

ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE:

A REVIEW OF RECENT ANALYSES

by

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS:

The first two chapters review the intellectualist interpretation of religion and ancestor worship and examine the rise of the sociological approach. Chapter Three proposes definitions of key terms, differentiating cults of the dead from cults of collective clan ancestors and of immediate jural superiors. Chapter Four analyses the links proposed between unilineality and ancestor worship. Chapter Five discusses the functionalist approach to a belief in life after death. Chapters Six, Seven, Nine, Ten and Eleven summarize important work done among some of the African peoples who worship ancestors. Chapter Eight looks at Fortes' theory of ancestor worship and authority. Chapters Twelve to Fourteen look at the relevant data from India, China, Japan and Melanesia. Chapter Fifteen sums up and evaluates the approaches adopted by anthropologists in the analysis of ancestor worship.

## PREFACE

The following is a summary of recent trends in the analysis of ancestor worship, showing the methods and approaches that have been used, the factors and variables involved, and the implications of this particular form of religion. The conclusion arrived at - that ancestor worship demands a definition with respect to each society and to a careful consideration of that society's cultural attitudes and premises - may seem a rather negative one. But I dissent from the claim that social anthropology compares with the aim only of arriving at general and absolute classifications. The aim of comparison, as I see it, is to arrive at a more acute understanding of particularities. In another sense also, this study seems negative in its conclusions, for it becomes clear that comparison can be conducted only in terms of relations and processes, and not in terms of cultural items or isolated institutions.

Although I am alone responsible for all the deficiencies in the following pages, I wish to express my thanks and indebtedness to Professor R. Slobodin for much helpful criticism and advice during the writing and revision of this thesis.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Montesquieu, whom Professor Evans-Pritchard calls the father of social anthropology, held that though a religion may be false, it could have a most useful social function; it would be found to conform to the type of government with which it was associated, a people's religion being in general suited to their way of life. So function and veracity must not be confused. Even the ultra-rationalists of the Enlightenment, like Condorcet, conceded that religion, though false, had at one time a useful social function, and had therefore played an important role in the development of civilisation.

The idea of a close connection between political and religious development can be found in the works of Spencer, Müller, Robertson Smith, Lang, Wilhelm Schmidt, and Sir Henry Maine. But the most far-going and comprehensive sociological treatment of religion was Fustel de Coulanges' *The Ancient City* (1864). The evolutionary theories of religion tended to neglect the functional aspects. The sociological theories questioned the role that beliefs and practices played and their relationship to other cultural institutions. *The Ancient City* is an

analysis of the social aspects of ancient Greek and Roman religion, based on the assumption that the social institutions of the ancients were intimately related to their religions. According to Fustel, the formation of Greek and Roman societies was based on a belief common to all Aryan races, namely that after death the soul continues to live, associated with the body in the tomb. Since the soul was still human, there was a need for periodic offerings of food and drink. It was the duty of the living relatives of the deceased to take up this responsibility. Religion was thus a domestic concern, and the earliest form of religion was ancestor worship. Explicit in Fustel de Coulanges' account is the point that the typical congregation of the ancestral cult was not the cognatically constituted family, but the unilineal descent group, the clan or the lineage. The head of the lineage acted as a priest in the daily rituals and held a powerful position. Now, religiously governed patrilineages could function properly only under certain social conditions, so that the religious system was strongly interrelated with other aspects of social organization.

As Professor Evans-Pritchard points out, summarising Fustel de Coulanges' argument, it is in the light of this central idea, and only in the light of it, of the dead being deities of the family, that all customs of the period can be understood: marriage regulations and ceremonies, monogamy,

prohibition of divorce, interdiction of celibacy, the levirate, adoption, paternal authority, rules of descent, inheritance and succession, laws, property, the system of nomenclature, the calendar, slavery and clientship, and many other customs (*Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford, 1965, p. 51). When city states developed, they were in the same structural pattern as had been shaped by religion in these earlier social conditions. When the cities became more powerful, family oriented worship was replaced by state religion. Traditional city government was transformed by the Roman conquest, and finally destroyed by the advent of Christianity. What Fustel de Coulanges argued with great logic, but perhaps, as Robert Latouche notes, (Article "Fustel de Coulanges" in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1968) at the expense of considering other relevant factors in social development, was that ancient society was founded on a particular belief, and that it persisted insofar as that belief prevailed; it changed gradually as the belief weakened, and it did not survive its disappearance. In arguing that it was the ancestral cult of the Romans which imposed agnatic kinship, he somewhat anticipated the work of Robertson Smith concerning the religion of the Semites, except that for the latter the linkage was reversed. "The source of kinship", wrote Fustel, "was not the material fact of birth; it was the religious cult." By his argument, the



relationship between father and son was a religious one. Hence, a son who had been excluded from the ancestral cult was also cut off from his inheritance, whereas a complete stranger who was made a member of the family cult by adoption became entitled to inherit both the worship and the property. The close connexion between inheritance and ancestor worship was also taken up by Sir Henry Maine in "Early Law and Custom" (1883). Referring to the Brahmanical codes of Bengal, Maine wrote that they display not only a close connexion between ancestor worship and inheritance, but a complete dependence of the last upon the first (p. 116). A transformation in ancestor worship, he maintained, led to changes in the laws of inheritance.

Robertson Smith, a quarter of a century later, was struck by the parental characteristics of early Semitic divinities and connected this with the composition of worshippers as invariably "a circle of Kin", whose greatest kinsman was the worshipped god. "The indissoluble bond that united men to their god is the same bond of blood fellowship which....is the one binding link between man and man, and the one sacred principle of moral obligation" (*The Religion of the Semites*, 1889, p. 53). Religious rites were thus social in nature, having the social function of strengthening group integration. This function could be seen most clearly in the totemic feast.

One thing that both Roberston Smith and Fustel de Coulanges are to be admired for is their perspicacity in directing attention to the social matrix of the type of religious institutions they were concerned with. For at that time, the orthodox approach to early religions was by way of their manifest content of belief. Unlike many of their day and of much later times, they did not concern themselves with the false logic, the erroneous cosmology, and the emotional distortions considered to be revealed in non-Christian religions. Goody argues that the sociological approach to the study of religion was one reaction to the Tylor-Spencer approach, which involved a considerable amount of conjecture (*Death, Property and the Ancestors*, Stanford, 1962, p. 19).

Tylor and Spencer saw funeral ceremonies, cults of the dead, and beliefs in an afterlife as the kernel of their studies in comparative religion. Tylor held that beliefs in another life were associated with a body/soul dichotomy, which was universal. Early men, he held, were deeply impressed by the difference between a living body and a dead one, and the causes of waking, sleep, trance, disease and death. They concluded that man had not only a material body but also life and a phantom. After death, the ghost-souls became manes, and the living first admired their powers and then began to worship them. Thus, ancestor

worship became the archetypal form of primitive religion. "Its principles are not difficult to understand, for they plainly keep up the social relations of the living world. The dead ancestor, now passed into a deity, simply goes on protecting his own family and receiving suit and service from them as of old; the dead chief still watches over his own tribe, still holds his authority by helping friends and harming enemies, still rewards the right and sharply punishes the wrong" (*Primitive Culture*, 1891, II, p. 113). Despite his being an evolutionist, Tylor's analysis of religious beliefs tended to be typological rather than sequential. Spencer developed the evolutionary aspects of Tylor, proposing a unilinear evolution of belief, which begins with the belief in the continued existence of the soul after death, and develops through offerings at funerals, ghost propitiation, persistent ancestor worship and "the worship of distinguished ancestors" to the worship of deities (*The Principles of Sociology*, vol. I, 1882, pp. 303-305). Thus, according to Spencer, all gods were originally ancestors, founders of tribes, war chiefs famed for strength and bravery, medicine men of great repute, or inventors. These human beings, regarded with awe and fear during their lifetime, were feared even more after death, so that the propitiation of their ghosts became necessary and inevitable. Thus, said Spencer, ancestor worship was

the root of every religion.

Both Tylor and Spencer explained religion as an intellectual effort which had no other purposes than to understand biological events and natural phenomena. Their early man was a logician, analysing the universe but coming to wrong conclusions. Unlike the approach of Robertson Smith and of the French, who concentrated upon group goals and interests, particularly in their integrative aspects, Tylor and Spencer attempted to explain religious action as an individual rather than as a social phenomenon.

Interest in ancestor worship centred upon two problems at this time: the antiquity of ancestor worship, and the friendliness or hostility of the ancestors. In criticism of Spencer, Jevons claimed that since ancestor worship was a family cult but the family was absent in the early stages of human society, it could not have served as the progenitor of other types of religious institution (*An Introduction to the History of Religion*, 1896, p. 13). Frazer and Durkheim claimed that totemism, the cult of the clan, was the most primitive form of the religious life. However, the researches of Westermarck disposed of objections to Spencer by establishing the universality of the family. For psychologists with a desire to identify ontological and phylogenetic sequences, the interlocking of these two principles, the primacy of the family and the primacy of

ancestor worship, must have been very appealing. Freud accounted for ancestor worship by saying that the feelings developed towards parents were projected onto supernatural beings. Flugel agreed that "there could be no doubt that the most important aspects of the theory and practice of religion are very largely derived from and influenced by ancestor worship" (*The Psychoanalytic Study of the Family*, 1948. First ed. 1921, p. 135).

