces of God and the ancestors have been replaced by the internal psychic force of the unconscious. It is as though, in Diagram 2, the  $y$ -axis had been extended in the negative direction. Every event on the  $x$ -axis still has a psychic dimension; but it is psychic with a different sign.

There are here a number of different possibilities of interpreting man in his relation to the universe; and they are not exhaustive.

1. Individuals are part of a social order which consists not only of living men and women but of a large number of external psychic forces of varying power (Diagrams 1 and 3).

2. Individuals are part of a social order which recognises one God as the source and sustainer of everything and the guarantor of ultimate happiness for all (the Christian view).

3. The universe, including men and women, is a complex organisation of atoms. Humans can manipulate the rest of the universe to suit their wants. But, in the end, the whole thing is without meaning or purpose.

4. Men and women are 'psychic', rather than merely 'atomic', in nature. There is nothing beyond this life. But meaning is to be found in the full exploitation of natural resources for the present happiness of individuals and the ultimate creation of a society in which all individuals can fulfil themselves.

None of these attitudes is based on logical argument. They are, rather, positions from which argument begins. As Saint Augustine said, 'I believe in order that I may understand.' All argument must start from a point (e.g. belief in God, belief in the all-sufficiency of reason, belief in the scientific method) which cannot itself be proved by argument. The probability is that the point from which any particular person starts is the 'commonsense' of his day—the wealth of social experience into which he is born and bred. For early Baganda, born into a wealth of human relationships, it was natural to assume the existence of ghosts and to interpret the universe in personal terms. For men of today, born into a world

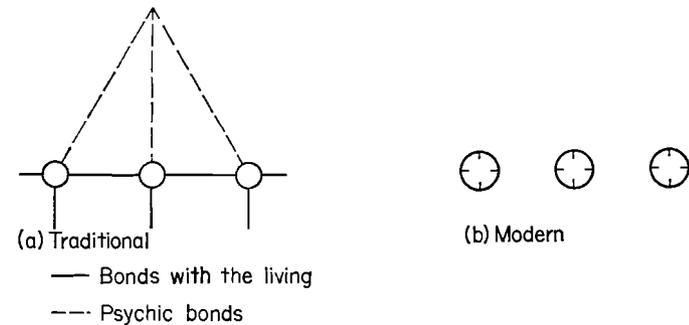


DIAGRAM 4. TRADITIONAL AND MODERN INDIVIDUALS

With regard to (b) students of chemistry may like to consider the significance of internally satisfied bonds.

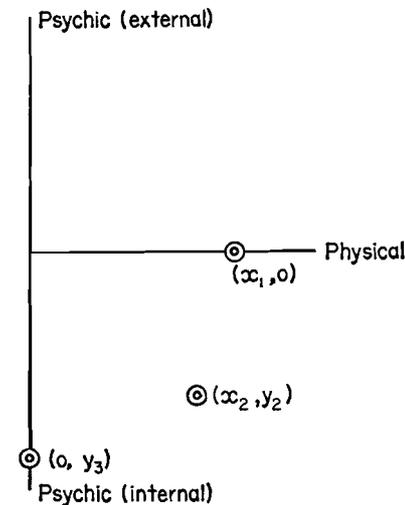


DIAGRAM 5. THE COMPLEMENTARITY OF PHYSICAL AND PSYCHIC (INTERNAL)

which is more and more manipulated by technology: into a society which is increasingly manipulated, for their own ends, by politicians, commercial advertisers and even charitable bodies, it is perhaps natural to think of the world, including other people, as things to be manipulated simply to our own advantage. This is certainly to treat other people as less than persons. It is almost certainly to make it impossible to see the universe as the expression of the will of a personal God.

But, if our religious belief or lack of belief is thus modified (if not actually determined) by our social experience, is there any way in which we can decide for ourselves what is true? The answer to this question is bound to be unsatisfactory. The early Baganda had no doubt about the existence of ancestral ghosts because they were committed to them at every point of life. Later Baganda had similarly no doubt about their king, because they were wholly committed to him. Muslims and Christians, who died for their religion, could do so because they were committed to God. The first Europeans in Africa were confident of the 'truth' of the white man's burden. Modern Africans are convinced of the 'truth' of nationalism. They arrived there not by argument but by commitment. It is in becoming committed that we learn what is, for us, the truth.

So far, in this book on comparative religion, it is legitimate to go. It appears to be in accord with the facts. But to find such commitment readers must go to those who offer it. Perhaps one hint is possible. Men are more often right in what they assert than in what they deny. The ancestor cult asserts the solidarity of human society—the interdependence of all its members. Traditional religion (and Christianity in its original form) sees that solidarity as three-dimensional, involved with external psychic forces as well as with physical relationships. It insists on the psychic factor in all human crises and sickness. Christianity asserts the oneness and ultimate meaning of all things under the control of God. It tends to neglect the working of the internal psychic forces of the unconscious. Modern humanism asserts the importance of individual men and women but can see no ultimate meaning in the whole universe. Is it possible that we are so bothered by the unconscious of individuals because society has broken down? that, if we were to rediscover our social responsibilities, we should rediscover God? Do we need a world view in which the height and simplicity of the external psychic forces (the positive *y*-axis) match the depth and complexity of the unconscious (the negative *y*-axis)?

**For further reading**

*The Heathens*, Chapters 16, 17

*The Primal Vision*, Chapter 13

*East African Christian*, Chapter 3

**For discussion**

1. Is psychoanalysis a 'myth'? Do we need a myth of the external universe as well as of man's inner being?
2. 'I believe in order that I may understand.' What are the unexamined beliefs from which your own thinking starts?

