

LETTERS TO AFRICA

Letters to the Editor should refer to matters raised in the journal and should not exceed 450 words in length. They should be signed and give full address and position of the writer. The Editor reserves the right to shorten letters or to decline them.

From Mr. J. M. Weatherby

Sir, I am writing about the article by C. D. Laughlin, Jr. and E. R. Laughlin on 'Kensan: Economic and Social Ramifications of the Ghost Cult among the So of North-Eastern Uganda', in *Africa*, xlii. 1, 1972, 9-20.

It is regrettable that this article, the first to give any account of the culture and institutions of these people, should be so misleading and contain so much faulty information. Any serious study of this subject demands a considerable field period, particularly when it concerns the workings of an esoteric cult, and an adequate knowledge of the language is also a first essential. The authors spent less than a year in the field and were only able to visit one part of the three mountains which form the habitat of the Sor, so that it is not surprising if there is some confusion. I will attempt to correct certain outstanding errors.

p. 10. The age-generation system cannot be said to have been superimposed on a traditional system of rule by a council of elders. A certain form of age-generation had been in existence over a very long period of time. Some innovations (e.g. *amuro*) would have been borrowed from the Paranilotic Karimojong in the early nineteenth century. There was no regular institution that could be termed 'a council of elders', as for instance the *kokwet* among the Kalenjin. In Sor society, elders who held the greatest authority and who might assist in an advisory position were those belonging to the central group of *arras* of the general *kensan* society.

A man did not only gain 'status and authority in council' by virtue of increased age. Age always commanded a certain respect, but among the Sor a man's status depended greatly on that of his father. Depending on the latter, a comparatively young man could enter *kensan* and later, depending on his suitability, *arras*.

The Sor state that the *buku* (heart) does not leave at death to become an *emtat* (pl. *emet*). After the death of a man or woman the *emtat* remains in limbo as an *emtadu* (a 'red' or 'raw spirit'). The necessary ritual, with *arras* members alone present, is performed so that the *emtat* may join the throng of *emet* in the *euwa* ('the great home'). It is only the *arras* members who can call up the *emet* or see them face to face. It is therefore incorrect to say (p. 12) that 'any *kensan* may at any time call forth the ghosts of any of the ancestors and speak with them face to face'. Nor is it correct to say that women were the first *kensan*. They participated with the men until, on a certain momentous occasion, the men

decided to take over. Concerning *kensan* initiation there must be agreement between *kensan* on all three mountains in order to hold the ceremony. The initiation is, however, held on either Kadam or Moroto mountains. There is no question of 'separate and simultaneous ceremonies occurring in all three sections': it never takes place on the mountain Tungi (Napak). The selection of who is to be brought into the society of *kensan* or *arras* is not dependent on the Asapan system.

p. 13. A case of theft does not come before the *kensan*. A number of elders would meet and one or two might be *kensan*. Those who are extremely old are most likely *kensan* but not necessarily *arras*. Several elderly men might be neither. To say that 'if the culprit remains unapprehended the *kensan* may join together at a secluded spot and call upon the *emet* to seek and kill the thief' is either the result of false information or pure invention: the *emet* are never called upon to do such a thing. They do not do the work of sorcerers. If angry because neglected, they can bring adversity to their living kin. If a thief is suspected, earth containing his urine, faeces, or spittle, when thrown upon the ritual fire by the *arras* during death rites, can cause his death if he is guilty. If threatened with this a guilty thief would sooner confess.

p. 14. The description of the final burial rite at the shrine of the *emet* is entirely false. The term *irbelgen* is not correct. The small beehive hut shown in the photograph is *irrho*. It is for the old women, members of the deceased's family, who are shut up inside it. They can converse with the spirits when the latter come and even hand out tobacco to them, but never see them. As for the suggestion that a member of the *kensan* might sleep inside it, this is quite impossible. The same ceremony is never repeated again for the same deceased individual.

p. 16. 'but rainmaking may also embrace the entire So tribe. The centre for this is Kadam mountain. In that section there exists a rainmaking clan named *euiman*.' Here several institutions have been confused. Major rainmaking ceremonies are carried out in Moroto and Kadam. Raindrums are used, of which there are two in Moroto and three in Kadam. The clans which manage these drums are the Eouorri and Nkomolo. An alternative way of procuring rain if these fail is to go to the *adwam* (also called *adboyio* or *adkrerr*). This is a large bamboo tree which is rare in Kadam although common in Kalenjin territory. It is situated in a remote spot in Western Kadam. An ancestor of the Eouiman clan brought it from another country in the nineteenth century. Only men

of the clan can perform the ritual, pouring libations of honey and beer and tobacco. Prayers are addressed to it. The entire account given on pp. 16 and 17 of the plant 'described as being like sorghum', etc., is based on faulty information.

Lastly p. 19. *Belgen* (god) does not dwell in mountain streams, he is omnipresent but that is a different matter. He is thought of as *irrib* or *irryiny* ('up there'). *Emet* when they join the spirits in the great home are also *tektan belgen* in 'the bosom of god'. The spirit which dwells in streams is *terrgwec* and very dangerous.

In the Sor community matters to do with *kensan* are never mentioned. All non-*kensan*, except youths, have a hazy knowledge of what goes on. Several of them can be persuaded commercially to divulge what little they know, on account of poverty and starvation; but the acquisition of information to any depth is a long process unattainable by any commercial short cut.