Despite these arguments, and despite the work of Fustel de Coulanges, whose pupil he was, Durkheim rejected the idea that ancestor worship was the most primitive form of religion. He claimed that ancestor worship was not primitive; it was found in its most developed form in advanced countries like China and Rome, but not in Australia. However, Hastings' *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* published in 1908, mentions its existence in India, Africa, Polynesia, Melanesia and Malaya, and there is evidence of it from Australia. Hertz had already maintained that cults of the dead were to be found in all societies, although ancestor worship was not universal, a distinction of some importance which Durkheim failed to make ("Contribution a une etude sur la representation collective de la mort", *L'Anne Sociologique*, 1907, 10:48-137). Durkheim's analysis of Australian religion has been criticised on many grounds, not least of which is the confusion surrounding

the historical and morphological meanings of the word "primitive". He did, however, argue that ritual expresses symbolically certain sentiments or values, upon the acceptance of which the smooth running of society itself depends.

Today there is no great interest in the antiquity of any particular form of primitive religion, it being recognized that there is an almost total lack of factual evidence. Any theory about the genesis of religion must remain speculative, for there are insufficient historical or archaeological records to provide evidence of the thought processes of early men.

## CHAPTER II

### SOCIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Recent interest in ancestor worship has developed coincident with the analysis of societies in which unilineal descent groups play an important part. In 1945 Fortes began to publish his material on the Tallensi, where the genealogy serves as a reference for social relationships and as a framework for a developed cult of the ancestors. In 1945 also, Radcliffe-Brown wrote: "In my own experience it is in ancestor worship that we can most easily discover and demonstrate the social function of a religious cult." ("Religion and Society", The Henry Myers Lecture, 1945. Reprinted as ch. 8 in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, 1952, p. 163). Further recent studies have been made by Goody, Gough, Colson, Plath, Freedman and others to whom I shall be referring, most of which seek to link ancestor worship with specific kinship groups and roles, thus developing the approach initiated by Robertson Smith and Durkheim.

The second problem was the attitude of the ancestors towards their descendants, or more correctly the descendants' conception of this supposed attitude. Robertson Smith characterised this as one of loving reverence; Tylor and

Frazer as one of hostility. Frazer wrote two articles on the primitive concept of the soul in 1885. These were later expanded to a three-volume work, *The Belief in Immortality and the Worship of the Dead*, (1915-1922). The argument was reduced again to more manageable scale in *The Fear of the Dead in Primitive Religion* (1933-1936). The whole of this series was derived from the second volume of Tylor's *Primitive Culture*. Tylor's thesis was elaborately illustrated but not developed. In these works Frazer demonstrated that a man is thought to be more hostile to his descendants after his death than during his lifetime. He gave examples of precautions to prevent the return of the dead, and to protect the survivors if they do return. The greatest danger was to the nearest kin. In the Introduction to volume three of *The Fear of the Dead* he put forward the idea that fear of dead ancestors as well as much else in religious thought was an extension of an instinctive fear of the corpse. In fact, he derived ancestor worship from a belief in the immortality of the soul coupled with a fear of the dead, which he thought was virtually instinctive among mankind (*The Belief in Immortality*, 1913, vol. I, pp. 23ff and vol. II, pp. 57ff.). Fortes has pointed out that such an explanation would seem a ludicrous oversimplification to the Tallensi, or any other West African people. The Tallensi, he says, have an ancestor cult not because



they fear the dead - for they do not in fact do so - nor because they believe in the immortality of the soul - for they have no such notion - but because their social structure demands it (*Oedipus and Job in West African Religion*, Cambridge, 1959, pp. 65-66). Malinowski shared the idea that a fear of the corpse was an instinctive reaction to death, although this was only one element in a complex of emotions, which involved intermingling of the love of the dead as well as fear of the corpse. Funeral customs and the belief in life after death were established out of fear of complete annihilation (*Magic, Science and Religion*, 1954. Reprinted from *Science, Religion and Reality*, ed. J. Needham, 1925, pp. 47-53). Using Andamanese data, Radcliffe-Brown challenged this thesis showing that feelings for the dead man were not instinctive but induced, not by the conflict between feelings for the living and for the dead, but by the conflict between the worlds of the living and of the dead. Freud's thesis, put forward in *Totem and Taboo*, is that the fear of the corpse is not instinctive, but is part of the guilt felt at the death of someone, for all relations are compounded of love and hate. This idea of the ambivalence in the relations between people and especially between members of adjacent generations is an important insight. But variations in the relations cannot be explained satisfactorily and solely in terms of the

operations of hereditarily derived instincts. Social factors must come into play. The search for correlative factors with which to associate the ambivalence can be seen in the work of Mead (1947, pp. 297-304), Opler (1936, pp. 82-116) and Fortes (1945, 1949) during this period. The search was helped also by work done on witchcraft, where attempts were made to link hostile supernatural relationships with the stereotypical conflict situations in the social system. A merging of sociological and psychological methods of analysis can be seen in the work of Kathleen Gough on the Nayars and Brahmins (1958). Nayar ancestors are punitive while Brahmin ones are lenient. She suggests that there may be a connexion with socialisation, in that Brahmin socialisation suppresses aggression against parents. She hypothesizes that cults of predominantly punitive ancestors are likely to be accompanied by kinship relations in which the senior generation retains control over the junior until late in life, but in which major figures of the senior generation are not highly idealised.

Jack Goody, in *Death, Property and the Ancestors*, examines the conflicts within the social system that give rise to what Freud called the ambivalent feelings in the personality, and he does so in the context of the ritual and religious institutions of the LoDagaa. He attempts to correlate mourning customs and ancestor worship with the

mode of inheritance and the locus of domestic authority among these people. He recognizes that there are dangers in using the concept of ambivalence - for all relationships are characterized by it. "Instead, then, of looking for the presence of ambivalent attitudes as such, I shall try to examine the differential distribution of the hostile and friendly components of social relationships; an attempt can then be made to relate these to the type of conflicts that a particular set of social institutions might be expected to engender." (Goody, 1962, p. 25)

Fustel de Coulanges had analysed the relationship between lineage structure and ancestor worship and its relevance to the wider problem of the connexion between social groups and religious institutions. Despite this, his pupil Durkheim paid little attention to ancestor worship. But in the study of funeral ceremonies, Durkheim's associates made some notable contributions, particularly Hertz in "Contributions a une etude sur la representation collective de la mort" (1907) and Van Gennep in *Les Rites de Passage* (1909). One of Hertz's major insights in this connexion is that beliefs in an afterlife appear to be related to the basic contradiction that exists between the continuity of the social system and the impermanence of its personnel. This conflict is resolved, in part at least, by the belief in an afterlife. Van Gennep generalises the idea of gradual

transition from one status to another to situations outside the life cycle. He views death as one of the situations that involve major changes of status and that are implicit in the passage of an individual through the social system. For him, funeral ceremonies are the final and most dramatic rite of passage in the life cycle: first they publicly state the separation of the dead from this world and of the bereaved from the dead. Then they aggregate the spirit of the deceased to the community of the dead and the bereaved to the community of the living.

The approach of these members of the *Annae Sociologique* school is one to which later social anthropologists have been greatly indebted in the analysis of funeral ceremonies, e.g., Radcliffe Brown on the Andamanese (1922), Warner on the Murngin (1937) and the United States (1959), Gluckman on the south-eastern Bantu (1937), and Wilson on the Nyakusa (1957). Malinowski played down the institutionalised aspect of these phenomena, and claimed not only that death shook the moral life of society and that public ceremonials were required to restore the cohesion of the group, but that funeral ceremonies and beliefs in immortality were the outcome of deep emotional revelations on the one hand and a product of the instinct of self-preservation on the other (1954, pp. 52-53). It is easy to criticise this approach, but it does bring out what

other writers have sometimes overlooked: that these institutions must be analysed on both the social and the personality levels, for these are not discrete systems. Indeed there is evidence that standardised procedures following the death of a loved one assist in the process of reorganization on the personality level.

However, as Gluckman points out in criticism of such approaches as that of Malinowski (Gluckman, 1965, p. 9), men do not believe in immortality because of their individual feelings or efforts of mind, but because they are taught to do so. The belief transcends any individual.

Its 'origin' must therefore be sought in the conditions of social life, for it is found wherever men live in society; and those conditions must explain why all societies attach such importance to the proper performance of funeral rites. The improperly buried return to trouble the living. The social importance of the belief is far greater than the comfort it gives the dying individual. This is shown by the way in which tribes who worship their ancestors give little heed to the afterlife of the spirits, but emphasize always the bonds of the spirits with their surviving descendants, and the effects of those bonds on the relationships of those descendants. The 'afterlife' of the spirit is left vague, undrawn, something like life on earth, though better, and below the ground or in the sky. (Gluckman, 1965, p. 9)

What was most significant in the *Année Sociologique* approach was the insistence that mortuary institutions are not to be considered merely as 'religious' phenomena, for they will be found to be interdependent with nearly all other aspects of social life. For example, the ceremonies

will have a social control function and a redistributive function. Funerals are inevitably occasions for summing up an individual's social personality in terms of both his roles and his actual conduct, either in obituaries or in funeral orations; therefore, opportunity is given for a public reformulation of social norms that is itself a sanction on behaviour. Economic and political factors will be involved in the redistribution of property, sexual rights, offices and roles, such that the continuity of social life is not greatly disrupted. Similar reorganization must occur on the personality level, following disorganization as reaction to loss and preparation for attachment to a new object.

