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# AFRICAN WORLDS

STUDIES IN THE  
COSMOLOGICAL IDEAS AND SOCIAL VALUES  
OF AFRICAN PEOPLES

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## NOTE

In fulfilment of a resolution of the General Conference of U.N.E.S.C.O. at its fourth session, on the recommendation of the International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies (Conseil International de la Philosophie et des Sciences Humaines), and in accordance with the decision of the Executive Board of U.N.E.S.C.O. at its twenty-first session, a grant was allocated towards the cost of the preparation and publication by the International African Institute of a study of the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African peoples.

The present volume has been prepared under the editorship of Professor Daryll Forde, Administrative Director of the International African Institute, and contains contributions by a number of distinguished ethnologists based on original field researches.

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external successes, the available data support the view that even at the height of her military glory Ashanti was not a stable nation internally, for the chiefdoms of the confederation were jealous of their regional autonomy. What held them together was their allegiance to the Golden Stool which was the religious symbol of their unity. The strength of the union rested on military power as well as on religious belief.

The many wars and conquests of the Ashanti brought into their midst slaves, captives, and immigrants from different tribes of the Gold Coast. Ashanti religion was very hospitable, and the Ashanti took over the beliefs, the gods, and the rites of conquered as well as those of neighbouring tribes; from the Moslem north they bought charms and amulets which were highly prized for the protection they were believed to give in battle. None of these borrowed faiths displaced the fundamental beliefs of the Ashanti. New gods and faiths were merely additions which were believed to give more power and protection against the spirits and forces of the world.

Today the Ashanti are largely an agricultural people, though there is an increasing diversity and differentiation of economic pursuits; there are changes not only in economic activities, but indeed in all aspects of life; for as a result of the long contacts with Europe, fifty years of British rule, the rapid growth of the cocoa trade, developments in education, trade and commerce, and transport, and the introduction of new laws and political ideas, Ashanti is undergoing a social change that may be described as a revolution; it may be asked to what extent all this has affected the cosmology of the Ashanti people.

In recent years Ashanti religion has proved similarly hospitable to Christianity. But, as is shown below, the world outlook of the Ashanti and their interpretation of the universe have been but little affected by the turbulent events of the last three hundred years; they have held very largely to their ancestral beliefs and practices.

## I

*A World of Spirits*

To the Ashanti the universe is full of spirits. There is the Great Spirit, the Supreme Being, who created all things, and who manifests his power through a pantheon of gods; below these are lesser spirits which animate trees, animals, or charms; and then there are the ever-present spirits of the ancestors (*asamanfo*) whose constant contact with the life of man on the earth brings the world of the spirits so close to the land of the living.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Ashanti form part of the larger body of Akan-speaking peoples widely distributed in the Gold Coast and Ivory Coast who have in common a number of social institutions, religious beliefs and rituals; but the traditional cosmology of the Ashanti differs significantly from that of some other Akan groups. For an account of these, and in particular of the concept of a bi-sexual godhead and its relation to ideas concerning human personality and the divine chieftainship embodied in the king and queen mother, see Eva Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, 1951, and 'Concepts of the Soul among the Akan of the Gold Coast', *Africa*, xxi, 1, 1951. (Ed.)

## THE ASHANTI

By K. A. BUSIA

### *Introduction*

THERE has been a growing literature about the Ashanti since the early years of the nineteenth century. In 1819 Bowdich, who was the first European to visit Kumasi, published his *Mission to Ashantee* in which he gave descriptive accounts of the laws and customs and the religion and arts of the Ashanti. Dupuis, who was British Consul at Kumasi in 1820, also published accounts of the Ashanti in his *Journal of a Residence in Ashanti*. In 1844 the Rev. T. B. Freeman of the Wesleyan Missionary Society wrote an account of his journey to Kumasi where he was granted a piece of land to build a church.

One of the most famous of the wars between the British and the Ashanti was the invasion of Ashanti in January 1874 when the British forces were led by Sir Garnet Wolseley. Ashanti was widely publicized, especially in Britain, through the crop of books written about the campaign by military officers and war correspondents.

But the most intimate and accurate knowledge of the Ashanti we owe to Captain R. S. Rattray whose books *Ashanti*, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, and *Ashanti Proverbs* have covered in an admirable way different aspects of Ashanti culture.

The tradition which appears to be the most generally accepted nowadays is that the Ashanti were a part of the Akan stock which migrated to the Gold Coast from what is now the French Ivory Coast. The Ashanti settled in the forest belt where they founded the town of Kumasi in about 1665. The clans in this vicinity formed a military confederation against the neighbouring state of Denker, to which they were tributary, and defeated it in the Ashanti-Denker War of 1669. Following this, Ashanti became a powerful nation which conquered one neighbouring tribe after another.

The desire to trade with Europeans on the coast, particularly in order to obtain flintlock guns and ammunition, led to wars with the coastal tribes, and eventually with the British who protected them. The most famous of the eight campaigns fought against the British between 1806 and 1896 were the battle of Insamankow, fought on 21 June 1824, when the Ashanti defeated the British forces and captured and killed the Governor, Sir Charles MacCarthy, and eight other British officers; the battle of Dodowa on 7 August 1826, when the British assisted by allies of the coastal tribes defeated the Ashanti; the invasion of Ashanti in 1874, to which allusion has already been made, and the capture and exile of the King of Ashanti in 1896.

The basis of the Ashanti confederation was military but, in spite of

The Ashanti conception of the Supreme Being may be gathered from the titles ascribed to him. He is, the Ashanti say, older than all the things that live on the wide, wide earth (*Asase tere, na Onyame ne Panin*). He is *Onyankopon*, Alone, the Great One; *Tweaduampon*, the Dependable One; *Bore-bore*, the First, the Creator of all things; *Otumfoa*, the Powerful One; *Odomankoma*, the Eternal One; *Ananse Kokeroko*, the Great Spider, that is, the Wise One; he is also personalized as *Onyankopon Kwame*, the Great One who appeared on Saturday.

According to a well-known myth,<sup>1</sup> *Onyankopon* long, long ago lived very near to men. His abode was the sky. There was a certain old woman who used to pound her *fufu* (a meal of mashed yam or plantain) and, whenever she did so, the long pestle she used knocked against *Onyankopon*, who lived just above in the sky. So one day *Onyankopon* said: 'Because of what you have been doing to me, I am taking myself away far up into the sky where men cannot reach me'. So he went up and up into the sky, and men could no longer approach him. Whereupon the old woman instructed her children to collect all the mortars they could find, and pile them one on top of the other. They did so, till they required only one mortar to add to the pile so that it could reach to *Onyankopon*. As they could not find another mortar, the old woman advised her children to take one mortar from the bottom, and put it on the top. The children accordingly removed one mortar from the bottom, and when they did so all the other mortars rolled and fell to the ground killing many people.

The idea of the original nearness of God illustrated by this myth gains support from the Ashanti belief that everyone has direct access to the Supreme Being. This is expressed in an old Ashanti maxim: '*Obi kwan nsi obi kwan mu* (no man's path crosses another's)', meaning that everyone has a direct path to the Supreme Being. There is another saying: '*Obi nkyere abofra Onyame*', which may mean either, 'No-one shows a child the Supreme Being' (he knows by instinct) or, 'No-one shows the child the sky' (which is the abode of the Supreme Being). It is noteworthy that the Ashanti never had special priests for the Supreme Being, though every god (*abosom*) has a priest. Outside many a house in old Ashanti villages were altars to the Supreme Being<sup>2</sup> which consisted of a three-forked stick cut from the *Nyame dua* (the tree of God) with a basin or pot or gourd placed between the forks. Into the receptacle offerings of food or wine were placed for the Supreme Being. This did not require the offices of a special priest; anyone could place his own offering in the receptacle. Though many of these altars were to be seen in Ashanti villages some twenty years ago, they have now become extremely rare. This, however, has not affected the belief in the Supreme Being. As the myth of the old woman and her *fufu* proves, the Ashanti have for a long time held the belief that the Supreme Being has removed himself too far for man to approach directly, and can

<sup>1</sup> Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs*, 1916, pp. 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> Rattray, *Ashanti*, 1923, p. 142.

only be approached through intermediary deities. Though Ashanti religious ceremonies concern these intermediary deities and the spirits of the ancestors, the people have a feeling of awe and veneration for the Supreme Being who is high above all deities and who animates them all.

According to Ashanti belief, the gods (*abosom*) derive their power from the Supreme Being. They come from him and are parts of him. A god is but the mouthpiece of the Supreme Being (*Onyankopon Kyeame*), a servant acting as intermediary between Creator and creature. There is a whole pantheon of these gods, for their number is being added to all the time. Some acquire a country-wide fame for a season and then pass into oblivion; while others, like the Ntoa gods of Nkoranza, Wenchi, and Techiman, or the Tano, have become tribal gods, having elaborate annual festivals held in their honour.