Yours faithfully
J. M. WEATHERBY
Alicante
Spain

From Professor Robert G. Armstrong, Director, Institute of African Studies, Ibadan

Sir, Dr. Alvin Magid has published an article on the Idoma of Nigeria in your journal, and some of his statements call for reply. The article is 'Political Traditionalism in Nigeria: a Case-Study of Secret Societies and Dance Groups in Local Government', *Africa*, xlii. 4, 1972, 289-304. He sees his study as a 'challenge' to the 'pre-eminence of anthropology in the tribal domain' (p. 289). He himself is a political scientist. If one wishes to challenge anthropology in its own camp, however, it is dangerous procedure to ignore all the lessons that anthropology has learned in three-quarters of a century of field-work. These lessons have been expensively learned, and their neglect can prove costly to oneself and to others. What is good in Dr. Magid's article has mostly been taken from the works of other people: anthropologists and administrators. What is bad could all too easily be blamed on anthropologists. Dr. Magid seems not to realize that when he visited Idoma in the third year of Nigeria's independence he came as a guest and that a guest has no business allying himself with a particular political faction and with outside interests against his host. He says, 'Most colonial officials . . . viewed the Idoma . . . as a singularly barbaric people, ill-tempered, intransigent, and of low intelligence' (p. 296). Such a view awakens immediate doubts in the mind of any anthropologist. Since Dr. Magid's comments on the Idoma are entirely negative, he leaves the impression that he agrees with the colonial judgement.

When he discusses the secret societies and dance groups in their role as constabulary, he cites as significant fact all the gossip to be heard on mission

compounds and in dissident political factions in the divisional headquarters town. It does not occur to him that his sources may be biased. Like all human institutions, police forces have their pathologies, and the Idoma men's societies are not free of these. The same can be said of many American police forces, which are too much given to secrecy and brutal methods. Does Dr. Magid suggest that we should for these reasons disband the police of New York and Chicago?

Dr. Magid's hostility towards the political structure of Idoma Division (now renamed Oturkpo Division) is so strong that one suspects he allowed himself to be the tool of some groups which would like to dismantle Oturkpo Division completely. It is most sharply expressed in his comments on the Och' Idoma, the 'divisional chief'. He leaves us in the dark about how the Och' Idoma is chosen and 'appointed . . . for life'. We are left to assume that this is done autocratically by the central government. In fact both the first Och' Idoma and his successor were chosen by the Council of Chiefs, the heads of the twenty-three districts. When they chose Ajene Ukpabi, the Chief of Ito, which is an Igede-speaking district, to be Och' Idoma, there can be no question of their right to do so or of the legitimacy of his position.

On p. 299 Dr. Magid says, 'By 1963 opponents of the Och' Idoma . . . were beginning to unify and seize the initiative.' It may surprise him to learn that in 1973 the Hon. Ajene Ukpabi is still in office and that in 1966 and 1967 he was one of the architects of the twelve-state system of the Federation of Nigeria.

The Idoma were in the forefront of the battle for Nigerian national unity during the late Civil War. Every Idoma village has lost men in the struggle, and the Idoma have amply proved their right to respect from those who presume to study their culture.

On p. 299 Dr. Magid's description of the Igede as 'a pariah group' and worse is quite unacceptable and has no proper place in the journal *Africa*. If he were in Nigeria, his remarks would be actionable under Nigerian law.

There is, Sir, no substitute for anthropology.

Yours faithfully
ROBERT G. ARMSTRONG
Ibadan

From Professor Alvin Magid

Sir, Replete with distortions and angry innuendos, Professor Armstrong's letter offends the spirit of intellectual inquiry which animates our two disciplines. My rebuttal follows:

The first paragraph in my article essentially urges Africanists to rethink an artificial division of labour. Apparently construing this as a call to political science to take up arms against anthropology, Armstrong has missed the opportunity to join me in a reflective colloquy.

Because Armstrong fails to detail 'lessons . . . expensively learned' by anthropology, I am unable to assess the 'cost' of their neglect. I do not know who, besides himself, will 'blame' anthropology for what he deems 'bad' in my article. I myself prefer to eschew a preoccupation in social research with 'good', 'bad', 'blame', etc.

Armstrong concludes that what is 'good' in the article is mostly taken from the works of anthropologists and administrators. But he knows that I draw, too, on hundreds of discussions and interviews in Idoma.

Let Armstrong substantiate the charge that I was an ungrateful guest, an ally of my hosts' opponents; or retract it publicly.

Armstrong discerns bias in my comments on the second *Och' Idoma*. The careful reader will observe (pp. 299, 301) that I refer to negative perceptions of Ajene Ukpabi widely held among the Idoma. These were reported to me by hundreds of informants, more than half of whom were, like Ukpabi, NPC members. Armstrong reasons that my not assailing various negative judgements—of colonial officials regarding the Idoma, and of many Idoma regarding Ajene Ukpabi and the Egede—implies approval. So much for logic!

I neither state nor imply that Ajene Ukpabi or his predecessor became *Och' Idoma* by illegitimate, unconstitutional means; only that many Idoma resented

Ukpabi's appointment, and that by 1963 his main opponents had seized the initiative. Significantly, Armstrong does not dispute this, but merely affirms that Ukpabi survived the struggle and gained stature in a reorganized Nigeria.

My discussion of the Idoma associations' constabulary function draws on a wide range of interview sources—including the pro-Ukpabi Native Authority official whom I quote at length (p. 303). I betray no preference for mission or dissidents' 'gossip'. Armstrong writes of police 'pathologies', not I. Concomitantly, he confuses one of my main points: it is not, as he thinks, that the associations' constabulary function should be terminated—I neither propose this nor imply it—but that similar adaptive traditional institutions are important in rural Africa and should be studied (along with chieftaincy) by political scientists.

Armstrong denies my right to report Idoma disdain for the Egede. Never mind the strictures of Nigerian law to which he alludes. My distress escalates only on observing Armstrong's illiberal, unprofessional, and menacing posture.

Yours faithfully

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