### CHAPTER III

#### DEFINITIONS

Ancestor worship has never been more than a vaguely defined term. William Crooke, summarising the issue for *Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* in 1917, claimed that too often there is no distinction made between ancestor worship and a cult of the dead, and that quite often not even ancestors are involved in forms of religious practice given the name ancestor worship. More recently, Radin (1930, "Ancestor Worship" in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, II:53-55) and Spier (1957, "Ancestor Worship" in *Encyclopedia Americana*, I:651-652) have given very broad and therefore vague definitions. For there are problems in both components of the term. Ancestors are worshipped in many different kinds of society and the cult will be found more widely or narrowly spread according to the meaning given to the word worship. In some societies the ancestors serve as foci of determinate units constructed on a principle of unilineal descent, and since Fustel de Coulanges this has been the kind of ancestor worship that has fascinated anthropologists. Radcliffe Brown's exposition of this form is the most widely known and frequently cited ('Religion and Society', reprinted in Radcliffe-Brown 1952). It is possible, however,

as Evans-Pritchard has noted, to find "many societies with ancestor cults without a trace of a lineage system". By Radcliffe-Brown's definition such cults would not fall within the range of the discussion. Because of difficulties in definitions, and because, as Plath puts it, different peoples recognise a variety of kindred souls who may be related to a variety of social groups through a variety of social ties, there is little value in trying to deal with ancestor worship as an undifferentiated category. To begin with, some kind of clarification of terms will be useful.

There are very few peoples who do not traditionally believe in some kind of life after death, and this life is usually defined in terms of the continued existence of a soul. The nature of this soul is variously conceived. Granted an almost universal interest in life after death, it is the variations rather than the uniformity in such beliefs which seem so striking. The already complex situation is further complicated by the not uncommon idea that man has not one but many surviving souls, each with its own ultimate destiny. Such a situation can be seen among the Dogon and in Dahomey.

I shall use the typology of supernaturals suggested by Professor de Waal Malefijt (*Religion and Society*, 1968, pp. 161-162):



- (1) Gods- personified, named, individually known supernaturals of non-human origin.
- (2) Spirits - collectivised, usually not individually named supernaturals of non-human origin.
- (3) Souls of the dead - supernaturals of human origin, at first individually remembered, later tending to merge in an unnamed group like the spirits.
- (4) Ghosts - Souls of the dead which, in spite of precautions, return to the living, usually to disturb them. They can be perceived by living man.
- (5) Ancestor gods - supernatural beings of human origin, related to the group and raised to the status of gods.
- (6) Ancestor souls (or spirits) - supernatural beings of human origin, related to members of the group and considered actual and active members of that group.
- (7) Culture heroes - supernatural beings of semi-divine origin who gave important culture traits to the group.
- (8) Tricksters - supernatural beings of semi-divine origin, who may accidentally give important culture traits to the people, but are not basically concerned with human welfare.

The fate of the soul after death may depend on a variety of factors. For example, the ritual of death, burial and mourning may be important in this respect, so that mistakes or omissions in the rituals will result in the return of the

soul as a malevolent ghost. In other societies, individuals must prepare themselves for afterlife by learning special formulae and other esoteric knowledge. In some cases, the fate of the soul depends on the possession of objects, buried with the body or ritually buried. In other societies, including most Western ones, the condition of the soul after death is closely related to the behaviour of the individual during his lifetime. When this is the case, religious beliefs have ethical implications of a personal nature. The survivors have relatively little influence upon the situation, and rituals for the dead tend to be commemorative rather than manipulative. However, in most non-Western societies belief in an afterlife need not imply personal immortality, nor is the fate of the dead usually correlated with moral values. As a rule it depends, as noted above, on the ritual actions of living relatives and descendants, which, if not correctly performed, may anger the dead who may send disease, disaster or death to the living.

Again, the type of afterlife may depend on the social status of the person and his family. The souls of kings and nobles, for example, automatically may go to a more desirable place than those of common people. In this case, rituals would tend to reinforce the social hierarchy of both the living and the dead, reflecting the status

differences.

In any case, associated with these notions of the dualism of man and of his persistence after death is another widespread, if not universal, social institution, the cult of the dead. Goody maintains that whenever beliefs in a future life are incorporated in standardised practices, such as the custom of placing some of the dead man's property in his grave, then the cult is present (Goody, 1962, p. 379). The European habit of laying flowers upon the grave, he claims, is another such practice, but one that borders on a simple commemorative rite; like the insertion of memorial notices in "The Times", it does not necessarily involve any specific concept of survival.

We need to distinguish the cult of the dead from worship of the dead. As Crooke noted 'religion' in its narrowest sense has been defined by Frazer as "a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life" (Frazer, 1911, p. 222). "For our present purposes", said Crooke (1908), "it is on the words in this definition 'superior to man' that the question depends." There are cases in which the dead are worshipped; but those of placation and ministration to the supposed needs of the departed in the other world are much more numerous, and these latter are examples of a cult. Propitiation would

include sacrifice, offerings of food, drink, and material objects, prayers and other forms of paying respect.

Also implied in the term 'worship of the dead' is the idea of the active participation of the dead in mundane affairs. It is not merely, *pace* Goody (1962, p. 379), that their intervention requires the living to propitiate the dead by the offer of goods, services, words, and other gestures to secure their favour; it is the threat of their intervention either because they are dissatisfied with their descendants' conduct or because of their need to be cared for regularly. As a rule the dead send benefits as well as misfortunes. The dead may visit their descendants and relatives in dreams or in some specified manner and at certain places.

Tylor pointed out (1871, p. 120) that a well-marked worship of the dead was observable in modern Christianity in the form of hagiolatry. "Saints, who were once men and women, now form an order of inferior deities, active in the affairs of men and receiving from them reverence and prayer". In other words, what we have is propitiation of the dead. Tylor also pointed out that these figures were often specific replacements for local deities or the patron gods of specialist groups.

Mention above of how status differences among the living may be reflected in similar differences after death

leads to consideration of the numbers and status of those members of the population who become the subject of rites for the dead. Goody points out (1962, p. 380) that in Christian countries, for example, ministrations at the grave are practice in the large majority of deaths, but other forms of honouring the dead are accorded only to a few. There are few saints; the 'benefactors' of colleges who are celebrated by feasts, portrait or prayer are likewise but a small fraction of the colleges' alumni. In other words, the inclusiveness of the cultus is related to the acts and status of people while alive. Even where there is no conception of a hierarchy of more or less desirable stages in an afterlife, status on earth may still affect the nature of the worship. For example, in many centralised states, even where most men become ancestral spirits capable of receiving the offerings of the living, the spirits of dead kings have to be propitiated on behalf of the whole chiefdom or kingdom in order to ensure the continuing well-being of its inhabitants. Examples are Ashanti (Busia, 1951, pp. 201ff) and Buganda (Mair, 1934). We need also to consider the degree of individualisation entailed in the treatment of the dead. At All Souls' Day services, the souls of the faithful departed are interceded for and commemorated collectively; their souls in the Other World can be helped by the prayers of the living. At other times

they may be individually named and celebrated. Goody gives the example of a Chantry mass endowed for the soul of a particular person (1962, p. 380). Quite often the relevant factor will be the nature of the shrine at which the dead are commemorated: whether it is a collective one, like a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, or an individual one, like a Chantry Chapel. Among the Mae Engga, the body of clan ghosts, collectively conceived, is the highest class of supernatural ritually contacted. But this contact is not made until domestic rites devoted to particular ghosts have failed to stem the tide of misfortune and it mounts to flood stage. In other words, under the general head of ancestor worship can be found cults of collective clan ancestors and of particular domestic ghosts.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND DESCENT GROUPS

I have indicated that the crucial factor, for my purposes, in the analysis of ancestor worship is the nature of the relationship between the living and the dead (including the question of the hostility or otherwise of the dead). The Christian saint and his diffused crowd of worshippers are not linked by any ties of kinship; therefore we cannot speak here of ancestor worship. But between the Chinese and the souls incorporated in memorial tablets to which he offers prayers there is a link of kinship; and, following Radcliffe Brown, it is to this type of cult, in which the living and the dead are the kin one of another, that the term 'ancestor worship' is best reserved. Even with this restriction it is often necessary to distinguish between the relationship of the dead ancestor to the person who conducts the ritual, the officiant, on the one hand, and the person who provides the offering, the donor, on the other. These relationships by no means always coincide, and the link between officiant and donor adds further complications.

It is now common ground among anthropologists that there is a 'fit' between a cult of ancestors and a system

of unilineal descent groups. As Beattie puts it: "Societies which attach high value to unilineal descent, as the Romans did, often have an ancestral cult" (Beattie, 1964, 225-6). But it does not follow that we should be surprised to find systems of ancestor worship in societies which do not have an ideology of unilineal descent or that we should be alarmed by not finding them in the kinds of society to which Radcliffe Brown limited his argument. The Nuer of southern Sudan, whose social structure depends on the relationships of patrilineages, have no developed ancestral cult. Practices consistent with our definition of ancestor worship have been found in bilateral societies, such as those of Polynesia which have ramages, and in West Africa among the Gonja. The Gonja lack any boundary-maintaining kin groups; in fact there are no descent groups of any great depth. Goody considers the kinship system to be cognatic or bilateral because while agnatic descent is important in determining rights to office, for other purposes the full range of an individual's kinsfolk are significant (E. Goody 1962). Like many of the New Guinea Highland peoples, the Gonja are not greatly concerned with their forefathers; ancestor worship is not greatly developed. It seems that each person has his own shrine and sacrifices independently to his forefathers, but it is very rarely that a sacrifice is made to forefathers more remote than the immediately previous generation.