Of these deities, the most powerful are those that are the spirits of rivers. An Ashanti myth has it that all the rivers, the Tano, the Be, the Bosomtwe Lake near Kumasi, and the mighty sea, were children of the Supreme Being. The latter decided to send these his children to the earth so that they might receive honour from men, and in turn might confer benefits on mankind. The Supreme Being himself planned where he would send each of his children. The goat got to know of these plans. He and Be were great friends, so he told Be that whenever their father sent for them he should go quickly so that he would arrive before his brothers. One day the Supreme Being sent for his children and Be ran quickly and got there first; so the father assigned to him the cool and shady forest country which had been intended for Tano, the favourite son. Tano therefore was sent to the grassy plains, and each child in turn was given a place different from the original plan, owing to the goat having revealed the plan to Be. For this reason, all the worshippers of Tano as well as those of the other sons avoid the goat as a 'hateful creature'. As the myth indicates, the Ashanti regard the rivers as having spirits which they derive from the Creator, and many gods are the 'children' of rivers. 'As a woman gives birth to a child, so may water to a god.'<sup>1</sup>

The god requires a temporary abode and a priest. The temporary abode may be a tree or river, or a rock; or a priest might prepare for the spirit of his god a wooden image or mound of mud daubed with blood and placed in a basin and kept in a temple. The god will not always be present in this temporary abode which he enters at will or when called there by the priest.

Rattray has told in detail how the shrines of the gods are prepared, and how the priests are chosen and trained.<sup>2</sup> Many an Ashanti priest would claim that he was chosen directly by the spirit of the god he serves. It may be he went into the forest and suddenly discovered a flaming stone charged with power, the temporary dwelling-place of a spirit; such was the case of *Di Amono* found at Gyansoso near Wenchi in 1935; the discoverer became

<sup>1</sup> Rattray, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> Rattray, *op. cit.*, chap. xiv; see also *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, 1927, chap. iv.

the priest of the god who had thus revealed himself. This priest-to-be, after the discovery, remained in the forest alone for several days, and when found behaved in a most abnormal way; it was thought that he was going mad, until an older priest who was consulted declared that the man was possessed by the spirit of a god. A shrine containing the stone was subsequently prepared, and the novice was initiated into the mysteries of the priesthood so that he could understand and interpret the will of the god that had possessed him. A similar story is told of the priest of *Kwaku Firi*, still a powerful god at Nwoase where people from all over the Gold Coast come to consult him. The spirit of the god possessed the man who is now his priest while he was away in the forest, where he remained for several days until he was discovered.

The spirit of the god speaks through his priest, sometimes by displacing the personality of the priest, so that he becomes a mere medium behaving and speaking as compelled by the spirit that possesses him. In such instances, a trained spokesman interprets the utterances and gestures of the priest. At other times the priest may interpret the will of the god through drawing leather thongs, or throwing cowrie shells or sticks, or casting a bone or stone die, or watching the fluttering of a slain chicken and the position in which it comes to rest. The gods are besought to grant health, or children, or prosperity in business, or protection from misfortune and from witches.

Animals and trees are also believed to have souls, though not all are powerful enough to cause harm to men: but there are some plants and animals that have powerful souls, and these must be propitiated.<sup>1</sup> Thus an Ashanti craftsman will endeavour to propitiate certain trees before he cuts them. He will offer an egg, for example, to the *odum* tree, saying: 'I am about to cut you down and carve you; do not let me suffer harm.'

In the same way, the drummer, whenever he begins to drum on ceremonial occasions, addresses the spirit of the cedar tree from which the drum is made, saying:

Spirit of the Cedar tree,

The Creator's drummer announces,

That he has made himself to arise

As the cock crowed at dawn.

We are addressing you, and you will understand.

A similar invocation is addressed to the 'Elephant that breaks the axé', because the tense membrane of the drum is made of the skin of an elephant's ear:

Spirit of the Elephant,

The Creator's drummer announces,

That he has started from his sleep,

He has roused himself at early dawn.

<sup>1</sup> Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, 1927, chap. i.

Below the gods (*abosom*) are minor deities (*asuman*)<sup>1</sup> that derive their power from the *abosom*, or from the souls of plants and trees. The *suman* may be in the form of beads, or medicine balls carried on strings or in a sheep's horn or a gourd. Some of them are no more than charms or talismans that could be regarded as impersonal forces acting in obedience to secret formulae and operations; the Ashanti themselves, however, believe that ultimately all *asuman* derive their power from some other supernatural beings. A *suman* protects the wearer and guards him against harm, or assists him to gain his personal ends, and functions effectively or not, according to the care given to it.

The Earth too has spiritual power. It is her spirit that makes the plants grow; she has the power of fertility. She is not a deity, for she has no priests or priestesses, and does not divine.<sup>2</sup>

But offerings are made to *Asase Yaa* so that she may help the crops to grow, and guard the farmer from misfortune,<sup>3</sup> and the sense of dependence on the Earth is preserved in the poetry of the drum language:

Earth, condolences,

Earth, condolences,

Earth and dust,

The Dependable One,

I lean upon you.

Earth, when I am about to die,

I lean upon you.

Earth, while I am alive,

I depend upon you.

Earth, while I am alive,

I depend upon you.

Earth that receives dead bodies,

The Creator's drummer says,

From wherever he went,

He has roused himself,

He has roused himself.

There was belief too in black magic and witchcraft. The forests were believed to be inhabited by the *mmoatia* (the little folk) and by forest monsters and witches.<sup>4</sup> It was the little folk that taught medicine men the arts of healing, and also taught them black magic. In league with the *mmoatia* and the witches (*abayifo*) was *sasabonsam*, the forest monster that was so hostile to hunters and priests. *Sasabonsam* is 'covered with long hair, has large blood-shot eyes, long legs, and feet pointing both ways. It sits on high branches of an Odum or Onyina tree and dangles its legs with which at times it hooks up the unwary hunter.'<sup>5</sup> Belief in these forest monsters is on

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. ii.

<sup>2</sup> K. A. Busia, *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti*, chap. iii.

<sup>3</sup> Rattray, *Ashanti*, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, chap. iii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

the wane, but tales of hunters being taught the arts of healing by the *mmotia* still linger on, and may be heard in remote villages. Belief in witchcraft is still prevalent.

To the Ashanti Nature is a world of spirits. It is filled with the spirits of rivers, trees, rocks, and animals and with the malignant spirits of fairies and forest monsters. Yet all spirits are subservient to the Supreme Being, from whom ultimately they all derive their power. 'Of the wide, wide earth, the Supreme Being is the Elder.'

## II

### *Man and Society*

We need to know the Ashanti conception of the nature of man and society in order to understand fully their world view.

Man is both a biological and a spiritual being. This is recognized by the Ashanti in the myth that a human being is formed from the blood (*mogya*) of the mother and the spirit (*ntoro*) of the father. This belief reflects Ashanti social organization. Two sets of bonds, a mother-child bond and a father-child bond, derive from their conception of procreation, and determine two sets of groupings and relationships.

It is believed that the link between one generation and another is provided by the blood which is transmitted through the mother. An Ashanti therefore traces his descent through his mother. The mother-child bond makes him a member of his mother's kin group. He is a member of his mother's lineage which consists of all the descendants of both sexes who trace their genealogy through the female line to a common ancestress. This group is a localized group, and belongs to a chiefdom which it regards as its home. It may be so large a group that the members will seldom all meet together except at the funeral of a member of the lineage. Effective kinship obligations tend to be observed within smaller segments of the lineage; such a segment seldom includes more than four generations of uterine descendants of an ancestress, and living together is important for effective co-operation. This was recongized, for in old Ashanti villages the members of a lineage lived close to one another in the same ward. The lineage is also a political unit; the lineage head represents it on the chief's council. The mother-child bond therefore confers the rights and obligations of citizenship. It also determines a man's status and his title to office or property, since succession and inheritance are transmitted in the matrilineal line.

The mother-child bond, which makes a man a member of his mother's lineage, also makes him a member of a wider group, her clan. Every Ashanti lineage belongs to one of the seven clans (*mmusuabaa*) of Ashanti. The number of clans is sometimes given as eight,<sup>1</sup> but some of the best authorities on Ashanti custom maintain that there are seven clans in

<sup>1</sup> Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, p. 64; see also Danquah, 'Akan Society', *West African Affairs*, 1951.

Ashanti and group them thus: (1) Oyoko ne Dako; (2) Bretuo ne Agona; (3) Asona; (4) Asenie; (5) Aduana; (6) Ekuona ne Asokore; (7) Asakyiri.

It is believed that all the lineages of a clan are matrilineal descendants from a single remote ancestress. The clan system is common to all the Akan peoples, and is one of the most important indices of their cultural unity. No clan members of different local lineages can, however, show their genealogical connexion, or even give the name of the ancestress from whom they claim a common ancestry. The concept is therefore mythical, but it is nevertheless an important unifying myth, for members of the same clan behave towards one another as though they were distant kin. The mother-child bond is therefore the basis of a wide net-work of relationships. It links a man with his near kinsmen, his fellow citizens, and with his society, for wherever he travels he will find someone with whom he has lineage or clanship ties.

The biological bond has religious significance too. The commemoration of ancestors links lineages and clans and, through the chief, it links the tribe and nation. Ancestor-worship, as will be shown, emphasizes the unity of matrilineal ancestry.