## A Note on Books

Three books are recommended, in particular, for further reading:

W. Howells, *The Heathens* (Doubleday paperback). This is a popularly-written, yet scholarly, account of religious beliefs and practices in a wide selection of traditional societies.

J. V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision* (S.C.M. paperback). This is written by a Christian missionary with a very deep feeling for African society and a critical attitude towards the way in which Christianity has been presented by western missionaries to Africa. It needs to be read cautiously, since the author does not always say from which particular society he is drawing his evidence and tends to generalise as though all Africans were the same. He also has a romantic attitude to what he calls 'the primal vision' without referring it to its context in untechnological societies. He seems to think that, by a snap of the fingers, it could be adopted as the salvation of the technological west. But it is difficult to find any book which gives more thoroughly the 'feel' of African society as religious through and through.

F. B. Welbourn, *East African Christian* (O.U.P. paperback). This is my own attempt to survey the whole field of Christianity in East Africa, in relation to traditional religions, Islam, colonialism, African nationalism and African attempts to interpret Christianity in their own terms.

As far as more specific research is concerned it is extremely difficult to recommend any one book which covers the many aspects of religion with which I have tried to deal. Perhaps the most comprehensive is W. A. Lessa and E. Z. Vogt, *Reader in Comparative Religion* (Harper and Row, 1965 edition quoted). This and all other books mentioned should be available through public libraries.

### Introduction

There is a useful account of *Dini ya Misambwa* by L. C. Usher-Wilson in *Uganda Journal*, 16.2 (September 1962), pp. 125-9.

The most readable book on 'cargo cults'—the modern cults which look to the ancestors to provide a life of plenty—is P. Lawrence, *Road belong cargo* (Manchester University Press, 1964). See also Lessa and Vogt, pp. 506-13.

### Chapter 1

Lessa and Vogt, pp. 419-50.

### Chapter 2

John Oman's classic, *The Natural and the Supernatural* (C.U.P., 1931), comes to the conclusion that 'there is nothing more natural than the supernatural'. Durkheim's distinction between *sacred* and *profane* (Lessa and Vogt, pp. 56-64) presents, in many ways, an opposite view; and this is criticised by Goldenweiser (Lessa and Vogt, pp. 65-72).

### Chapter 3

Lessa and Vogt, pp. 298-339. An extremely readable book is J. Middleton and E. H. Winter (eds.), *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).

### Chapters 4 and 5

Lessa and Vogt, pp. 340-418 and 454-79. The nearest approach to a discussion of the complementarity of physical and psychic is in John Beattie, 'Ritual and Social Change', *Man*, 1.1 (March 1966), pp. 60-74.

### Chapter 6

Material is difficult to find. The best short treatment is E. Evans-Pritchard, 'The divine kingship of the Shilluk' in *Essays in Social Anthropology* (Faber, 1962). There is a fascinating, but much longer, account in M. Wilson, *Communal Rituals of the Nyakyusa* (O.U.P., 1959). My own *Religion and Politics in Uganda 1952-1962* (East African Publishing House, 1965. London, Heinemann Educational Books), pp. 42-58, discusses the situation in Buganda in terms of 'identity'.

### Chapter 7

Howells' treatment is so full that it is perhaps unnecessary to read further. Some attempt might be made to link up with classical and Norse mythology. See also Lessa and Vogt, pp. 541-6.

### Chapter 8

Lessa and Vogt, pp. 167-70. See also M. Eliade, *From Primitives to Zen* (Collins, 1967), pp. 6-82. This book contains a large number of religious texts (many straight from oral tradition). Its weakness is that it makes no attempt to place them in their social setting.

### Chapter 9

Two good short books on Islam are H. A. R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism* (O.U.P.) and A. Guillaume, *Islam* (Penguin). J. S. Trimingham has *Islam in the Sudan*, 1949, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 1952 (both reissued by Cass, 1966), *Islam in West Africa*, 1959, *History of Islam in West Africa*, 1962 and *Islam in East Africa* (all O.U.P.).

### Chapters 10 and 11

A book for the general reader is T. A. Beetham, *Christianity and the New Africa* (Pall Mall, 1967), from which I have taken some examples. The seminal book is R. Oliver, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* (Longmans, 1952). A great many detailed studies have appeared recently, many of which are very suggestive, e.g., J. V. Taylor, *The Growth of the Church in Buganda* (S.C.M., 1958); J. F. A. Ajaye, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891* (Longmans, 1965); E. A. Ayandeke, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914* (Longmans, 1966); R. I. Rotberg, *Christian Missionaries and the Creation of Northern Rhodesia, 1880-1924* (Princeton, 1965); N. Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835-1960* (O.U.P., 1966). I have discussed the essential 'Europeanness' of missionaries in *East African Rebels* (S.C.M., 1961), Part IV.

### Chapter 12

W. M. Watt, *Truth in the religions: a sociological and psychological approach* (Edinburgh University Press, 1963); W. C. Smith, *Towards religious truth* (Gollancz, 1967). I have discussed the differences between traditional and modern societies in *A Place to Feel at Home* (O.U.P., 1966), Chapter 14. The seminal book on this topic is D. Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (O.U.P., 1950). An excellent chapter on 'interiorising and exteriorising' our experience is G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience* (Clarendon Press, 1960), Chapter 4. An important discussion of the relationship between 'atoms and ancestors' is to be found in R. Horton, 'African Traditional Thought and Western Science', *Africa*, 37.1 (January 1967), pp. 50-71, which I read after the completion of this book.

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