Many of the New Guinea societies are very loosely structured, and there is no necessary relation between the alleged descent principle and actual group composition. Consequently there is less interest in ancestors than in Africa. Often, consanguinity does not define a descent group - reciprocity does (see Wagner, 1967). In the classical African cases of ancestor worship, descent defines corporate kinship units, and there seems to be a 'lineage principle'. On the other hand, in most Highland New Guinea types the dogma of descent is only weakly held. In Africa the descent-theory model sees ancestor worship as assisting in the formation and maintenance of group solidarity. Such a model will not work in the Highlands, where often clans have no tradition of descent from a single common ancestor, and it is assumed that the present system always existed. There may also be strong prohibitions on allowing clan solidarity to outweigh the loyalty owed to other members of the same village or community. For these reasons it is better to talk in many cases of network cohesion than of group solidarity, and this fact, reflected perhaps in the common Melanesian shallow sense of time, means that where we come across ancestor worship among these peoples, we must be sure that we are not dealing with a cult of the dead, the cult of an undifferentiated group of ancestors, or some other kind

of cult that is not closely connected to descent groups. The data provided by Melanesian ethnography call into question many of the assumptions made by the structural-functional approach of Radcliffe Brown, Evans-Pritchard and Fortes, based as it was largely on African data. Social behaviour need no longer be regarded as a variable purely dependent on larger groups. Firth's concept of social organization can be regarded as seminal here, involving as it does individual choice as a complement to social structure. Bott's (1957) work on social networks, and Barth's paper on transactions (1966) are also recent examples of the movement away from the idea of society as a system of groups.

A further caution on positing a direct link between ancestor worship and unilineality is the power often attributed to extra-descent group ancestors, which may be considerable. I shall go into this in more detail when discussing Fortes' theories on ancestor worship in Africa.

Apropos of the link between lineages and ancestor worship, Sahlins makes an unsound comment on Tiv-Nuer segmentary systems (Sahlins, 1968, p. 107). He attempts to point out that the crystallization of higher order lineages argued by ancestor cults would be inconsistent with the functioning of their lineage systems.

Recall that, as political entities, lineages above the minimum level do not exist as such or function autonomously, but emerge only in opposition to like units and as the order of opposition dictates. In fixing this complementary opposition, a hierarchy of ancestor cults would destroy its flexibility. (Sahlins, 1968, p. 107)

This formulation begs the question of which comes first, the ancestor worship or the flexibility. It also misrepresents the Nuer data, at least, for Nuer lineages never emerge as political or even corporate groups.

By restricting my concern to cases where ancestors are worshipped separately by different groups of people connected to them by descent, I exclude cases where the worship of ancestors is a tribal cult, having no connection with clan or lineage affiliation. The worship of Zuni katcinas is an example. They participate in, rather than are the objects of, Zuni ceremonial. Every Zuni prays to the ancestors in general, not only to his own particular ancestors. Zuni clan and subclan are of little importance. Funeral rites are simple and as little as possible is made of a death.

As a result, all we can say is that it is clearly a condition of a cult of ancestors that the people who practice it should at least know that they have ancestors, and should think it worthwhile to remember them, and that this is often so where membership in a unilineal descent group is socially important. It may well be that we shall

never get to the point of understanding why only some unilineally constituted kinship systems display cults of ancestors.

What we can say is that where the cult is found in a system of descent groups, there is surely no difficulty in seeing the appropriateness of a religion in which, either collectively or individually, as the case may be, ancestors stand at the centre of the attention of the people descended from them. Professor Freedman, for example, has shown that every agnatically constituted unit in China stands out as a religious congregation worshipping its common forebears. Every lineage has its ancestral hall or shrine; in the most elaborate halls the rows of tablets on the altar and the honour boards hanging from beams and walls are a triumphant and awe-inspiring display of success. Every segment of a lineage has a hall or at least the tomb of a focal ancestor at which rites comparable to those in the main hall are performed (Freedman, 1958, ch. II).

Similarly, according to Herskovits (1938, ch. II), the ancestral cult was the focal point of social organization of the Dahomeans. For it is the lineage group organized round a unilineal genealogy that provides the typical congregation in the worship of the ancestors. Even in societies with ramages the genealogy may still serve as the framework for the group, as a mnemonic of existing social relationships,

although here kinship is never the only criterion of group eligibility. In other words, genealogies provide a calculus for the system of social relationships. This means that they are constantly in the process of change; for changing social pressures work all the time in the reinterpretation of genealogies, for the part of a genealogy that is remembered tends to be what has social significance at the moment of remembering. Because the span of unilineal genealogies varies according to their depth, the recognition and worship of a common ancestor will unite as many people as can trace their descent from him. In this sense ancestors act as foci, and ancestor worship is often broadly reckoned the appropriate theology of a lineage system. The existing arrangements of a lineage, its divisions and further sub-divisions, the rights of various members, segments, and of the whole vis-a-vis other lineages are the present residue of past history. The dead survive in the relationships of the living. In its whole and in its parts, the lineage is thus explained by invocation of the ancestors and it is so validated. In secular contexts we have the genealogy, which, as Malinowski taught, is the 'charter' of the lineage, the warrant for its constitution and the privileges of its members. The mystical analogue of the genealogy is ancestor worship.

A cult of the ancestors, therefore, naturally occurs among people who feel that the dead remain members of their

group. Linton reports that a Tanalà clan has two sections which are equally real to its members: the living and the dead (1936, pp. 121-122). The latter remain an integral part of the group, and take constant interest in the activities of their descendants. A cult of the dead, on the other hand, is generally associated with a desire to separate the dead from society. In societies with such a cult the dead are usually greatly feared, especially the recently dead. Sometimes the survivors spend time, money and effort to keep the souls of the deceased as happy as possible in their otherworldly existence, so that they will have no desire to return to earth. Other cultures do everything to obliterate the memory of the dead as soon as possible so that the community will be able to function in its accustomed manner. But these latter societies, of course, will have no cults of the dead at all. In such cults, burials stress the separation between the realm of the dead and that of the living, and further ritual activities tend to minimise their relationship. Ancestor cults on the other hand tend to reaffirm or reinforce the connexions between the dead and the survivors.

The degree of attention that the living pay to the dead varies from society to society. Noss reports that in rural China there was regular and intimate contact between the living and the ancestors (1963, pp.330-340). The

ancestral shrine, built in the home, was the centre of family life and contained wooden tablets inscribed with the names of the dead. Food sacrifices were offered daily, and important family affairs were conducted in front of the shrine. Marriage plans were presented for the approval of the ancestors, and their blessing was invoked when a journey or any important business transaction was undertaken. Daily rituals often included the reading or reciting of recent events, so that the ancestors might be fully informed, and the reading of the biographies of the ancestors, so that they remained familiar to their descendants. Among the Swazi, on the other hand, each family propitiates its own ancestors only at births, marriages, deaths and the building of new huts. The dead are not otherwise addressed, except when misfortunes occur in the family (Kuper, 1963, p. 60). Questions as to the malevolence or friendliness, whimsical non-reliability or moral involvement of the ancestors will be referred to later. Here again there are considerable differences and no clear correlation with other social structure variables.

Professor Freedman has recently drawn attention to the ritual aspect of the relationship between men and their proximate ancestors, that is, to the role of the ancestors among the people with whom they were once linked in life. In his books *Lineage Organization in South East*

*China* (1958) and *Chinese Marriage and the family in Singapore* (1957) he introduced the term 'memorialism' to apply to those rites in which ancestors were cared for simply as forebears and independently of their status as ancestors of the agnates of the worshippers. This must be distinguished from the cult of descent group ancestors. In his most recent book (1966) he has referred to "the cult of immediate jural superiors" instead of memorialism. The cult of immediate jural superiors and the cult of descent group ancestors do not necessarily go together, since the former can exist without the latter. The Manus are an example (Fortune, 1935). The cult of immediate jural superiors raises some highly interesting questions about the relationship between domestic authority and the attitudes maintained to recently dead superiors, a matter discussed at length by both Freedman (1967a) and Fortes (1961) to which I shall return. Whether or not there is a difference of intent or of result in the two types of cult, it is clear that in any case the main cult and the problems will be at local levels - where stresses are greatest, the need of solidarity is more essential, economic risks are taken, etc.



## CHAPTER V

### ESCHATOLOGY

Evans-Pritchard has written that intellectualist generalisations about 'religion' can be misleading. "They are always too ambitious and take account of only a few of the facts. The anthropologist should be more modest and more scholarly. He should restrict himself to religions of a certain type or of related peoples, or to particular problems of religious thought and practice." (1959, p. 6) While bearing this caution in mind, it might be useful to make one or two general observations about primitive beliefs concerning the fate of the soul before dealing with the actual data on ancestor worship from various parts of the world. In this, I rely heavily on Firth's Frazer Lecture of 1955, "The Fate of the Soul, An Interpretation of Some Primitive concepts" (reprinted in Firth, 1967).