The father-child bond is a spiritual one. Besides the blood which a man inherits from his mother, the Ashanti believe that every man receives a *sunsum* and also a *kra*. A man's *sunsum* is his ego, his personality, his distinctive character. It is not divine, but perishes with the man. A man's *kra* is a life force, 'the small bit of the Creator that lives in every person's body'. It returns to the Creator when the person dies. It is the Supreme Being that directly gives to a man this spirit or life when he is about to be born, and with it the man's destiny.

It was stated above that the Ashanti believe that a human being is formed from the blood of the mother and the spirit of the father. An old Ashanti informant explained the latter process by saying: '*Sunsum* is that which you take with you to go to the side of the woman and lie with her; and then the *Omyankopon*, the Great One, will take his *kra* and bless your union. You give your *sunsum* to your child, not your *kra*. He comes with his own *kra*. As the Supreme Being gives you a *kra*, so he gives your child his *kra*.' A child receives two spiritual gifts, a *sunsum* and a *kra*. A father transmits his *sunsum* to the child; this is what moulds the child's personality and disposition. The Ashanti believe that a child cannot thrive if his father's *sunsum* is alienated, and a priest sometimes says of a sick child that he is ill because his father's *sunsum* is aggrieved.

In the explanation given by the old informant, he used the word *sunsum*, the personal power, or cast of countenance, or personality of a man. But more often the Ashanti will say that a man transmits his *ntoro* (spirit) to his child. The two terms in this sense are synonymous. *Ntoro* is the generic term of which *sunsum* is a specific instance. Just as every Ashanti belongs to a clan, so every Ashanti belongs to a *Ntoro* group. The latter consists of a group that share the same spirit; it is a 'spirit-washing or cleansing group'.

A man's *sunsum* is a child of his *Ntorɔ*; and all who belong to the same *Ntorɔ* are believed to have similar *sunsum*. Hence it can be rightly said that a man transmits his *ntorɔ* to his children.

Owing to the fact that the practices connected with the *Ntorɔ* have ceased to be generally observed, very few in Ashanti today have clear ideas about it. Though every Ashanti belongs to a *Ntorɔ* category, there are many who cannot answer correctly the question, 'What *Ntorɔ* do you wash?'

For the same reason the answers that are given as to the total number of *Ntorɔ* groupings vary from one locality to another. In Kumasi, a group of experts on Ashanti customs gave the number as seven as follows:

1. Bosommuru:  
Sub-groups, Adufudee, Akrudee, Asadofee, Aninie.
2. Bosompɔ:  
Sub-groups, Aboadee, Ankamadua.
3. Atwidede:  
Sub-group, Agyinadee.
4. Agyaadeefoo:  
Sub-group, Nkatia.
5. Amoadee.
6. Akankadee.
7. Abankadee.

Dr. Danquah,<sup>1</sup> who has carried out extensive research into the dual family system of the Akan, gives twelve principal *Ntorɔ* groups as follows:

1. Bosompɔ.
2. Bosomtwi.
3. Bosommuru.
4. Bosompo or Bosom-Nketea.
5. Bosom-Dwerebe.
6. Bosom-Akom.
7. Bosomafi.
8. Bosomayesu.
9. Bosom-Konsi.
10. Bosomsika.
11. Bosomafɔram.
12. Bosomkrete.

The constant prefix 'bosom' emphasizes the fact that each *Ntorɔ* is believed to be under the aegis of a god (*bosom*). It is also noteworthy that six of these are rivers, one is a lake, and one refers to the sea. The Ashanti myth which declares that these were children of the Supreme Being has been narrated above. In the same way that these children of the Supreme Being share his spirit, so the *Ntorɔ* are children of the rivers from whom they derive their spirits; and in the same way that the *Ntorɔ* is a child of the river, so the *sunsum* of a man is a child of the *Ntorɔ* and shares its nature; thus again, all spiritual power derives from the Supreme Being. As it is the father who is the immediate transmitter of his son's *sunsum* from the *Ntorɔ*, the spiritual bond between father and son is immediate and close.

This spiritual bond is further strengthened by the belief that all who belong to the same *Ntorɔ* manifest the same characteristics. Each *Ntorɔ* transmits a particular type of character to its members. Thus, Dr. Danquah gives

the distinctive character of each of the twelve *Ntorɔ* groups listed above as follows:

1. Bosompɔ  
The Tough
2. Bosomtwi  
The Human
3. Bosommuru  
The Distinguished
4. Bosom-Nketea or Bosompo  
The Audacious
5. Bosom-Dwerebe  
The Eccentric
6. Bosom-Akom  
The Fanatic
7. Bosomafi  
The Chaste
8. Bosomayesu  
The Truculent
9. Bosom-Konsi  
The Virtuous
10. Bosomsika  
The Fastidious
11. Bosomafɔram  
The Liberal
12. Bosomkrete  
The Chivalrous.

In addition, each *Ntorɔ* group has taboos which each member observes; thus the Bosommuru group taboo the ox, the python, and the dog; the Bosompɔ, the leopard and a white fowl; the Bosomtwi, the bush buck, &c. Each *Ntorɔ* group also has its own sacred day for purification or 'washing of spirits'.

Another practice which linked members of the same *Ntorɔ* was the fact that each *Ntorɔ* had a number of surnames which were commonly borne by the members, and one could tell a person's *Ntorɔ* by his surname. Examples are:

Bosommuru: Osei, Owusu, Poku, Saakodie, Amankwaa, Safo, Nti, Anin.  
Bosompɔ: Dua, Boakye, Boaten, Akyeampon, Ofori, Bediako, &c.  
Bosom-Nketea: Duko, Baafi, Adom, &c.

Members of the same *Ntorɔ* also used the same forms of response to greetings, and again the Ashanti man who knew these forms could tell a person's *Ntorɔ* from his response to a greeting. For the three *Ntorɔ* groups above, these responses were:

Bosommuru: *Akudɔnɔ*; *Aburu*.  
Bosompɔ: *Aku*; *Esɔn*.  
Bosom-Nketea: *Essua*; *Aryaado*.

Thus the members of the same *Ntorɔ* were linked by the observance of common taboos, and the use of common surnames and common forms of etiquette. All these served to strengthen the spiritual bond between father and son. The spiritual nature of the bond between them was again emphasized by the fact that a father was held responsible for his son's moral behaviour, and although a son belonged to his mother's lineage, it was the father who was liable for any damages that were claimed if his son committed adultery with another man's wife.

Social values and filial and parental bonds are thus given meaning within the Ashanti system of belief. Man as a biological being inherits his blood from his mother; this gives him his status and membership within the

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 12.

lineage, the clan, and the tribe, and his rights and obligations as a citizen; moreover, as is discussed below, the concept of a life hereafter and of a spirit world, and the consequent worship of the ancestors, provides a religious link and an unbroken continuity with all one's matrikin.

As a spiritual being, a man receives a twofold gift of the spirit: that which determines his character and his individuality he receives through his father; but his soul, the undying part of him, he receives direct from the Supreme Being.

One part comes via his father from the father's *Nloro* which, in turn, receives its spiritual power from one of the river sons of the Supreme Being. The blood that is transmitted through the mother, the personality that comes indirectly from the Supreme Being through intermediaries, and that 'small bit of the Creator which is in every person's body' and which he receives directly from the Supreme Being, combine to make a man what he is.

These gifts, too, define his place in the universe, linking him with the world of nature and of man. All this is what the Ashanti mean when they declare: 'All men are children of the Supreme Being, no-one is a child of the earth (*Nnipa nyina ye Onyame nma, obi nye asase ba*).'

### III

#### *Political Organization*

In the preceding section it was shown that Ashanti social organization is based on the rule of matrilineal descent, and that the mother-child bond makes one a member of a lineage and so of a chiefdom; for an Ashanti Division (chiefdom) is an aggregate of social units: the lineage, the village, and the sub-division. A chiefdom is really a combination of localized lineages inhabiting a given territory and forming a political community.

Ashanti political organization is thus based on kinship. Each lineage is a political unit having its own headman who represents it on what becomes the governing body; that is, representation is based on kinship, and each lineage head is a councillor. The lineage head is chosen by the adult men and women of the lineage.

In a similar way, the chief who rules the tribe is also chosen from a particular lineage by the heads of the other lineages. Kin-right and popular selection are thus combined in the choice of a ruler.<sup>1</sup>

An Ashanti Division was administered on the basis of organized kinship groups through the lineage, village, and sub-division by a system of decentralization.<sup>2</sup> Each unit was left to manage its own affairs under its own head or council, and to provide such public services as it needed by communal labour. Issues that affected the whole tribe were decided by a tribal council of lineage heads.

The principal administrative tasks were the keeping of law and order, the defence of the tribe from attack by other tribes, the maintenance of

<sup>1</sup> Busia, op. cit., chap. i.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., chap. iii and iv.

amicable relations among persons and groups within the community, and between the community and its ancestors and gods. In the judicial system of Ashanti, the central authority (the chief and his council of lineage heads) took official cognizance only of offences which endangered the good relations between the community and its ancestors and gods, for the maintenance of those relations was deemed essential for the well-being of the community. Other offences were left to be settled by arbitration, but they could be brought before the central authority by swearing the chief's oath; that is, by deliberately uttering words that were tabooed; as this constituted a threat to the amicable relations existing between the living and the ancestors of the chief, it had to be inquired into; what was otherwise a private issue was thus brought under the category of offences which endangered the well-being of the whole community.

