

A SCIENCE OF SOCIAL CONTROL

The trouble about discussing religion is that most of us are against it. Since Bruno was burned at the stake and Galileo bullied into saying that the world was flat, rational and scientific thought about man and the world has known its enemy: God and the priests and all their works, the whole black cloud of canting obscurantists who have clogged understanding and persecuted knowledge for the sake of kings, popes, proprietors or other baleful fatherfigures clinging to their privilege and comfort at other mens'expense. If the liberal thinkers of the nineteenth century did not go as far as Marx and Engels in affirming that "law, morality, religion are to (the proletarian) so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk just so many bourgeois interests," they said much the same in their own context. They saw Christianity as a deplorable mystification, at best a mere vestige of primitive awe in face of the unknown, at worst an ingenious racket. Wrestling with it, they called for aid to "primitive religion." There they found "a weapon which could, they thought, be used with deadly effect against Christianity," since "if primitive religion could be explained away as an intellectual aberration, as a mirage induced by emotional stress, or by its social function,"

so too could “higher religion” and the path thereby cleared to that extent of historical lumber.¹

All this is may be very understandable. In any case it helps to explain why, again in Evans-Pritchard’s words, the study of religion has remained “an enormous and almost untilled field for research.” Even where studies were undertaken, they stemmed from a conviction that the subject matter was really superfluous to genuine social analysis. To these anthropologists “religious belief was... absurd, and it is so to most anthropologists of yesterday and today.” This, too, is understandable. Ever since the sixteenth century, the task of explaining the world has been the work of a science necessarily anti-religious because Christianity mutilated science. Today the battle is largely fought and won, but the attitude persists. Christianity has been diminished in the scientifically advanced societies to a merely personal prophylactic of individual rescue from isolation and alienation. It has lost its power to explain, and so its power to influence behavior and has become a mere “comfort,” an eccentricity, a dying survival of a dead age. Consequently thoughtful men have sought—and clearly must seek—for other means of social control and personal reassurance.

Yet these attitudes, however painful in Europe, have just as clearly failed to close with the traditional African apprehension of reality. Explanations of African religion reduced to terms of “superstition” or “function” have left too much unexplained. It is now perfectly evident that far more is needed to elucidate why, for example, appointed ancestors should have become “the jealous guardians of the highest moral values, that is to say, the axiomatic values from which all ideal conduct is deemed to flow.”² Superstition and function are partial explanations which point, in fact, to the greater residue of meaning that still remains in question.

When the lords of the Karanga carved their empire from the lands between Zambezi and Limpopo long ago, and built their stone dwellings at Zimbabwe, they set up a shrine to Hungwe, the fish-eagle, and erected soapstone effigies to the power they also called *Shirichena*, the Bird of Bright Plumage, or *Shiri ya*

¹ E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, 1965, pp. 14.

² M. Fortes, *Oedipus and Job in West African Religion*, 1959, p. 53.

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Mwari, the Bird of God. Attending this shrine the priest of the most powerful of the appointed ancestors, Chaminuka the “great *mbondoro*,” was required to interpret the meaning of the cries of Hungwe. Crucial decisions of state were influenced by what he said. For more than three centuries before 1830 it was to the spirit of Chaminuka, and its oracle the Bird of Bright Plumage, that the kings of the Karanga turned for guidance on their testing problems of state.

Now the old European explanations of the nineteenth century could have seen in this behavior only a quaint foolishness engendered by the fogs of superstition, or else, yielding somewhat later to the facts, an in-built but arbitrary mechanism of social control. This has led to many misunderstandings: to the point, indeed, that “most of what has been written in the past, and with some assurance, and is still trotted out in colleges and universities, about animism, totemism, magic, etc., has been shown to be erroneous or at least dubious” by modern anthropologists working from another standpoint, and in far greater possession of the facts.³

The point is that modern anthropologists in studying these societies have had to re-think what they mean by religion. For it has become clear that religion was, or is, far more than a mere “comfort” or useful function in these traditional structures, based as they were on ancestral charters fashioned by the imperatives of daily life, and fastened by a corresponding moral order. “Religion” in the sense we generally use it is really much too narrow a concept for application where all significant social and cultural patterns have been bodied forth in suprasensible terms. We are in fact faced here with structures of belief which were not only mandatory in a social sense but also explanatory in a material one: and, as such, the basis for rational behavior. What we call “religion,” in other words, was essentially the means of apprehending reality. Possibly though not inherently superstitious and incidentally functional, it was basically a rational projection of consciousness according to its time and place.