E. C. Dewick, in a book on primitive Christian eschatology some fifty years ago, pointed out that primitive peoples, as contrasted with civilised, are concerned with individual eschatology rather than with cosmic eschatology (1912). It is the fate of the souls in their own society, not the fate of the world, which interests them. However, even within one society there is often a wide variation of

belief, or at least of statement, about the possible fate of the soul. Comparative study of primitive eschatologies leads to the derivation of a number of general propositions like this which have a wide degree of acceptability. Others mentioned by Firth include the idea that in most primitive communities it is continuity rather than immortality that is assumed. The soul is believed to endure but there is no positive notion of eternity as such. In such cases life after death is much the same as life here and ancestor worship is a replication of the lineage structure projected onto a metaphysical plane. It is also generally true that the fate of the soul is not associated with any concept of rewards or punishments after death. This is in strong contrast to the beliefs of followers of most of the major religions. Perhaps this is one reason why members of most primitive communities have no great concern about the fate of their own souls; i.e., each individual does not worry in advance about the personal problem of his future life. As long as he has descendants, he himself will be an ancestor.

Most primitive eschatology is dynamic, with plenty of social interaction. This is in contrast to the Western view, in which the departed soul is effectively depersonalised in favour of group dependence upon the divine; the primitive gives departed souls a field of concrete social activities. First they interact with each other and secondly, with the

world they have left behind. In the West we have removed from our dead and our ancestors the ability to participate effectively in the society of the living. "In the light of our emphasis on the importance of the individual this might seem surprising, were it not for the influence that it is the individual freedom of the living that demands the annihilation of the exercise of decisions by the dead. But of course the difference is one of procedure rather than of principle, since in the primitive system, one may argue, the dead are merely the living in another guise. In particular, in an ancestor cult, they are a means of expression of social obligations, and an important element in the process of decision-taking, by an indirect route." (Firth, 1967, p. 332) As a result, Firth put forward the hypothesis that "it is rather as a framework for activity in this world and for positive experience in life that concepts about the continuity and fate of the soul are developed rather than as a protection against death" (Firth, 1967, p. 334). In other words, in interpreting primitive eschatology, the emphasis is placed on its social function. What needs to be acknowledged is that there is some logical relation seen and explainable between the condition in which the dead soul finds itself at any given time, and some particular social circumstance - this circumstance being drawn from the behaviour of other living persons here and now. Or, as

Firth says, "statement about the destination and fate of souls are restatements of social structure, at a symbolic level". (Firth, 1967, p. 342)

These propositions of Firth should not be allowed to mask the fact that people's theories and beliefs do influence their actions and can, to a certain extent, explain their actions. Along with Jarvie (1966), I would argue that belief is logically prior to the ritual it justifies. Beliefs are an essential part of the logic of a person's situation and anthropologists must assume that the behaviour of the people they are among can be rationally explained, and that it is intelligible. In other words, we must believe people when they say that they worship ancestors because they believe their ancestors have some influence on the course of events in the world, or that the ancestors' temperament is such that they require to be worshipped if one is to get anything out of them. If we agree that an explanation is any answer to a 'why' question that is satisfying, then such an explanation of why a people worship their ancestors may or may not be enough. But to ignore the explanation offered by the people themselves, as Fortes does, and to explain instead that they worship their ancestors "because their social structure demands it" misconstrues the problem. This, of course, is the answer to the totally different problem 'why do some societies have a religion structured in terms

of ancestor worship?'. .

If we prefer the theory that people worship their ancestors because of a belief they hold about ancestors to the theory that their social structure demands ancestor worship, it is because the first theory is simpler and more satisfactory. Again, since we believe the theory about the influence of the ancestors to be false, the second theory amounts to the idea that the social structure 'demands' a false theory. This leads us to the relativistic position that the ancestor theory is true for them in their social structure but false for us in ours. I do not find this kind of cultural relativism congenial. The ancestor theory is not a truth - it is hypothetical knowledge, the best hypothesis that the people concerned can make. Ancestor beliefs are either false or unfalsifiable hypotheses.

What we are doing is distinguishing explanations in terms of situational logic from those consisting of descriptions of the socially desirable or beneficial unintended consequences of some action.

The further question, 'how did this belief arise?' is best explored in historical or psychological terms. A plausible psychological argument would have to enable us, for example, to infer from the importance and power of a father during his lifetime, to the formation of a belief about his importance after death.

Another question tackled by some anthropologists is why ancestors in some societies are accorded hostile characteristics, in other societies benevolent characteristics or neutral ones.

The functionalist approach, according to which one studies the ritual rather than the belief that justifies it, would explain institutions by their consequences. Such an approach would need much defending, it seems to me. A structuralist approach, however, could offer useful insights. Rather than trying to explain antecedents by their consequences, it would merely attempt to delineate the structural set-up of the society in terms of principles, institutions and consequences, so that links can be seen. For example, while one cannot have a structural account of how ideas about worshipping ancestors were formed, a structural approach may help explicate what is involved in such a belief.

CHAPTER VI  
THE TALLENSI

Ancestor Worship is seen in its most elaborate forms among the Bantu tribes of Africa. It must be remembered, however, that it normally forms only a part of the total complex of religious and ritual institutions of any one African society. It is only for purposes of analysis that it can be dealt with separately. Also, like all institutions, it has what Gluckman calls 'multiplex' meaning; that is, it has a role in every domain of social structure. The task of analysis is simplified, however, by the broad uniformity of African patterns of ancestor worship, in consequence of their common basis in the family, kinship and descent structure. That there is this common basis is a matter of general agreement among African anthropologists, some of whom describe ancestor worship as an extension of descent, kinship and domestic relations to the supernatural sphere, others as a reflection of these relations, or as their ritual and symbolic expression. Fortes has noted that, comparatively viewed, African ancestor worship has a remarkably uniform structural framework (cf. Fortes and Dieterlen, 1965, p. 122). The congregation of worshippers invariably comprises either an exclusive common descent group, or such a group augmented

by collateral agnates, who may be of restricted or specified filiative provenance or may come from an unrestricted range; or else the worshippers in a given situation may comprise only a domestic group, be it an elementary family or a family of an extended type. In the first kind of congregation, members participate by right of descent or filiation, and ancestor worship is seen in the structural context of the corporate lineage. The second case shows us the family context of ancestor worship, where spouses, who are, of course, formally affines, not kin, participate by right of marriage and parenthood.

The classic material on African ancestor worship is that provided by Fortes; in particular, four of his works: *The Web of Kinship Among the Tallensi*, *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi*, "Pietas in Ancestor Worship", and *Oedipus and Job in West African Religion*. These concern the Tallensi of northern Ghana, for whom, as for so many African peoples, "kinship is one of the irreducible principles upon which their organized social life depends." An understanding of kinship forms a necessary groundwork for the study of all other social activities. The Tallensi are patrilineal-virilocal agriculturalists. Their unit of residence is the compound, in which lives a joint family, a group of agnatically-related men with their wives and children. The common ancestor of these men is never more than four generations



back in time. A localised aggregation of joint-families forms a sublineage. Similarly, sublineages nest inside lineages, and lineages inside clans. Generally, contiguity of residence in the area is proportional to closeness of kinship, and there is an intense attachment of lineages to localities. The unity of the lineage is a deeply cherished ideal. People remember their lineal ancestry for up to fourteen generations. Every lineage is linked with lineages in other clans because of common participation in earth-cults, and there are ritual ties between lineages such that they collaborate in the burial of the dead, the installing of lineage heads, etc. An overlapping series of ties of friendship is thus produced. Fortes writes: "Unbroken continuity of descent, persistence of self-identical corporate units, stability of settlement - these are the essential characteristics of the (Tallensi) lineage system. It requires the assumption, which the ancestor cult places beyond question, that the social structure is the same as it was in the past. The Tallensi, therefore, have no history in the sense of authentic records of past events. The memories and reminiscences of old men are part of their biographies and never contribute to the building up of a body of socially preserved history. Their myths and legends are one means of rationalising and defining the structural relationships of group to group or the pattern of their institutions....They are

part of the social philosophy, projected into the past because the people think of their social order as continuous and persistent, handed down from generation to generation." (Fortes, 1945, p. 26)

It is true of many preliterate societies that social relationships are undifferentiated for their is little scope for specialisation. For example, a man has few specific economic relationships, and economic relationships alone, with other men. He does his productive work with the same people with whom he lives, plays, shares good and ill fortune, celebrates weddings and mourns at funerals. A man's associates are primarily his kinsfolk, though they fall into different categories which entail varying obligations. But kinship as such involves a general obligation to help and sustain one another. Nearly all the people that a man will meet in the course of his lifetime will be linked to him by some kinship tie, however remote. Among the Tallensi a man's kin will be his agnates. Tallensi ancestors have permanent shrines and graves which are attached to specific localities, which are usually surrounded by the residential farm land of a lineage and which therefore serve as foci of the unity of the lineage as a whole and of its segments: hence, as Professor Fortes succinctly expresses it, "the ancestor cult is the calculus of the lineage system". Thus the ancestor cult is related to the land, to agriculture,

and to permanent residence on the land of well-defined corporate lineages. The cult tends to emphasise and validate the intense attachment of lineages to localities. Worship of the patrilineal ancestors and worship of the Earth are the deepest values of Tale religion. Although in some respects they are opposed, since the ancestor cult tends to emphasise the divisions between lineage and clan segments while the Earth-cult tends to stress the common interests of the widest Tale community, the two cults are at the same time complementary since the cultivations of individuals and of particular lineages are "but parcels of land cut from the limitless earth". Tallensi are attached to the soil and, given the existence of patriliney as the dominant principle of social organization, local and lineal groupings tend to coincide and to be interlinked within a common framework of overlapping clanship and lineage ties that embrace the entire socio-geographic region of Taleland.