This emphasizes the close link that exists in Ashanti cosmology between the world of the living and the world of spirits. The Ashanti believe that there is a world of spirits (*asaman*), where all their ancestors live a life very similar to life on earth, and this conception is implicit in Ashanti funeral rites. The dead are given food and drink and gold-dust to help them on their journey to the world of spirits. Receptacles, bedding, ornaments, and clothing which it is believed they will require in the world of spirits are buried with them, and the newly dead are asked to convey messages to the ancestors.

An Ashanti has his ancestors constantly in mind. At meals, the old Ashanti used to offer the first morsel of food to the ancestors, and to pour libations to them daily. It is believed that success and prosperity in this life depend on the favour of the ancestors. At the grave-yard, before the coffin is finally covered, the deceased is addressed by a member of his lineage:

You are leaving us today, we have performed your funeral. Do not let any of us fall ill. Let us get money to pay the expenses of your funeral. Let the women bear children. Life to all of us. Life to the chief.<sup>1</sup>

That prayer expresses the sense of dependence on the ancestors. They are believed to be constantly watching over their living relatives. They punish those who break the customs, or fail to fulfil their obligations to their kinsfolk. To such people they send misfortune and illness or even death. Stories are constantly circulating in Ashanti villages of deaths caused by the intervention of ancestors, and priests of the gods also often declare that sickness has been caused by an ancestor because of some guilt or misconduct on the part of the sufferer. On the other hand, those who obey the laws and customs and fulfil their obligations receive the help and blessing of the ancestors. The latter see to it that the crops of such people are plentiful, that children are born to them, and that their undertakings prosper.

Accordingly, each lineage has its blackened stool which is the shrine of its ancestors. On this shrine the head of the lineage at the appropriate seasons

<sup>1</sup> Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, chap. xii; *Ashanti*, chap. v-ix; Busia, op. cit., chap. ii.

offers food and drink to the ancestors, praying that they may protect the members of the lineage, bless them with health and long life, that the women may bear children, and that their farms may yield food in plenty.

Such beliefs and practices give chiefship in Ashanti a special significance. Every lineage is believed to be protected by its own ancestors, but it is the dead rulers, the ancestors of the royal lineage, that guard and protect the whole tribe or chiefdom.

In the central rite of a chief's installation the chief-elect is gently lowered and raised three times over the blackened stool of the ancestor believed to be the founder of the royal lineage. By this ceremony the chief is believed to have been brought into a peculiarly close relationship with his ancestors. Thereupon his person becomes sacred. This is emphasized by taboos. He may not strike or be struck by anyone; he should not walk bare-footed; and, as the drummer regularly reminds him on the talking drums, he should always tread 'gently, gently'; a chief walks gently, majestically, lest he stumble; his buttocks must never touch the ground. The occurrence of any of these incidents would, it is believed, cause some misfortune to befall the community, unless the expected calamity be averted by a sacrifice.

An Ashanti chief is thus important not only as a civil ruler who is the axis of the political relations of his people and the one in whom the various lineages that compose the tribe find their unity; he is also the symbol of their identity and continuity as a tribe and the embodiment of their spiritual values. An Ashanti chief fills a sacred role as the 'one who sits upon the stool of the ancestors'.

That stool, the symbol of his power, is what the famous Ashanti priest, Anokye, described as 'the soul of the nation'. It is the sacred emblem of the tribe's permanence and continuity. The chief as the occupant of the stool represents all those who have occupied it before him. He is the link, the intermediary, between the living and the dead; for, according to the conception which the Ashanti share with other Akan tribes, the dead, the living, and those still to be born of the tribe are all members of one family, and it is the stool that binds that family together.

These sentiments are kept alive in the *Adae* and *Odwera* ceremonies.<sup>1</sup>

At the *Adae* ceremonies the departed rulers are recalled, food and drink are offered to them, and their favours are solicited for the welfare of the tribe. An *Adae* occurs every twenty-one days, known alternately as *Kwasidae* or *Adae Kese*, and *Wukudae*. The former, the Great *Adae*, falls on Sundays, and the latter on Wednesdays, so that there are six weeks between one Great *Adae* (*Kwasidae* or *Adae Kese*) and the succeeding Great *Adae*, and six weeks between one little *Adae* (*Wukudae*) and the next little *Adae*. So every third week, on an *Adae* day, whether it is a Great *Adae* or a little one, an Ashanti chief officiates before the ancestral stools and prays to his ancestors on behalf of the tribe, asking that the earth may be fruitful, and that the tribe may prosper and increase in numbers.

<sup>1</sup> Busia, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

On the eve of an *Adae* the talking drums announce to the people that the *Adae* falls on the following day. The stool treasurer and the stool carriers will already have secured the sheep and drink that will be needed. Early in the morning the chief, accompanied by his spokesmen (*akyeame*) and elders, enters the stool-house. As they enter the sacred place, they take their sandals off their feet and bare their shoulders as a mark of respect to the ancestors who are believed to be present where their stools are kept. The chief then reverently offers drink and meat from a sheep that is slaughtered there to the ancestors. Placing a piece of meat on each stool, he offers the prayer: 'Today is *Adae*; come and receive this and eat; let the tribe prosper; let those of child-bearing age bear children; may all the people get money; long life to us all; long life to the tribe.'

Then he takes a bottle of rum, pours some into a glass, and letting a few drops fall on each stool he repeats the prayer: 'Today is *Adae*, come and receive this and drink; let the tribe prosper; let those of child-bearing age bear children; may all the people get money; long life to us all; long life to the tribe.'

When the rites in the stool-house are over, a public ceremony is held. The chief takes his seat in an open space or court-yard, surrounded by his councillors, drummers, and minstrels. Each lineage head or sub-chief, accompanied by his subjects and members of his lineage, ceremonially greets the chief and takes his place in the gathering. There is drumming and dancing in which everyone is free to join. The minstrels chant the traditions of the tribe, and the brave deeds of its departed rulers. The talking drums extol the chief:

We salute you as chief,  
We salute you as chief;  
Who is a chief?  
Who is a chief?  
He is a chief who is worthy to be called master;  
We extol you,  
Man among men,  
Hero, royal of royals.

The drums will call the chief the powerful one, the valiant one, the benefactor and mother of the tribe, the defender of his people. The ruling chief may not himself deserve these appellations, but his ancestors did, and it is as their representative that he is thus addressed and extolled. They praise him because as chief he is the embodiment of the highest values of the tribe, 'the one who sits upon the stool of the ancestors'. It is the ancestors who are recalled at the *Adae* ceremony; it is they whom the tribe seeks to propitiate in order that it may receive blessing from them.

The *Odwera* ceremony was an annual festival which lasted from a week to a fortnight. Sheep, drink, and first fruits of the year were offered to the ancestors and the gods. At one of these ceremonies, when yams, eggs, sheep, and drink were offered to a tribal god by the chief, the priest prayed:

*Drybo* [name of the god], the edges of the year have met. The chief has given you yams, he has given you a sheep, he has given you eggs, and now he has brought this drink. Let the tribe prosper; may the women bear children; do not let our children die [i.e. protect them]; those who have gone to trade, may they get money; may there be peace during the present chief's reign.

As part of the *Odwera* celebrations, the chief and his people in a long procession visited the royal mausoleum (*ban mu*) and offered sacrifices and prayers there also. At one such ceremony the prayer offered to the ancestors was:

Here is food; all you ancestors receive this and eat; the year has come round again; today we celebrate it; bring us blessing; blessing to the chief who sits on your stool; health to the people; let women bear children; let the men prosper in their undertakings; life to all; we thank you for the good harvest; for standing behind us well [i.e. guarding and protecting us]; Blessing, blessing, blessing.

The *Odwera* was also a time for the cleansing of the tribe from defilement, and for the purification of the shrines of the ancestral spirits and tribal gods. The rites of cleansing and purification usually took place in a stream where the chief took a ritual bath, and water was sprinkled on the shrines and on all who were present, as a symbolic act of cleansing. A peculiar sacrifice of a black hen symbolized the removal of all that had defiled the tribe, and the new year was begun with a ritual feast which the living and the dead were believed to share. All who partook of this feast were believed to receive strength and health and blessing.

The cycle of rites observed during the *Odwera* portrayed all the elements of Ashanti religious faith: the Supreme Being, the gods, the rivers, and the ancestors were all propitiated. The offerings of food and drink to the ancestors show how human they are in the conception of the Ashanti, as do the direct simplicity and naturalness of the prayers. The dominant interests of the tribe are also shown in the prayers; these are food, drink, prosperity, and increase—those things which are needed for the sustenance of life and the continuity of the tribe. Their preoccupation is with this life, not with the next. They seek aid in order that they may achieve success in this life.