When the priest of Hungwe interpreted the cries of Shirichena,

³ Evans-Pritchard, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

the “messages” he gave to the king of the Karanga were not, accordingly, a farrago of savage fancies. They were advice—obviously of a value depending on the wisdom of the priest in question—that was drawn from a particular study of reality; in this case, from a logically elaborated series of explanations about the way the world of the Karanga worked. However picturesque and peculiar his methods of conceiving such advice might be, the effective task of this priest was to safeguard community welfare and survival. His advice was therefore framed to ensure that behavior stayed in line with the “ideal equilibrium” of the ancestors: of those who had “shown men how to live” in this land.⁴ That the advice might be couched in esoteric explanations of a bird’s cries did not therefore mean that it was any the less concerned, in practice, with the social or cultural problems of the day. Just how practical such advice could be, and how closely the product of a weighing of realities, was shown with startling clarity later on when the priests of the Karanga advised revolt against European invaders, with whom, as they concluded, no peaceful action would any longer carry weight.⁵

Seen in this way, “religion” in this context stands for an apprehension of reality across the whole field of life. This was the explanatory apprehension that produced its mandatory force. Out of it, in one way or another, there emerged what may reasonably be called a science of social control.

One may boggle at use of the word “science” in these societies. Certainly they were pre-scientific in that, generally, their thought had “no developed awareness of alternatives to the established body of tenets,” and thus no urge toward systematic search for such alternatives.⁶ Even so, this thought had a highly developed awareness of the practical possibilities of prediction arising out of observation: of what Lévi-Strauss has called “the science of the concrete.”⁷ In fact it was copiously empirical in its approach to natural phenomena. Experiment, after all, had been its saving

⁴ I discuss this concept of the “ideal equilibrium” in other chapters.

⁵ T.O. Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*, 1967, esp. ch. 6.

⁶ C. Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage*, 1962: London, *The Savage Mind*, 1966.

⁷ *Ibid.*

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virtue from early times. Nothing else can explain the Africans' intense attention to the detailed knowledge of environment.

Their persistent classifying and naming of phenomena, whether known by observation or inferred by intuition, perhaps needs a little emphasis. The Dogon of the Western Sudan, for example, classify the plants they know in twenty two chief families of which some are divided into as many as eleven sub-families, though according to criteria which might have surprised Linnaeus. The Karimojong can "distinguish, as precisely as any outside professional observer, what the topographic features are that bear on a predictable water-supply," and name them accordingly; and "for any herder, it is this 'grid,' applied to known stretches of territory with named pastures, that in part determines his movement plans over the year, and from one year to another."⁸ Lévi-Strauss remarks that the many known classifications such as these "are not only methodical and based on carefully built-up theoretical knowledge. They are also at times comparable, from a formal point of view, to those still in use in zoology and botany."⁹

Transposed to the wider field of social relations, comprehending natural relations, the same remark still holds good: thought remains concerned with prediction based on observation, the "primary intention of much African thought," Horton has argued, "seems to be just that mapping of connexions between space-time phenomena which modern Christian thought feels is beyond its proper domain. Though, by the standards of the more advanced contemporary sciences, these religions could seldom provide value explanations or make completely successful predictions, there is a very real sense in which they are just as concerned with explanation and prediction as the sciences are." So that "the really significant aspiration behind a great deal of African religious thought is the most obvious one: i.e. the attempt to explain and influence the workings of one's everyday world by discovering constant principles that underlie the apparent chaos and flux of sensory experience." In so far as we make "this aspiration central to our analysis, we shall find ourselves searching for translation instruments not so much in the realm of Christian

⁸ N. Dyson-Hudson, *Karimojong Politics*, 1966, p. 16 and p. 97.