Tallensi say that a man who dies sonless has wasted his life, for to become an ancestor a man must have sons. Ancestorhood can only be achieved by so cherishing sons that they supplant one. However, authority, power and status associated with jural autonomy can be achieved only on the death of the father. Until a man's father dies he himself has no jural independence and cannot directly bring a sacrifice to a lineage ancestor. The father has rights

to command his son's labour and property, to take responsibility for him in law, to sacrifice on his behalf to ancestor spirits, and to discipline his manners and morals. One inescapable duty rests on children in relation to both parents. This is the duty of filial piety. It requires a child to honour and respect his parents, to put their wishes before his own, to support and cherish them in old age, quite irrespective of their treatment of him. The supreme act of filial piety owed by sons is the performance of the mortuary and ritual ceremonies for the parents. It is felt by the Tallensi as a compulsion of conscience, but there is a powerful sanction in the background. To fail in it is to incur the everlasting wrath of the ancestors. For the mortuary and funeral rites are the first steps in the transformation of parents into ancestor spirits, and the worship of the ancestors is in essence the ritualisation of filial piety.

A man as father in his family and as elder in his lineage, holds authority in the name of his ancestors. Thus "the jural authority of the living father is metamorphosed into the mystical authority of the ancestor father, backed by the whole hierarchy of the ancestors". A father's status is held by grace of the ancestors who may punish conduct they regard as impious and unsatisfactory. Ancestor worship here resolves the opposition between successive generations.

Filial piety makes living authority acceptable: ancestor worship is piety extended to the ancestors and transposed into ritual form. A father does not lose any of his paternal authority on his death; his authority is immortalised by incorporation in the dominion and power of the lineage and clan ancestors. Between father and son there is suppressed hostility and opposition during the lifetime of the father, as the father is suspicious that his son wishes to supplant him economically and politically before his death. Filial piety and first-born avoidance are two of the ritual mechanisms by which a son is kept submissive to paternal authority, and are the regulating and mollifying mechanisms which enable a son to accept the coercion of authority throughout life without the loss of respect, affection and trust for the holder of authority. Radcliffe Brown's revolutionary paper on the Mother's Brother (1924) first demonstrated the significance of respect and avoidance customs as expressions of the authority held by fathers over children in a patrilineal family structure, as Malinowski (1927) had revealed the conflicts that go on under the surface of matrilineal kinship norms.

I have said that Tale social life is almost wholly organized by reference to relations of descent and of kinship. Precise genealogical knowledge is necessary in order to define a person's place in society and his rights, duties,

capacities and privileges. This is one reason why the cult of the ancestors is so elaborate among them. However, it is much more than a mnemonic for regulating their social relations. It is the religious counterpart of their social order, hallowing it, investing it with a value that transcends mundane interests and providing for them the categories of thought and belief by means of which they direct and interpret their lives and actions.

The ancestral spirits are continuously involved in the affairs of the living. Diviners are consulted to find which ancestors are involved by and on behalf of both individuals and groups at family crises like child-birth, sickness or death, at public crises like drought, at seasonal and ceremonial turning points like sowing and harvest times, before hazardous undertakings like setting off for a hunt, and whenever the mood takes a responsible man. But the ancestors manifest their powers and interest characteristically in the unforeseeable occurrences which upset normal expectations and routines, and they do so in order to make some demand or elicit submission to authority.

Evans-Pritchard has suggested that "the simplest way of assessing an African people's way of looking at life is to ask to what they attribute misfortune, and for the Azande the answer is witchcraft". For the Tallensi the answer is the just wrath of the ancestors.

As Tallensi say, everybody gets ill sometimes, marries, has children, kills animals in the hunt and so forth. Why then should illness strike a particular person at a particular time? Why should one man be so fortunate in his marriages and have many children while his brother fails in these respects? One cannot foresee the course of one's life, for it is governed by forces beyond human knowledge and control; and these Tallensi conceptualise in terms of their ancestor cult. The particular course of a person's life history depends on his Destiny. A man's Destiny consists of a unique configuration of ancestors who have of their own accord elected to exercise specific surveillance over his life-cycle, and to whom he is personally accountable. In return for his submission and service, a man's Destiny is supposed to preserve his health, his life and the well-being of his family, to bring him good fortune in his economic activities and social aspirations, and to confer on him, in due course, the immortality of ancestorhood by blessing him with sons and grandsons. But a man also has lineage ancestors. These are just, and their justice is directed to enforcing the moral and religious norms and values on which the social order rests. Destiny is invoked as an explanation when appeals to ancestral justice have failed. In this case the victims have wished their fate upon themselves and neither they nor society need, therefore, feel guilty. At other times,

the ancestors strike because of infractions of the moral order, but a man will rarely know beforehand that the ancestors will strike. Their will becomes known only after they strike.

The consequences of the wrath of the ancestors is shown in the following story told by Fortes (1961, p. 183). Kologo quarrelled with his father and departed to farm abroad. But when messengers came to tell him that his father had died he hurried home to supervise the funeral. He had barely taken possession of his patrimony when he fell ill and died. The general feeling was that this was retribution for failure to make up his quarrel with his father. When he came home from the funeral he made submission to the lineage elders and they had persuaded his father's sister to revoke his father's curse. But this was not enough, as his death proved. The diviner revealed that his father, now among the ancestors, still grieved and angered by his desertion, complained to them of his impiety and so they had slain him.

What ancestor worship among the Tallensi provides, according to Fortes, is an institutionalised scheme of beliefs and practices by means of which men can accept some kind of responsibility for what happens to them and yet feel free of blame for failure to control the vicissitudes of life. When someone accepts and later enshrines the ancestors who manifest themselves for him, or when he admits failure in service and makes reparation by sacrificing to them, he is accepting his



own responsibility. But there is an implication of duress in this; and the very act of acquiescing in his own moral responsibility establishes the final, mystical responsibility of the ancestors. The individual has no choice. Submission to his ancestors is symbolic of his encapsulation in a social order which permits of little voluntary alteration of his status and social capacities. Fortes' analysis is in both sociological and psychological terms. All the concepts we have examined, he suggests, are religious extrapolations of the experiences generated in the relationships of parents and children. Ancestor worship presupposes the triumph of parenthood. It recognizes the paramountcy of the moral norms emanating from society as a whole over the dangerous egotism of childhood. For the punitive aspect of the ancestor figures has a disciplinary not a destructive function.

Similarly, by offering an explanation of misfortune, Tale religious beliefs and practices, like those of other peoples, serve a cathartic purpose. The grief, anger and anxiety aroused by the affliction of material loss or sickness or death are assuaged by them.

The ultimate disaster for a man, beside which death itself is insignificant, is to die without a son to perform one's funeral ceremonies and continue one's descent line.

In radical contrast to the Tallensi picture of jural and economic relations between successive generations is

Stenning's analysis of the developmental cycle of the family among the Wodaabe Fulani (Stenning, 1958). Here fathers relinquish their control over herds and their authority over persons step by step to their sons during the course of the son's growth and social development. The process begins when a man's first son is born and culminates when his last son marries with the final handing over to the sons of what is left of the herd and what is left of paternal authority. The father then retires physically, economically and jurally, becomes dependent on his sons and is, in Stenning's words, to all intents henceforth socially dead. Wodaabe descent groups generally have a genealogical depth of not more than three or four generations. Among the Wodaabe there is clearly no need for a man to wait for dead men's shoes in order to attain jural autonomy and economic emancipation, and the tensions between successive generations that are characteristic of the Tallensi do not appear to develop. There is no ancestor cult among the Wodaabe.

Fortes' explanation owes a lot to such psychological concepts as ambivalence and projection, especially his later book *Oedipus and Job in West African Religion*. It is in this book, however, that he ignores the important part played by those ancestors of ego who were without jural authority during life. McKnight in a recent article (1967) has called attention to the powers of extra-descent group

ancestors in many African societies, adducing data from the BaThonga, Bhaca, Pondo, Ila, Tallensi and Plateau Tonga to show how these ancestors are considered sources of misfortune and are sometimes seen as aggressive. We shall see that among the matrilineal Plateau Tonga the paternal ancestors are far more powerful and dangerous than the maternal ones. Conversely, for the patrilineal Tallensi, "a man's welfare and that of his dependents rests as much on his maintaining good relations with [his mother's] spirit as with his father's spirit" (1949, p. 175). Even death may be attributed to the mother's spirit. Again, (p. 235) "the spirits of female ancestors are believed to be specially hard, cruel and capricious. This is remarkable when we consider the love and devotion a mother shows her child throughout his life". Although Fortes admits in *Oedipus and Job* that "the spirits of maternal ancestors and ancestresses play as big a part in a person's life as his paternal ancestor spirits" (p. 27), he does not see that this seriously calls into question his whole explanation of ancestor worship in terms of succession and inheritance in relation to the position of authority and projection. Unlike the father-son relationship, which Fortes sees as crucial in the understanding of the worship of descent group ancestors, it seems that there is no particular nuclear kin relationship, such as mother and son, or father and son, which can be regarded as the prototype of the

character attributed to extra-descent group ancestors.