In connexion with the role of the ancestors, it may be added that the Ashanti believe that the land they inhabit belongs to the ancestors, and that the living have inherited from them only the right to use it. They in turn must hand it on to their children. Hence the inquirer is often told, 'The land belongs to the stool; or the land belongs to the chief'. They both mean the same: the ancestors own the land. The stool and the chief are their symbols.

Thus in the Ashanti conception the ancestors sustain the tribe. They have given them the land; they watch and protect them, and send them the things they need. In the ceremonies and prayers described above, the reverence of the Ashanti for their ancestors and their sense of dependence on them are apparent. The ceremonies by which these sentiments are given

expression persist in the face of the revolutionary changes taking place in Ashanti today. The strength of an Ashanti chiefdom is founded on the belief in the ancestors, and the sentiments of unity and solidarity associated with their worship.

#### IV

##### *The Contemporary Situation*

The preceding sections have shown that Ashanti cosmology is predominantly animistic. Though, according to Ashanti belief, the Supreme Being is remote, he is nevertheless conceived as a spirit and a person; the gods, his children, are also spirits animated by the Supreme Being, temporarily inhabiting a tree or rock or river or shrine; men are endowed with blood and a twofold spirit: first, the man's own personality, second, his soul; the latter lives on after death in the world of spirits whence the ancestors watch over the living and protect and guard them. Animals and inanimate objects too have spirits, and are to be propitiated according as their spirits are conceived to be strong and potentially harmful or not.

The universe of the Ashanti is largely a personalized universe, and their behaviour towards the supernatural conceived in animistic terms is the same as their familiar behaviour in normal human relationships and intercourse. Attention has been drawn to the characteristic naturalness and simplicity of Ashanti prayers. As accounts given above have shown, the Ashanti employ the techniques of prayer, sacrifice, taboo, and divination. The gods are treated with respect if they deliver the goods, and with contempt if they fail; it is the Supreme Being and the ancestors that are always treated with reverence and awe, a fact which an onlooker who has seen Ashanti chiefs and elders making offerings or pouring libations to the ancestors can hardly fail to observe. The Ashanti, like the other Akan tribes, esteem the Supreme Being and the ancestors far above gods and amulets. Attitudes to the latter depend upon their success, and vary from healthy respect to sneering contempt.

The use of charms and amulets which are believed to work automatically, provided the correct procedure is observed, testifies to the belief in impersonal power; but animistic beliefs and ancestor-worship dwarf the importance and the exercise of impersonal power. The Supreme Being, the gods, and the ancestors leave little place for it. This is the more so because of the ceremonialism that has grown round ancestor-worship. It has been noted that every twenty-one days there is the celebration of an *Adae* in which all the people join. An *Adae* is marked not only by prayers and sacrifices, but also by pomp and pageantry, and group dancing and singing. This is a potent means by which belief in the presence and power of the ancestors is constantly renewed and strengthened. The ceremonies are a binding force for the group as a whole, as well as a means of keeping the belief in the ancestors fresh and strong.

Mention has not been made of the existence of totemism in Ashanti,

because the evidence available is too scanty for its nature to be defined with satisfactory clarity. Totemism applies to a wide range of behaviour and belief, as far as West Africa is concerned. Rattray<sup>1</sup> judged from the taboos observed in connexion with the *Ntoro* divisions that one aspect at least of the *Ntoro* was totemistic. Such evidence as is available shows that the relationship between man and the totem is of the 'respect for services rendered' kind. The totem animal was not eaten or killed, because the myths told how the particular animal befriended the ancestors and helped them during a critical period of their history, either to obtain food, or to escape from a pursuing enemy tribe.

The myths recorded by Rattray belonged to this class; he wrote:

It has been seen that the *ntoro* is considered as being instrumental in the conception of the embryo in the womb. A further proof that this is the belief is given in the following myth—a translation of an account in the vernacular—giving the origin of the first *ntoro* ever bestowed upon man, the Bosommuru *ntoro*.

Very long ago one man and one woman came down from the sky and one man and one woman came up from the earth.<sup>2</sup>

From the Sky God (Onyame), also came a python (*onini*), and it made its home in the river now called Bosommuru.

At first these men and women did not bear children, they had no desire, and conception and birth were not known at that time.

One day the python asked them if they had no offspring, and on being told they had not, he said he would cause the woman to conceive. He bade the couples stand face to face, then he plunged into the river, and rising up, sprayed water upon their bellies with the words *kus kus*,<sup>3</sup> and then ordered them to return home and lie together.

The woman conceived and brought forth the first children in the world, who took Bosommuru as their *ntoro*, each male passing on this *ntoro* to his children.

If a Bosommuru *ntoro* man or woman sees a dead python (they would never kill one) they sprinkle white clay upon it and bury it.<sup>4</sup>

*Agyinadie ntoro*. This *ntoro* is supposed to have been given to man in a somewhat similar manner, by the crocodile.

*Bosomtwe ntoro*. This *ntoro* is supposed to have been given to man by T'we, the anthropomorphic spirit god of the lake.

*Akankaadei ntoro*. 'Nyame (the Sky God) very long ago sent down a dove to the earth to a certain man and woman there with his blessing and a promise of children. The Ashanti say that persons of this *ntoro* are to be distinguished by their peaceful natures even to this day.

The Ashanti observe taboos and avoidances not only with regard to the *Ntoro* but also with regard to certain curative medicines and charms. A priest may forbid a patient to eat certain foods while undergoing treatment, or to touch certain things, and may prescribe a long list of 'hateful things' (*akyiwade*) which may refer to conduct as well as food and drink. As the

<sup>1</sup> *Ashanti*, chap. ii.

<sup>2</sup> This dual origin of man is constantly alluded to in tradition and myths.

<sup>3</sup> These words are used in most ceremonies in connexion with *ntoro* and *Onyame*.

<sup>4</sup> A Bosompri man treats a leopard in the same manner.

practices connected with *Ntoro* taboos have become obsolete, it is difficult to obtain information that will enable the nature of Ashanti totemism to be clarified. In discussing the contemporary situation it is correct to say that totemism does not count either for practical purposes or in matters of belief or conduct.

It has often been said that Ashanti religion has no ethical content. If this means that the Ashanti do not aspire to grow like the gods, then it would be true. The Ashanti do not seek identification with the Supreme Being or the gods; their emphasis is not on becoming, and therefore there is little emphasis on morality. But the Ashanti have concepts of right and wrong, of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, culturally defined in terms of their own life and belief and, as has been apparent in the brief accounts given, the ancestors and gods punish those who violate the traditionally sanctioned code, and reward those who keep it. Within their own culture, then, Ashanti religion is ethical. It will be seen from their prayers that the gods and ancestors are expected not only to see that the crops grow, that children are born, that the members of the tribe prosper, that they succeed in their trading ventures or wars; but also that proper behaviour is rewarded and offences are punished. The Ashanti conception of a good society is one in which harmony is achieved among the living, and between the living and the gods and ancestors, a fact that is thrown into bold relief in their judicial system.<sup>1</sup>

There are both Christian and Moslem converts in Ashanti today. The system of belief in a Supreme Being and a pantheon of gods, in animated nature, and in ancestors is not an inhospitable one. Nevertheless, Christianity has been a source of conflict in Ashanti.<sup>2</sup> The nature of the conflict was thus explained in an official report on Ashanti in 1905:

The tendency of Christian converts to alienate themselves from the communities to which they belong is very marked, and is naturally resented by the chiefs who claim their hereditary right, in which they are supported by Government, to make the converts in common with their fellow tribesmen obey such laws and orders as are in accordance with native custom, not being repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience.

The Christian converts refused to perform the ordinary services to their chiefs, on the grounds that being Christians they could not take part in 'fetish observances'.

In 1912 a committee consisting of the Governor of the Gold Coast, the Chief Commissioner, three other officials, and representatives of the Missions then working in Ashanti—Wesleyan, Basel, and Roman Catholic—attempted to resolve the conflict by ruling that: 'No Christian shall be called upon to perform any fetish rites or service, but shall be bound to render customary service to his chief on ceremonial occasions when no element of fetish practice is involved.'

<sup>1</sup> Busia, *op. cit.*, chap. iv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. v.

The committee further suggested that an 'effort should be made to draw a distinction between fetish and purely ceremonial service'.

The value of these injunctions may be seen from the account of the Ashanti world view given above. The ceremonial occasions when the services of the Christian converts were required could not be 'purely' ceremonial. The convert may indeed be required to do no more than carry a chair or an umbrella or beat a drum; but the occasion may be the celebration of an *Adaa*, when the people express their sense of dependence on the ancestors, and pray to them for food and health and children and prosperity.

Though Christianity has won many converts in Ashanti, this fundamental conflict remains. The chief in Ashanti fills a sacral role. Ancestor-worship provides a unity between the political and religious authority of the chief. The Christian churches seek to oust the chief as the religious head of his people; but the office of chief is not, in the Ashanti conception, divisible into secular and sacred, or political and religious, so the conflict remains unresolved. The ceremonialism connected with ancestor-worship has made it a resilient force which Christianity has not assailed. Many Ashanti Christians join in *Adaa* celebrations with their fellow countrymen and share the sentiments that the ceremonials keep alive: a sense of tribal unity and continuity, and a sense of dependence on the ancestors. This aspect of Ashanti life has suffered little change from the impact of European civilization and thought.