⁹ Lévi-Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

discourse as in that of the sciences and their theoretical concepts.”¹⁰

Horton goes on to urge, and I think that many modern anthropologists would agree with him, that traditional thought “can be seen as the outcome of a model-making process which is found alike in the thought of science and in that of pre-science” taking pre-science to mean forms of empirical inquiry into the workings of the world that preceded any theoretical knowledge of material structure and process. To understand traditional politics, then, one must first understand traditional religion: only thus can the categories of description be grasped. Horton offers a parallel. “A chemist, asked to give a thorough description of some substance in his laboratory, can hardly avoid mentioning such characteristics as a molecular weight and formula, which refer implicitly to a massive body of chemical theory” taken for granted. “In the same way, an African villager, who is trying to describe what his community is, can hardly avoid implicit reference to religious concepts.”

Enough is understood about some African societies to demonstrate this in practice. Horton takes the case of a people among whom he has lived, the Kalabari of the Niger Delta, a fishing and trading community who have dwelt along the Atlantic creeks of southern Nigeria since unrecorded time, and certainly for many centuries.

Kalabari apprehension of reality supposes three kinds of spirits. First of all, there are the spirits of the “founding heroes” who first settled in Kalabari country and fathered their remote ancestors. These spirits are considered to be “instruments of collective village welfare,” since it is they who first framed the Kalabari way of life; and it is to them that one turns in matters affecting the whole community. Secondly, there are the ancestors of different Kalabari lineage segments, “considered as instruments of collective descent-group welfare.” These are capable of being opposed to one another in defence of their respective living descendants, so that conflicts of interest at this level may have to be referred eventually to the spirits of the founding heroes. Thirdly, and in a way that the modern world will find attractively!

¹⁰ R. Horton, “Ritual Man in Africa,” in *Africa* 2 of 1964.

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subtle and realistic, there are “freelance spirits”—“water-people” who are thought to live at the bottom of the Kalabari creeks and who “cater for individualist competitive aspirations.” The water-people are ready to confer their benefits on all comers on a scale proportional to offerings made to them, but they are not associated with any of the permanent social groupings in the community.¹¹

One may note in this connexion that the multiplicity of cults in any given society will depend upon the degree of competitiveness which the society can allow or afford. The more a system has scope for individual enterprise, the greater the number of cults will be. The Kalabari, with many opportunities for individualism deriving from their fortunate trading position in the Niger Delta, have a multitude of cults; while the cattle-driving Karimojong, far away in their arid grasslands, have very few. Much the same is true of modern societies, as anyone will see who compares the pullulating cults of the motor car with complaints of “lack of freedom” in societies which are short of consumer goods. The Kalabari, in this perspective, are far “more free” than the Karimojong, though the Karimojong might not think so.

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

Thus the Kalabari apprehension of reality—their religion and what flowed from it—composed a theoretical model of the workings of their world according to observed and meditated experience. A given people, that is, entered a given environment—the founding heroes of the Kalabari settling in the Delta—and

¹¹ Id., “African Traditional Thought and Western Science,” in *Africa* 2 of 1967.

there adjusted themselves to the needs of social growth. These needs they have codified in terms we call religious. And if we ask just *why* Kalabari thought should have taken a religious form, we are simply confused by the terms of our modern dichotomy: science-supernatural, reality-religion.