In summary, Fortes sees ancestor worship as one of the institutional devices and cultural values that serve to regulate the potentiality of schism between successive generations. A son knows that it is by his pious submission to ritual that his father is established among the ancestors for ever. He sees it as the continuation of submission to the authority that was invested in his father before his death.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE EDO AND THE LODAGAA

Fortes and Goody analyse the relationship between ancestor worship and the jural and property aspects of nuclear kin relations. A different picture is presented by Bradbury for the Edo of Nigeria (R. E. Bradbury, 1966). Bradbury's analysis links ancestor worship with the collective authority of the village elders. Edo elders as a collectivity hold jural authority over the rest of the community. They hold no tangible movable property; they do hold rights over land belonging to village communities as a whole, they own ritual paraphernalia and shrines, collect and share out dues from strangers who wish to work the land or its trees, collect court fines and fees, and command non-elders in village work. The elders exercise a supervisory control over the dealings of the household heads with their subordinates, restraining or supporting them according to their assessment of the justice of their actions and decisions. The elders supervise the division of property between the sons of a dead man. The senior son acts as an intermediary with the dead father on behalf of the other children, but only when the elders have allowed it and have given recognition to his assumption of the latter's fatherly roles. For initially

the elders stand in the way of the son's direct access to his ancestors. Now a son cannot validate his claim to be the heir to his father's property until he has accorded his father ancestorhood, in a special ritual. For the senior son must not only bury his father, but he must also convert him into an ancestor and dedicate an altar at which to serve him. In the interval between burial and conversion, the heir's authority over his father's other descendants and their wives lacks effective mystical backing. Nor, until he has accorded his father ancestorhood, has he validated his claim to be the heir to his father's property. The lineage elders may permit him to make use of this property - but he cannot have full control, or transmit it to his own son should he die.

At funeral rites there is therefore constant tension and friction between the sons and the elders, as the elders try to exert their authority and the son seeks to free himself from it. He can never do so completely, for not only do they know how to perform details of the ritual that are hidden from him, but their cooperation is necessary for the translation of the dead man into a deceased elder. The heir and other sons have to present a goat, a cow and other offerings to the elders for their cooperation in the conversion.

A dead man who is not converted into an ancestor becomes a malignant 'ghost'. The ancestors are accepted as

acting justly in their demands upon the living, who are morally obliged to submit to their authority and to sustain them; they are also believed capable of conferring positive benefits, in the form of vitality and prosperity, on their worshippers. Ghosts, on the other hand, while they may have just grievances against the living, for the very reason perhaps that their heirs have neglected to perform the rites that would convert them into ancestors and elders in the land of the dead, act out of anger and resentment, untempered with any capacity for exercising benevolence. The ancestors are recipients of not only expiatory offerings but also acts of thanksgiving and commemoration. Ghosts can only be bought off.

If a young person ignores or flouts the elders' authority or breaks a clan taboo, the ancestral elders will punish him. But by far the greatest number of expiations are directed towards dead fathers rather than ancestral elders. Bradbury suggests that this preponderance is in accordance with a greater amount of suppressed resentment and hostility in relations between father and sons, and sons of the same father - relationships in which the control, transmission and division and use of property are a constant potential source of conflicting interests - than in relations between the lineage elders and their subordinates.

Corresponding to every set of elders (of kinship,

territorial and associational groups) there are the ancestral elders, their forerunners, who demand that the living elders should uphold the customs and rules they have transmitted to them, and afford them mystical sanctions to assist them in dealing with infractions. The dead elders not only demand regular proof, in the form of offerings, of the group's continued respect for them, but they also punish breaches of the rules they have laid down by bringing sickness and other disasters upon the group as a whole or its individual members. The dead elders are worshipped regularly and they are called upon to witness and sanctify various rites de passage. The relative autonomy of senior sons as intermediaries with their ancestors, on behalf of the latter's children, is balanced against and limited by the overall authority of the elders as intermediaries with the ancestral elders, on behalf of the lineage at large. As an ancestral elder, a dead man at once loses his individuality, but as a 'father' he retains it for as long as it remains significant for the ordering of relations between his descendants. Yet it is fervently hoped that he will soon be reincarnated in one of these descendants. This paradox Edo think not necessary to explain. It is, however, very meaningful. "The ancestor, by establishing the roots of the descent group in the past, has the function, among others, of legitimising the authority of family and lineage heads and of providing sanctions for the maintenance



of proper relations between kin and spouses. The belief in and desire for reincarnation refers to the dependence of the descent group for its continuity on the renewal of personnel. The consequences of bad relations between kin and between man and wife are sickness, death, and failure to produce and keep children. That the dead should be conceived of both as ancestors - that is as the perpetual guardians and judges of kin morality - and as the reservoir from which the group renews itself is hardly illogical, given the dogma that vitality is a function of harmony and justice in human relations." (Bradbury, 1965, p. 101) Bradbury concludes that much of the ritual and symbolism of Edo mortuary rites derives from the recognition that the continuity of the descent group involves the redistribution and redefinition of statuses and the orderly transmission of jural authority through the generations.

Concern with the relation of descent, inheritance and succession to ancestor worship is the central point in Goody's examination of the mortuary institutions of the LoDagaa. These people live near the border of Ghana with Upper Volta, and divide themselves into two groups: the LoWiili and the LoDagaba. There is double descent, so that every person belongs to a patriclan and a matriclan. But only among the LoDagaba are the matriclans property-holding. Among LoWiili, all property is inherited patrilineally, while

LoDagaba inherit immovable property patrilineally, and movable property matrilineally. The inhabitants themselves attribute a number of differences between their two societies to this difference in inheritance, especially in the relationships between close kin. Goody's aim in his book is to examine the validity of this assumed correlation, and to do this he takes the system of rights to property and examines the way in which these are handed down from one generation to the next. The transmission of these rights, a process made inevitable by the inescapable fact of death, occurs, obviously, between close kin at death. Goody's analysis shows how closely the funeral ceremonies, ideas of the afterlife and the worship of the ancestors are bound up with the system of inheritance and succession. Men who have died childless, and those who have suffered an evil death are denied an ancestor shrine. Among the Tallensi, the custodianship of the shrines coincides with the distribution of authority within the lineage; their handing over in itself confers a lineage position upon the holder. There is no such close overlap among the LoDagaa. The byre of the senior member of a lineage does not necessarily contain the shrine of the founding ancestor. Although the elder may make an attempt to move it, mystical trouble is often traced to this disturbance, and the shrine has then to be returned to its original resting place. But even if it is not kept

in his house, the senior member is still responsible for seeing that the proper ceremonies are carried out, and it is he who addresses the founder's shrine at any sacrifice made on behalf of the lineage as a whole.

Offerings to the ancestors are made both regularly and in special circumstances. Some regular offerings are connected with the seasonal rhythm of production, others occur at set stages in the life cycle and are mainly centred upon the physical and social processes of reproduction. There are no planting rituals, but there are two post-harvest ceremonies, the Earth Shrine Festival, involving every compound in the ritual area, and the General Thanksgiving Festival, carried out by local descent groups or sections of them. At the latter occasion, fowls and crops are offered at ancestor shrines, especially the shrines of founding members of the local agnatic descent group. The thanksgiving sacrifices to the ancestors provide a focus of great importance for the religious activities of the lineage.

Rites involving the ancestors are also carried out on occasions of birth, marriage and death. Every child is born in the presence of an ancestor shrine, and three months after its birth a diviner will be consulted about a spirit guardian for it. The ancestors have vested interests in the rights over a new wife's reproductive services, for any child born of that woman is a member of the lineage, no

matter who the genitor may be. An expiatory sacrifice has to be made to the ancestors when adultery is committed. At a marriage, one of the bridewealth cattle received for a daughter has to be sacrificed to the founding ancestor of the lineage, although this rarely takes place until some misfortune has happened to remind the living of what they owe the dead. A man has an obligation to offer the ancestors part of the goods he acquires not only by incoming bride-wealth payments, but also by inheritance, farming, hunting, wage labour and other economic activities. Using property-holding as the criterion of corporateness, only the LoDagaba have corporate matriclans and patriclans, though both groups recognize double clanship in other contexts. This difference in the inheritance systems explains the differences which occur at sacrifices in times of affliction in the two communities. At such times sacrifices are demanded by the ancestors "but a man can only return by sacrifice what he has received", i.e., a man sacrifices to the ancestors who belong to the same wealth-holding corporation as himself. But these offerings are rarely, if ever, made when they first become due. In time of misfortune, a diviner will tell a man which of the supernatural agencies is responsible. For example, if the client has been a successful farmer, it is likely that the diviner will tell him that the ancestors are angry because they have not yet received a portion of

the gains that are their due.

These sacrifices are not gifts, because both living and dead have joint rights in the same property, while a gift is surely a transaction between members of different property-holding corporations. Moreover, most of the sacrifices that the LoDagaa make to specific ancestors are expiatory in form, fulfilling neglected obligations and offering to the spirits what was already owed to them for other reasons. Indeed, every man at all times lies under an obligation to the ancestors. From the general point of view, he can never repay the weighty benefits he has received from his forebears, and on the particular level there is always some service to the dead that he is behind with.