Nor, so far as can be ascertained, has the Ashanti world view changed. It is a commonplace to describe Christianity in Ashanti and the Gold Coast generally as a thin veneer. The description is not inaccurate or superficial if it means that the people have not taken over the concept of the universe and of the nature of man within which Christianity finds its fullest meaning. The Ashanti Christian most probably still accepts the view of the universe and of man that has dominated Ashanti thought for generations. It is part of his cultural heritage, and he has taken it on, as he has done other aspects of his culture, without much difficulty, and without subjecting it to critical analysis. To most Ashanti people the world is ruled from afar by a Supreme Being who is all-wise, all-powerful, &c., the Creator of all things; below him are lesser spirits, born of the Supreme Being, but closer to men; nearest of all are the ancestors of whom he is reminded daily by speech and action.

The Ashanti concept of man has not changed either; the observance of matrilineal descent, the definition of a man's status and role, and his political and legal rights and obligations, through his membership of his mother's group give the colour of truth to the myth about childbirth; while a man's relations with his father, the latter's moral responsibility for the child, and the part he is customarily expected to play in his marriage, together with all the evidence of daily speech and practice justify the father-child myth that it is the father's *ntoro* that gives his son his personality. Moreover, Christian teaching has confirmed the Ashanti conception of the

soul. The Bible teaches that God made man in his own image. Long before the Ashanti knew the Bible, they believed that the Creator gave a bit of his spirit to everyone whom he sent to the earth, and that with the gift of that bit of his spirit—the man's soul—was bound up that man's destiny, what he was to become and to do in the world.

On the social level, and in certain details of conduct, Christianity is influencing Ashanti society; but in matters like birth or funeral rites, where questions of the interpretation of the universe come in, the influence of Christianity is slight; for the Ashanti to a large extent still retain their own interpretation of the universe and of the nature of man and society; and the difference between this and the European interpretation of the same phenomena constitutes the fundamental conflict between the Ashanti and the European way of life.

# INTRODUCTION

By DARYLL FORDE

## I

**I**N this book an attempt is made to present in brief compass the world-outlook of a number of African peoples. Each study seeks to portray and interpret the dominant beliefs and attitudes of one people concerning the place of Man in Nature and in Society, not only as revealed in formal and informal expressions of belief but also as implicit in customs and ethical prescriptions in both ritual and secular contexts.

It is not to be assumed that the views and attitudes of a people concerning the duties of men among themselves and their relations to the universe are necessarily all of one piece. Anthropological studies of many cultures have shown that even in small and comparatively isolated societies, where differences of wealth, rank, and power are small, there need be no complete integration of belief and doctrine, still less the domination of conduct in all spheres by a single system of beliefs or basic ideas. For both the historical sources of knowledge and belief and the contexts of activity in which these are evoked are likely, even in a circumscribed world, to be diverse. On the other hand, there is reason to believe that a close relation exists between dominant attitudes towards social relations and the proper use of resources and established beliefs concerning the nature of human society and its place in a wider universe of cosmic forces. Between such beliefs, and the ethical standards of a people and their opportunities for action, there appears to be a continuous process of reciprocal adjustment.

The myths of the origin of a people, of the natural resources they exploit, of their cultural equipment and of their social institutions, express and sustain attitudes towards extra-human forces that are believed to control or intervene among them. Together these constitute a charter for the observance of customary patterns of activity and established social duties and privileges. It must be recognized, however, that the unique mobility and capacity for communication of the human species have nearly everywhere prevented any population from remaining long isolated and static, culturally or socially, in an unchanging environment. The history of all human communities has been one of recurrent, if irregular and uneven, change in response to local discovery or, more often, to external contacts; and the introduction of new ways of living in whatever sphere and by whatever means—from the spontaneous development of new tools or symbols to the imposition of external political power—generates, through wide repercussion, manifold adjustments of activity, new standards of conduct, and new mythological justifications.

At any given time, however, even in phases of extensive technical and

social change such as the peoples of Africa, like many others, have experienced over the past century, traditional beliefs and standards continue to exert a powerful influence. For mythical charters and moral codes have their own cultural inertia whereby they can retard or guide adaptation in other fields. And, as we know from the history of ideas in the West, the reformulation of myth and code and the modification of social sentiments are slow processes as compared with the readjustment of particular items of technical activity or the mere acceptance of some new social relation. Hence the multifarious conflicts that arise between ideology and technical opportunity during phases of rapid cultural change. Even in such phases, while new techniques are adopted for reasons of individual or sectional self-interest, and new social relations are accepted as the distribution of economic power changes, traditional myths and codes may continue to claim allegiance. These may indeed appear, from one point of view—and one especially apparent to the outsider—to block obvious and important opportunities for general economic advance or social reorganization; but, from another, they can often be seen as preserving patterns of activity and social relations which are felt by the people to be of intrinsic and overriding value and so may in fact be indispensable to the preservation of their social cohesion and solidarity.

Such conflicts of values, both between peoples and between sections and individuals within a single society, are only too familiar from the history of the western world. It is, however, little appreciated that they have been and continue to be endemic in an acute form among the multitudes of small-scale societies as these have been brought increasingly within the orbit of an industrialized western civilization. Moreover, even when the nature of the conflict has been sensed, the problems of providing scope and time for adjustment have been made more difficult by virtual ignorance of the nature and the foundations of the traditional value systems that were being undermined by the introduction of new techniques of administration, production, and commerce.

The studies presented in this volume thus have both a theoretical and a practical bearing. They provide brief but comprehensive descriptions and analyses of the character and the contexts of the value systems of a number of African peoples. Painstakingly reached through prolonged field research, they make it possible to see how the varying material and cultural backgrounds of indigenous life in Africa have conditioned the beliefs and attitudes of its peoples. They show, too, how social and personal conflicts and disintegration are bound to arise if the foundations of such beliefs and attitudes are abruptly swept away without opportunity for adjustment.

The authors are professional field anthropologists, associated with the International African Institute, who have lived and carried out systematic studies among the peoples whose beliefs and social values they present. For some of them the investigation of religious beliefs and cosmological ideas as expressions of basic notions underlying cultural activities and

social relations was a main objective. In all cases there was close concern with moral values and with the periodic rites and other ceremonies carried out on behalf of kin-groups, sects, communities, tribes, or states. For anthropologists realize, more fully, perhaps, than most other students of society, how much the study of religious observances may reveal of the strength of social bonds and cultural attachments which the superficial flow of everyday life, especially among peoples newly in contact with attractions offered by western institutions, might seem to gainsay.

For anthropologists and other students of human cultures and of the forces that mould them, this book should be of particular value as a first collection of brief but systematic studies of the cosmological, religious, and moral ideas of a number of African peoples in the context of their material environment and their social organization. Mary Kingsley, a pioneer field anthropologist, long ago wrote of the West African peoples to whom she was so devoted, that to understand them it was necessary to study their beliefs, fears, and ritual practices in the context of their own social and cultural situations. But systematic and scholarly studies of the religious ideas and moral values of African peoples have not kept pace with the advance of administrative control and commercial development, and have lagged behind the study of the political and economic aspects of the indigenous social systems. This is not to say that much has not been written by anthropologists and others over the past generation concerning African religious beliefs. But the few early studies of the religions and morals of African peoples,<sup>1</sup> in which prolonged critical study was combined with sympathetic insight, have not been followed, as might have been expected with the advance of both theory and field methods in anthropology, by an abundance of comprehensive studies of African religious systems and the values they express. Important aspects of ritual and belief in a number of African societies have, indeed, been most effectively described and analysed, but usually in the context of some specific problem of social structure or of cultural change. Notable advances have been made in this way in demonstrating the cohesive role of such religious institutions as ancestor or earth cults and first-fruit ceremonies, and the significance of witchcraft belief and accusation and the practice of sorcery as indexes of social stress. Evans-Pritchard,<sup>2</sup> in his study of divination and witchcraft among the Azande, has shown in detail, for one African people, how the occurrence of misfortune comes to be linked to socially generated fears and hatreds and so sustains an unformulated philosophy as well as moral sanctions for benevolent or circumspet conduct. Study of the religious beliefs of the Luba peoples of the southern Congo<sup>3</sup> has afforded Father Tempels the background for an arresting essay on the pervasive effects of belief in the

<sup>1</sup> Such as H. A. Junod's classic *Life of a South African Tribe* (the Thonga), 2nd edition, London, 1937; L. Tauxier, *La Religion bambara*, Paris, 1927.

<sup>2</sup> Evans-Pritchard, E. E., *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford, 1937.

<sup>3</sup> Tempels, P., *La Philosophie bantoue*, Elisabethville, 1945.

permeation of nature by dynamic spiritual forces. Intensive field research has also revealed the hitherto unsuspected complexity and elaboration of cosmological ideas among some peoples of the Western Sudan, such as the Dogon, Bambara, and Akan, examples of which are provided in this volume.