In traditional thought the dichotomy was not there, for the apprehension was a total one. This apprehension was concerned not only with what was, but also with what ought to be and why it ought to be. Its affect was mandatory, one may repeat, as well as explanatory. Things being as they were, such and such actions or ambitions were permissible, while others were not. As organic aspects of the same necessary truth, means and ends were indivisibly conceived. Today in modern societies we have torn them apart; and the price of our progress is a split consciousness. Science tells us what can be done but not what ought to be done or why it ought to be done: the mandatory moral issues are necessarily eluded, and scientists who raise them are likely to be chided for speaking out of turn. Otherwise the mandatory issues, the moral issues of choice that govern behavior, are left to the promptings of whatever feeble residue of our own traditional morality there may still exist, at levels where it can really count, or else to sectional decisions about the "national good." And so we have a situation in which science predicts disaster with the continued spread of nuclear weapons, but the spread continues despite all lamentations because the mandatory moral force to stop it is no longer there. Whereas in African apprehension, persistently, the explanatory-mandatory duality of thought possessed its ultimate satisfaction in what was also its ultimate sanction: in conforming to prescribed behavior as the only way of doing what was "right and natural," of belonging to the "community of the blessed," of flowering from the isolation of the one into the communion of the many.

If these ideologies are looked at in this way they will not present a paradise. Reality was tough and tortuous. Many individuals will have fallen by the wayside, and whole communities engulfed themselves in ruin. Even where such ideologies were most successful in achieving social harmony, a heavy price was paid in conservative conformism. Just because they were total systems, their predictive capacities had to be hedged

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around with devices for explaining or ignoring failure, since their mandatory aspect depended on their explanatory—that is, predictive—claims: and these claims could not, in the nature of the systems, be “wrong.” Putting it another way, the forms of social life could change, but not the content.

There is no case for gilding the past. But there is a case for understanding it. This approach will at least begin to make sense of what men actually thought or did, and why. It will help to drag us clear of swamps of mystifying verbiage, of bogs of boring paternalism and floods of flatulent speculation. Patiently pursued, it will elucidate all that enormously diverse range of “founding myths” preserved by African peoples, such as the Lozi belief that descends from Mbuya whom God begot upon God’s daughter Mwamba. It will explain why these ancestral charters held their force. It will open those “social archives,” as Leboeuf has called them, composed by the Dogon in the carving of sculptured masks at conscious intervals in time, or by the Sao and Kotoko in piles of polished stones which symbolised the vanished generations, or by others in other ways.¹²

Then much becomes clear. It becomes clear, for example, why these “archives” were not conceived as records for the satisfaction of historical curiosity, and why they must offer pitfalls to uncautious analysts who take them at face value. It becomes clear why unfortunate kings could be omitted from remembered lists because they failed in battle, or otherwise upset the ancestral scheme of what should be and should not be; why new dynasties, fitting themselves into the charters of the dispossessed, were careful to “rewrite” the past or else suppress it; and why, with the recent intrusion of a world of new ideas, the traditions often change again. D’Hertefeldt has lastely cited an illuminating case from Ruanda. There the ancestral charter of the Tutsi kingdom had long supposed strict hierarchical inequalities, but the ideas of national independence now spoke a different language. So the founding myths were reinterpreted during the 1950s in order to buttress with their force a premiss, quite new for that stratified kingdom, according to which “all Ruanda people are equal”—or, if they are not, then the fault lay with colonial

¹² J.-P. Leboeuf, “L’Histoire de la Région Tchadienne,” in *The Historian in Tropical Africa*, ed. J. Vansina, R. Mauny and L.V. Thomas, 1964.

rule. What had been in line with the “right and natural” of the past was no long so today, and the symbols accordingly required adjustment in their meaning.¹³

Yet the underlying significance of the symbols, of all such ideological data, did not change. They remained the embodiment of a specific world view, of an all round apprehension of how things were and ought to be. Where circumstances changed the symbols were adjusted, diminished or extended—but in order to reaffirm the past and not in order to deny it.

In a related field the meaning of “totems” and “taboos” takes shape in the same perspective. These manifold differentiations and prohibitions were at one time regarded as mystical projections of the “primitive mind,” as phantoms deriving from aboriginal fears and fancies. Or else they were explained as more or less arbitrary aids to solving aboriginal problems: such as, in the matter of sharing out food, that one clan ate eland but not buffalo while its neighbour ate buffalo but not eland.