But there remains the need to explore in the African field the significance of cosmological ideas as expressions of moral values in relation to the material conditions of life and the total social order. The value of such an attempt to discover and appreciate the *raison d'être* of those basic concepts which, though rarely explicit, so largely guide and give meaning to the conduct of a strange people in both trivial and momentous situations, was shown in such pioneer studies as those of Durkheim on Australian religion and Radcliffe-Brown on the Andamanese.<sup>1</sup> The contributors to the present volume have attempted, for the African peoples they have studied, to show this intricate interdependence between a traditional pattern of livelihood, an accepted configuration of social relations, and dogmas concerning the nature of the world and the place of men within it.

## II

When these studies are considered together one is impressed, not only by the great diversity of ritual forms and expressions of belief, but also by substantial underlying similarities in religious outlook and moral injunction. In the first place in myth, ritual, and social code there is always a strong sense of direct dependence on local resources: on, for example, the rains and the harvest that they should bring forth or the grass to maintain the herds. There is often, too, an equally vivid expression of concern lest pestilence overtake men and crops and livestock. Primitive techniques in the production of food supplies, the small and localized scale of that production, and severe limitations on the accumulation, transport, and storage of surplus combine to render hazardous the very basis of subsistence for household and community. The practical measures that can be taken to combat disease and sickness whether individual or epidemic are equally limited. Where the natural processes involved in good fortune and in bad remain largely unknown and uncontrollable by practical means, men have at all times rationalized their fate by postulating mysterious forces and beings in nature, and mysterious powers among their fellows.

To all this Africans have been no exception. Gods, spirits, and magical forces beyond the community, together with witches and sorcerers within it, are postulated in explanation of the workings of the universe, of the incidence of benefits and misfortunes, and of the strains of life in society. Means are employed according to the situation and the diagnosis to enlist or avert the anticipated action of such beings and powers. Africans, in the

<sup>1</sup> Durkheim, E., *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1915, English translation by Swain, London, 1926; Radcliffe-Brown, A. R., *The Andaman Islanders*, Cambridge, 1922 (2nd edition 1933).

same way as Europeans, have appreciated and successfully based their routines of living on principles of causation linking events, on the logical implications of ideas, and on an understanding of mechanical and organic process. Their techniques of farming, fishing, and stock-raising, their procedures in training the young, their judgements of men and of social situations all reveal this at every turn. Where they have differed from the Europeans who have recently come among them has been in the depth and range of their collective knowledge of natural process and in the degree of control and security that they could thereby command.

Under primitive conditions of life and in the absence of a coherent body of scientific theory so much more lies beyond the reach of naturalistic explanation, so much more elicits interpretation and action in terms of the mysterious agents called into being in response to hopes and needs. Beliefs of this order are not capable of verification but neither do they require it. In such spheres the peoples of Africa, like those of the West and, indeed, all mankind save the tiny minority which is able to suspend belief, have adopted theories that project on to a plane of supernatural action the desires and aspirations that they know in the realm of human action. Passion and will, virtue and malevolence, compassion and indignation as they are known among men are attributed to unseen powers. The physical limitations on human action that are accepted in everyday life are thought no longer to restrict men who can command supernatural forces. Limitations of knowledge, and the absence of a tradition of critical inquiry and philosophic doubt, combine with the greater frequency of unforeseen distress to accentuate the universal dichotomy between explanations, common-sense or scientific, of processes directly involved in the occurrence of events and the desire to know why a particular chain of events should occur to particular people at a particular time.

Some educated Europeans in some situations are able to apply western knowledge concerning the complexity of causation, to maintain the distinction between *post hoc* and *propter hoc*. But there is a deeper propensity which tends to supervene outside fields of special training or knowledge—the tendency to seek the cause of any event which touches men closely in some antecedent and emotionally charged situation affecting themselves or other persons. The crops are known to wither for lack of rain, the cattle are known to flourish because the rains came early and in abundance; it is recognized that a man fell from a tree and died because he climbed out on a dead branch, that another is prosperous and has many children because he and his wives are healthy and able. But when the meteorological processes involved in fluctuations of rainfall are unknown, when the notion of chance is not applied to the occurrence of a dead branch, when the conditions of human well-being and ability can be so little analysed, what is to be the answer to the further questions: why should the rains fail or be abundant *now* for us? why should *my* kinsman and not another have fallen from the tree? why should one man and his wives enjoy prosperity while

neighbours sicken and lose their children? All these questions remain open to explanation in terms of attendant emotions and the moral ideas of virtue and guilt associated with them. In other words, success and prosperity, so long as they are socially approved, may be seen as the rewards of virtue and dependent on its continuance; misery and catastrophe are linked through anxiety and anger to notions of wrongdoing or envy in oneself or others and thence to the punishment or elimination of these faults.

So it is that in misfortune, not merely attendant circumstances, but explanations in moral terms are sought and the consequences of human or supernatural action divined. Where does the guilt or anger lie and how may it be requited or expiated? And explanations in these terms take different directions according to the actual or assumed locus of the emotions and desires in question and the moral status of the persons concerned. Thus, for example, where guilt is ascribed to the sufferer of misfortune the misfortune tends to be attributed to supernatural beings—to gods and ancestral or other spirits, symbolic guardians of the moral order, whose anger has inflicted punishment. But where the context of misfortune does not elicit guilt on the part of the sufferer, then the injurious desires of others, of evil spirits and malevolent human beings, tend to be invoked. Where malevolence from other persons is feared, magical instrumentalities—powers of witchcraft or sorcery—can be attributed without contradiction from experience or in logic. Needless to say, the particular situations in which persons consider themselves, or are considered, to be guilty and those which arouse apprehensions of the evil intentions of others are so judged neither abstractly nor capriciously, but in terms of accepted cultural values and approved social conduct. Thus, as so many studies have shown, and as is well illustrated in this volume, the reaction to misfortune and apprehension is to take stock of the past conduct and social relations both of those concerned and of others towards them. And, since there is always wrongdoing to be observed, recalled, or feared, there is always opportunity for the release of tensions by accusation and expiation or punishment, whether through sacrifice to the supernatural custodians of moral values and social obligations, or through denunciation of and vengeance on persons believed to be malevolent practitioners of witchcraft or sorcery.

Similarly, since there are always needs to be satisfied and doubts as to the outcome of any venture, there is always anxiety to be stilled and assurance to be gained, whether by invoking the aid of supernatural guardians of security and success, and thereby submitting to their authority and accepting the code of conduct they enforce, or by seeking magical means to harness supernatural forces that are supposed to aid men to gain their ends. Thus the desire for protection and success where technical competence is lacking or in doubt, reinforces the postulation and propitiation of more powerful supernatural agents or the manipulation of hidden forces. But while beliefs in supernatural action and in human ability to control it through prayer and sacrifice, rite, and spell have their foundations in

universal features of human psychology, the forms they take, the contexts in which they are invoked, are related to the rest of the cultural pattern and to the social system. For the individual, for groups with important common interests, and for the community as a whole they are responses to the tensions and emergencies of life. Accordingly when analysed in this sense they reveal these tensions and emergencies together with the material situations and the frustrations or conflicts of values from which they arise. Furthermore, although they may not be rational and may lack empirical foundation, they must, to persist, be mutually adjusted or apportioned to different contexts of need and activity so that they do not explicitly contradict one another. Thus, collectively, they express both the general framework of ideas concerning the relations of men to one another and to the world they know and the articulation of different spheres of action and their degree of integration. Again, the extent to which cosmological ideas and social values are integrated in an explicit system affords insight into the degree of coherence of a cultural pattern and the stability of a social system, and correspondingly into the range of the repercussions and the disintegrations that are likely to follow from sudden change in any one field of social life. That there can be inconsistencies between dogma, ethic, and action in different fields will be as apparent in these studies as is the fact that cultural totalities and social systems do not automatically maintain equilibrium. The capacity for overall adjustment may well be exceeded by the impact of new forces, and it is to be expected that changes affecting techniques or the organization of society will be reflected in the spheres of cosmology and ethics.

### III

Neither direct field observation nor the comparative study of the cosmologies and ritual patterns of African peoples are yet sufficiently advanced to attempt their systematic analysis and classification. We hope, however, that the studies presented here will afford material for a deeper understanding both of the religious ideas and social values which are widespread in Africa and also of the diversity of outlook that has existed among African peoples. This diversity is as understandable as it is obvious once it is realized that, although they have lived within the bounds of what western geographers have recognized as a single and distinct continent, and all derive in part from one branch of the human race, the geographical and cultural horizons of the hundreds of distinct African peoples were, until less than a century ago, necessarily restricted to small regions. And among these small, largely self-contained regions, the conditions of life, the material equipment, the accessibility to external influences of the various peoples have often been widely divergent. This will be immediately apparent, when, for example, the outlook of the Lele hunters of the forest margins of the Congo is contrasted with that of the Lovedu of the steppes of Southern Africa. Even among so distinctive a series of peoples as the

cattle-keepers of Eastern Africa, nearly all of whom have acquired and preserved a common substratum of economic attachment and mystical attitudes towards their livestock, the social values actually associated with cattle differ greatly. As the studies in this volume show, the role of cattle in cult and their meaning in social relations are not the same for a Shilluk, for a Tutsi aristocrat, for a Hutu client, or for a chief or a commoner among the Lovedu.