But totems and taboos can now be seen to display their true function as symbols deriving from a theory of social control. This theory was perfectly non-mystical in that it rested upon the observation of real phenomena; but it was couched in mandatory-moral terms. Within it, totems and taboos played the part of markers—symbolically embodied markers—along the boundaries of the “right and natural,” defining the theory and its system of control but also protecting these from all assaults of contrary phenomena. They are to be understood, accordingly, neither as mystical projections nor as acts of commonsense: not the first because they were codifications of the selective “programme data” of the given social computation. Selective because they were designed to exclude events or actions which would threaten the system: programmatic because they aimed at the achievement of a desired ideal.

New research is getting us nearer to an understanding of all this. The Ndembu of north-western Zambia are undoubtedly among those who once would have been said to “bow down to wood and stone,” or at any rate to wood, and generally to suffer from a great deal of self-mystification. They attach a complex

¹³ D’Hertefeldt, “Mythes et Idéologies dans le Ruanda ancien et contemporain.”

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symbolism to three of their trees, the *mudyi*, the *muyomba* and *mukala*. The *mudyi* and *muyomba*, which yield a milky latex when their bark is cut, are respectively associated with maternity and womanhood, and with the virtues of the ancestors: goodness and strength, generosity, longlife, fertility. They also have to do with social harmony. Where the *mudyi* stands for the segmental unity of lineage or village, the *muyomba* “represents a general unity—the unity of the moral order recognised by all Ndembu and sanctioned by the ancestor spirits.” The *mukala* tree, on the other hand, secretes a reddish gum. Ndembu associate it with blood and the properties of blood: with manhood and adult responsibility in society as a whole.¹⁴

So long as the key of the moral order was missing, these ideas could appear either as wild superstitions or as “primitive customs” of merely arbitrary choice. In fact, Ndembu see them as a code—the phrase is that of Lévi-Strauss—which can “guarantee the convertibility of ideas between different levels of social reality.” They even say as much. When Ndembu explain that the red gum of the *mukala* tree stands for blood, they call this symbol by a term in their language which means “to blaze a trail;” so that a symbol is conceived as a tree-blaze or landmark, “something which connects the known with the unknown,” and thus links one level of apprehension with another.¹⁵ But it is social reality with which this linking process is connected. The symbols are social symbols. They are intimately part of a determined socio-moral order.

This comes out insistently. Turner, who has studied the Ndembu, compares the initiation or other rites associated with these symbolic trees with sacraments which “not only indicate inner changes of moral and social status, but also effect” such changes in the person conducted through the rites. “Furthermore, like the Christian sacraments, they point to the past, present and future, for they commemorate the first *mukanda* (in the series of circumcision or initiation rites), signify the various kinds of

¹⁴ V.W. Turner, “Ritual Symbolism, Morality and Social Structure among the Ndembu,” in *African Systems of Thought*, ed. M. Fortes and G. Dieterlen, 1965; and “Three Symbols of Passage in Ndembu Circumcision Ritual,” in *Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations*, ed. M. Gluckman, 1962.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1962.

power they confer, and indicate the state of consummate manhood to come.”

“What actually happens” at these rites, or is seen to happen by the uninitiated observer, cannot therefore give any real description of them. Patient learning can alone do that, and it is only in recent years that any such insight has become available. As Ndembu see these rites, crude and simple though they may appear to others “each boy is sacramentally imbued with the whole Ndembu moral order, which is immanent in but also transcends the social order”—since by ancestral sanctions it controls the social order—“when he is circumcised under the *mudyi* tree of his mothers, passed over the tree of the ancestors (symbolised by a log of *muyomba*), and lodged finally on the tree of maturity (placed to rest and recover on a freshly cut branch of *mukala*).”

Given the key of the moral order, other “primitive customs” speak the same clear language. They too emerge as media “for giving tangible substance to moral obligations,” reflect “a conviction that there is a moral order in the universe, and that man’s well being depends upon obedience to that order as men see it,” and appear as links in a chain of equilibrated relationships.