The selection of African peoples represented here cannot claim to include or to distinguish a comprehensive range of indigenous African societies. No single cultural classification can take account of all the many variations in environment, economy, social structure, and ritual pattern. Further, any choice has, in practice, to depend on the availability of field studies germane to the questions under discussion.

It has, however, been possible to include accounts of peoples who not only differ widely from one another in their ways of life, but, taken together, illustrate the salient variations in the patterns of African life and the differences in outlook and social values that stem from them.

The interaction between the material and social conditions of life and their religious expression is analysed for two very different types of autonomous village communities in the African forests: the Lele of the Kasai and the Mende of Sierra Leone. In the small Lele communities, widely scattered in the forest, the age-old collective hunt, despite its meagre contribution to the food supply, has remained the repository of ritual values and, as Mrs. Douglas shows, the apparently unintended means of securing order and solidarity among the floating population of the village. Among the Mende, with a warrior tradition of raiding and slave-holding, a higher density of population, and greater stability of settlement, hierarchically ordered associations for men and for women support a secular chiefship and the patriarchal authority of the heads of large households in the organization of a more productive economy. The far-reaching effects on social attitudes and religious cults of the development in such forest regions of considerable states with centralized political institutions are exemplified in the Ashanti of the Gold Coast and the Fon of Dahomey.

Some of the wide variations in social organization and cultural values that exist among the cattle-keeping peoples of the grasslands of eastern Africa already referred to are to be seen in the studies of the Shilluk of the Upper Nile, the Kingdom of Ruanda, the Abaluiya in Kavirondo, and the Lovedu of the Transvaal. The Shilluk present a variant of the pastoral Nilotic culture pattern in which patrilineal kinship is the organizing principle for the many activities and interrelations of the local communities. But these people living along the banks of the Upper Nile are, as Dr. Lienhardt shows, unified by their beliefs concerning a first mythical being whose successors as sacred kings are believed to contribute powerfully to the harmony of society and the beneficence of nature on which pasture and crops depend. In Ruanda, as in several other great chiefdoms of the

Great Lakes Plateau of East Africa, where control of cattle has been a privilege of rank and a means whereby an aristocracy could organize labour and supplies on a considerable scale and thus maintain a centralized state, the notions of a good life for aristocrat and commoner differ as widely from those of the Shilluk as from those of the Abaluiya of Kavirondo, who never came under the control of a cattle-monopolizing aristocracy.

Beliefs and moral values operative in the comparatively long established and stable chiefdom of the Lovedu, as presented by Professor and Mrs. Krige, show how the patterns of mutual obligation among kinsfolk living or intermarrying in small communities can be extended to link together on kinship principles large bodies of originally separate people. The chiefship itself is conceived in terms of rights to receive and give women in marriage throughout the chiefdom. Girls of one group are fictionally married to the chief or chieftainess who then gives them in marriage to men of other groups thereby linking all districts to the chiefship by marriage and kinship. Thus basic domestic sanctions arising from the individual's need for support and approval among his kin are effectively extended to society at large, so that co-operative, unaggressive attitudes, which embody readiness to make compromises and to share benefits with others, are the qualities generally admired; and these qualities are, as far as possible, induced in the individual through fear of sickness or misfortune caused by the anger of his ancestors, the sorcery of his fellows, or conviction as a witch or sorcerer if he departs grossly from this norm.

Belief in the power of the chief to secure the beneficence of cosmic forces for the people—a notion which has been already noted among the Shilluk and is generally fundamental among the Southern Bantu—here takes on a special quality which reflects these conceptions of social relations. The Lovedu chief—the Rain-Queen—does not, as among some Southern Bantu peoples, stand apart as the possessor of a magically acquired power. Her power, we are told, is inherent in her position as one of a long line of ancestors to whom all Lovedu conceive themselves to be collaterally related; thus the 'establishment' of the seasons every year and the procurement of rain, which, as a source of moisture for crops and herbage, symbolizes general security, are regarded as the natural function and duty of the chief.

The account of the Dagon by Professor Griaule and Dr. Dieterlen concerns a culture very different in orientation. It affords an insight into one variant of the intricate cosmological ideas associated with the organization of husbandry and crafts which, with a ritually elaborate ordering of social relations, characterizes the many peoples who are heirs of the pre-Islamic civilization of the Western Sudan. Many of these fundamental ideas and ritual elements, as is evident from the accounts of belief and ceremony among the Ashanti and the Fon, are also found in the more complex societies of the forest lands of the Guinea Coast.

In his study of Dahomey, M. Mercier is able to show how remarkably the special features of the Dahomean pantheon and the role of ritual in social life were adjusted to the political and economic characteristics of this military kingdom, built up from the sixteenth century in the hinterland of one of the active trading areas of the Guinea Coast. Dahomey retained in its religious beliefs and cult forms many features, such as the androgynous or twin creators and the personification in *Dã* of a creative agent manifest in all vitality, that are widespread in West Africa. At the same time the military, bureaucratic, and commercial emphases in its organization and the ethnic and economic diversity of its populations are reflected in special characteristics. Thus, the cosmological formulations vary according to ethnic groups or priesthoods; particular cults are given special status within a general but flexible scheme of creation; the political structure is reflected in the royal control of the many local cult organizations of priests and their devotees and in the insistence on the primacy of the royal cult in recurrent festivals. Notable also is the Dahomean attitude of acceptance towards the unforeseeable and the new, and their apparent readiness to adjust to new contacts and opportunities by innovation and assimilation in the field of belief and ritual. The Dahomean kingship and the cult of the royal ancestor harnessed underlying metaphysical notions of Fon religion to the prestige of the line of warrior adventurers and organizers. The spiritual power of the king as a moulder and supporter of the state is, for example, equated with that of the spirit *Dã* in building and sustaining the universe, and the dualistic doctrines embodied in the pantheon are reiterated in the ritual and in the organization of the court and government.

Thus, besides showing how different orientations in the means of livelihood are reflected in religious attitudes and codes of social obligation, these studies afford insight into the way in which differences in the type of political institutions affect the outlook of African peoples. Where, as among the Banyarwanda, the Lovedu, the Ashanti, and the Fon, there is a considerable concentration of power and a concomitant hierarchy of authority, beliefs concerning the role of the individual in society differ markedly from those found among such peoples as the Shilluk, the Lele, or the Abaluiya, in which political relations are those of give and take within and between kin- and residence-groups and where sex, age, and personality rather than inherited rank or appointed status determine the respect accorded to the individual. Among some African peoples as, for instance, the Shilluk or the Ashanti described here, the individual is offered security and protection by a dominant tribal or state cult which sanctions right conduct in all social relations and subordinates or curbs other magical or religious activities. Among others—for example, the Abaluiya and the Lele—although the pattern of belief concerning supernatural forces or personalities may be common to the people as a whole, the ritual units may be confined, according to context, to the household, kin-group, or local community. Although ancestral beings are believed to protect the living and

sanction their conduct, these are not the ancestors of the tribe as a whole or of a royal line, but those of the several bodies of kin, each of which ascribes power and authority to its own. Belief and ritual tend, in other words, to mirror the scale and degree of social integration. The greater the economic self-sufficiency and the political freedom of action of localized groups, the greater the segmentation of ritual activity and the particularity of the objects of worship. On the other hand, the closer the integration of economic activity and of social control among such groups, the more extensive socially and the more firmly interconnected are the basic concepts and ritual forms.

## IV

It has not been possible in this book to attempt the complex task of describing and analysing the multifarious social changes and the transformations of beliefs and morals that are so marked a feature of Africa today. But the study is of value, both scientifically and practically, for its portrayal of some of the backgrounds and points of departure from which African peoples are now making the extensive and often difficult cultural and social adjustments demanded by their progressive integration into the western world. And we hope that it will be of service, not only to those who are concerned with scientific problems in anthropology, but also to the growing number of people who are occupied in various ways with social and economic affairs in Africa today. Only a few of those who, as administrators, teachers, technical advisers, or traders, are participating in the economic and political transformation of Tropical Africa that has been going forward at an increasing rate over the last twenty-five years, have had any opportunity of living with Africans in their own communities and acquiring, through day-to-day experience of village life or chiefly courts, an appreciation of the attitudes and underlying beliefs which African peoples bring with them when they come under the influence of western institutions. The boy or girl going to a mission school, the youth who progresses to a college, the migrant labourer on farm or mine, the man who receives technical training in agriculture or forestry, the store clerk and the lawyer—all these, as well as their far more numerous fellows who have remained in their villages, bring to their manipulation of western tools and practice of western routines a background of ideas inculcated in childhood through their tribal culture. There can, as this book will show, be no single 'blueprint' that will apply directly to all African cultures and there is correspondingly no short way to the understanding of particular peoples. There are, however, recurrent themes and a number of main patterns of activity and interconnexion which are valuable guides to this understanding, and these are exemplified here.