A number of African peoples have believed that their kings or ritual leaders must never “die,” and have gone to great lengths from time to time (it is difficult to know how often) to deal with the indisputable fact that they did die. Lienhardt tells how the Dinka say, they would dig a pit and place the dying Master on an *angareeb*, a type of bedstead of great antiquity in the Sudan. Then they would make a platform above this, using strips of hide, place a gourd of milk close by, and cover the whole with cattle dung.

Yet the dying Master of the Fishing Spear “will not be afraid of death; he will be put in the earth while singing his songs. Nobody among his people will rail or cry because their man has died. They will be joyful because their Master of the Fishing Spear will give them life, so that they shall live untroubled by any evil.” So long as the Master still spoke, they would not cover up the grave. Only when he no longer replied to their words

would they heap the dung upon his grave. "And nobody will say 'Alas, he is dead.' They will say 'It is very good'."

Now the inwardness of this rite was that the Masters of the Fishing Spear were concerned with matters pertaining to the condition and movement of the rivers which controlled men's lives in Dinkaland, and so were believed, in line with the Dinka apprehension of reality, to "carry the life," of their people. This being so, a Master's natural death would symbolise death for his clan by means of one disaster or another. "What (the Dinka) represent in contriving the death which they give him is the conservation of the 'life' which they themselves think that they receive from him, and not the conservation of his own personal life. The latter, indeed, is finally taken away from him by his people so that they may seem to divide it from the public 'life' which is in his keeping, and which must not depart from them with his death." The ritual burial is "associated by a wide range of associations with a social triumph over death and the factors which bring death in Dinkaland." It is to be seen, in other words, as a conscious effort at control deriving from a given ideology, an ideology evolved in turn from ecological necessity and from Dinka means of meeting that necessity.¹⁶

Purposes varied. Other rituals belonged to other aspects of this "pre-scientific" science of social control that were concerned with the endowment of authority. Whenever the emperor of Oyo died in old Yorubaland, appointed officials are said to have cut off his head; cleaned his skull, and taken out his heart. During installation rites the next emperor was obliged to sacrifice to Shango, a senior god, "and was given a dish containing the heart of his predecessor which he had to eat." A little later he was called on to swallow a potion of corn gruel from his predecessor's skull. These dramatic rites were occasioned by the need "to open his ears to distinguish truth from falsehood," to give "his words compelling power," and to assign "to him alone the authority to execute criminals and his enemies at home, and to make war on enemies abroad."¹⁷ The point lay not in the

¹⁶ G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka*, 1961, pp. 298.

¹⁷ P. Morton-Williams, "The Kingdom of Oyo," in *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. D. Forde and P.M. Kaberry, 1967.

gruesomeness, but in the mobilising of chartered power behind the granting of a solemn office, thus guaranteeing legitimacy, as Fortes says, and imposing accountability on its proper exercise.

From this standpoint one may grasp why these societies needed many more rituals than ours. In our societies most individuals know their place by the influence of a process of differentiation effected by class, accent, education, income, professional affiliation or some other fissile action of the social order. Rituals have fallen away, or have survived in affectionate gestures to an irrelevant past, as when budding lawyers in London have to “eat their dinners” at an “inn” which is no longer any such thing. But with these societies the situation was otherwise. They were faced with the task of creating a differentiation of roles and statuses from a more or less undifferentiated community of social equals; and then, afterwards, with the task of safeguarding these offices from disorderly infringement by persons who might otherwise be living in much the same way, or exactly the same way, as the office holders.

Summing up, religion in Africa appears in all its varied garb as the projection and affirmation of certain principles concerned with the evolution of society. Defined most simply, it is the selective codification for everyday life of the workings of the Principle of Good, of whatever guards or harmonizes with a system initially empirical but long since “given,” and of the workings of the Principle of Evil, of whatever undermines or goes against this given system. Hence the multiplicity of religions. Each society has necessarily required its own. And hence, too, the further elaboration into processes of what Turner has called “social analysis”: the application to oracles and the varied testing of reality against these twin Principles, against the truth or power of God and the Devil, in ways we call magical, in witchcraft and sorcery...