The differences between forms of ancestor worship among the two sections of the LoDagaa can be related to the differences in the rules for transmission of property rights. Among the LoWiili sacrifices are most commonly made to fathers and close agnates, because "the donor had accumulated wealth with the aid of his agnatic ancestors and had now to make a return prestation". (Goody, 1962, p. 376)

Recipients of sacrifices among the LoDagaba include both close agnates and matrilineal kinsmen, as one might expect. On the view that in the main it is those from whose death one benefits that one fears as ancestors (Goody, p. 410), one could predict this, just as one would expect tension

between the holder of an estate and the heir to it. A LoWiili man has power of life and death over his agnatic descendants, and his authority is reinforced by his custodianship of his dead father's shrine. The LoDagaba mother's brother shares authority over a man with his father - consequently there are sacrifices to both kinds of ancestor. In both cases the heirs gain control of money and livestock only at the death of the holder. When death comes, it arouses joy as well as sadness, the inheritance arouses guilt as well as pleasure. For all concerned accept hostile thoughts as a sign of complicity. The idea that the bereaved had a hand in the death that is being mourned pervades a number of the rites at a LoDagaba funeral. So in one sense, the tension between holder and heir still exists after the death. It is important to remember that the corporate group consists of both living and dead, and that the position and powers of property holders is in no way diminished at death. The ancestors are still authority figures, who maintain the norms of social action and cause trouble if these are not obeyed. (N.B. Goody recorded no instance of a sacrifice arising out of misfortune attributed to a dead father among the LoDagaba.)

As with the Tallensi, the distribution of authority in the lineage is linked with the computation of the genealogy and with the officiation at sacrifices. The main

difference lies in the greater degree of individuality involved among the LoDagaa, since a shrine is created for each adult man during the course of the funeral ceremonies. His translation is thus automatic, and only in rare cases does it become the subject of conflicts among his descendants. Moreover, this means that lineage seniors do not control all approaches to the ancestors. Even a younger son may have independent access to his dead father if he builds his own house, for he can take with him a provisional shrine; and, as mentioned before, the shrine of the founding ancestor is not always found in the byre of the senior member of the lineage. Perhaps this situation reflects the relative lack of emphasis on the lineage head's authority over the group as a whole; the ability to obtain obedience to commands does not extend far beyond adjacent generations of close kin in domestic groups. Worship of the ancestors provides sanctions on relationships between members of the descent group in two ways: by giving supernatural support to the system of authority and by the threat of mystical retribution in life and in death. By transmitting property at their death, the dead do not relinquish all rights in the goods; for as ancestors they continue to belong to the same property-holding corporations that they belonged to in life and are entitled to share in the gains that accrue to their descendants. Consequently, these living descendants always see themselves

in debt to the dead. People who harbour hostility suspect themselves of complicity in the death of a near kinsman, and hence they fear as ancestors those from whose death they had most to gain. In this way, death, inheritance, descent and succession are inextricably bound up with ancestor worship among the LoDagaa.



## CHAPTER VIII

### ANCESTORS AND AUTHORITY

In all the foregoing analyses we have been considering the roles and statuses of people. The personality and character, the virtues or vices, success or failures, popularity or unpopularity, of a person during his lifetime make no difference to his attainment of ancestorhood. So long as a man dies leaving a son, he becomes an ancestor of equal standing with any other ancestor, with the (believed) power to intervene in the life and affairs of his descendants in exactly the same way as any other ancestor. For, to paraphrase Professor Fortes, ancestor worship is a representation or extension of the authority component in the jural relations of successive generations; it is not a duplication, in a supernatural idiom, of the total complex of affective, educative and supportive relationships manifested in child-rearing, or in marriage, or in any other form of association, however long-lasting and intimate, between kinsmen, neighbours, or friends. It is not the whole man but his jural status as the parent (or parental personage, in matrilineal systems) vested with authority and responsibility, that is transmuted into ancestorhood.

Consideration of Ashanti data should make this even

clearer. The Ashanti are a matrilineal society in Ghana. An Ashanti father has a specially intimate personal relationship with his children during their infancy. He takes a direct responsibility for their upbringing which the mother's brother does not normally have. And the unique moral relationship thus engendered is recognized in the belief that the father's sunsum (his personality conceptualised as a personal soul) influences the well-being of his child because they have a common ntoro (male kinship spirit). It stands to reason that a father will live on in his child's memory much more vividly and affectionately after his death than will a mother's brother. But it is the latter and not the former who may have a stool dedicated to him and becomes the ancestor for purposes of worship. For ancestor worship is a lineage cult, among the Ashanti as elsewhere; a cult that is, in Fortes' terminology, of the basic politico-jural unit of Ashanti society, not of the domestic unit in which both parents count. Those who are enshrined and venerated as ancestors are thus not those whose memory is strongest among their children, but those who exercise over them legitimate jural authority.

What I have said about the personality and conduct of a man making no difference to his attainment of ancestorhood applies equally to the oldest living son (in patrilineal societies) who has the main responsibility for the ritual

tendance and service of his parent ancestors. The responsibility for the funeral rites for his parents are unavoidably his, no matter what his character, and so are the consequential, life-long duties of ancestor-worship.

Similarly, there are set ways in which the ancestors are expected and permitted to behave, regardless of their lifetime characters. A devoted and conscientious father will cause illness, misfortune and disturbance in his descendants' lives after his death, in the same way as will a scoundrel and a mean and bad-tempered parent. All ancestors exact ritual service, and their punishment for failure in service is the same whether this failure is witting or unwitting. They do not punish for wickedness or reward for virtues, as these are defined by human standards. The unpredictability and generally punitive rather than beneficent behaviour of the ancestors is the subject of a paper by May Edel, which I shall summarise later on, but for the purpose of the present argument we can agree that while ancestors do not punish wrong-doing and reward virtue, their behaviour is not entirely capricious. They are better thought of as ultimate judges whose vigilance is directed towards restoring discipline and order in compliance with the norms of right and duty, friendship and piety, whenever transgressions occur. When misfortune occurs and is divined as punitive intervention by the ancestors, they are believed to have acted rightfully,

not wantonly. Fortes, in arguing that authority and right may be accepted as just, as attributes of the ancestors, but that they cannot but be felt at times to be coercive and arbitrary, links this with the ambivalence which marks the experience of filial dependence among the Tallensi. We have dealt before with the functions of the avoidance and respect behaviour required of children towards their parents. To counterbalance latent opposition and secure loyalty in spite of it, familiarity and affection are also invoked and allowed conventional expression. Benevolence and affection, hospitality and largesse, are necessary concomitants of authority but their function is only to make it tolerable. For it is the authority and jurisdiction of parents that is marked in their worship as ancestors. This is why, considering West African data, Fortes defines ancestor worship as a body of religious beliefs, rites and rules of conduct, which help to reinforce the principle of jural authority and legitimate right as an inviolable and sacrosanct value-principle of the social system (Fortes, 1965, p. 136). Ancestor worship puts the final source of jural authority and right beyond challenge. Though parents die, they leave behind a web of kinship and descent relationships and the norms, value and beliefs they have inculcated in their children, and the symbolism and imagery used in ancestor worship serves to clarify the fact that, though parents

depart, the authority and jurisdiction they wielded survives and continues after their death.

Consideration of these factors leads Fortes to speculate that perhaps we are dealing with the existence in all societies of something like a general factor of jural authority, which pervades all social relations, and which may be complied with or accepted through the threat of sanctions, or by reason of habits, beliefs or ingrained sentiments. Succession insures that authority and right do not die with the men who hold them. "The nuclear context for the experience and for the transmission of legitimate authority is the relationship of successive generations". "Ancestors are apt to be demanding, persecutory and interfering for one reason because parents appear thus to their children when they are exercising authority over them, but also, in the wider sense, because this is a particularly effective way of presenting the sovereignty of authority and right." (Fortes, 1965, pp. 139, 140)

Turner adduces evidence from the Ndembu that lend support to Fortes' hypothesis. Among these matrilineal people it is the mother and grandmother who return most often as shades to afflict or assist their living kinswomen.

This pattern of affliction by close matrilineal kin often affecting the reproductive capacities, is consistent with Meyer Fortes' hypothesis that the ancestor cult is mainly concerned with the transmission of juralty per se from one generation

to another, and that this partly accounts for the harshness and punitiveness of ancestral intervention in the affairs of their descendants. For even gentle and amicable persons are credited after their death with the ability to bring disease, barrenness and other trouble upon their kin. It is the 'hardness' of law, the obligatoriness involved in performing a social role, that are symbolized by the actions of the shades and the character traits of the person do not enter into the reckoning. Similarly it is the power of organized society that is symbolized by the benevolence of the shades - once they have been publicly recognized and propitiated. (Turner, 1968, p. 79)

Clearly, most of the African data we have looked at shows that not only are certain ritually treated ancestors regarded as points of reference for the determination of units of lineage structure, but more importantly there is, in Fortes' words, a tight relationship between the transfer of jural authority and property rights from a recently dead man to his son and the worship by that son of his father.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE LUGBARA

The ethnographic material on ancestor worship in East and Central Africa is no less rich than that from West Africa. I shall be adducing data on the Kaguru of Tanzania, the Lugbara, Amba and Banyoro of Uganda, the Plateau Tonga of Zambia, and the Lovedu of South Africa.

The Lugbara of the Congo-Uganda border are a non-Bantu speaking people with an agnatic lineage system. Middleton's excellent analysis of their religion shows, basically, how men compete for the privilege of cursing their juniors with misfortune, for failure to acknowledge their seniority (J. Middleton, *Lugbara Religion: Ritual and Authority among an East African People*, 1960). For certain offences are followed by mystical sanctions and by sacrifice to ghosts. These sanctions are put into operation and controlled by living people, who claim the power both to interpret the actions and motives of the dead and to intercede with them to withdraw the sanctions when the time is appropriate.

The Lugbara conceive of their ancestors as intervening in two ways. They can appear as the collective body of the ancestors of a lineage, for whom collective shrines

are set up, and from whom sickness can be sent to the living. Or they can appear as individual ancestors "in certain situations which are significant in relation to responsible kinship behaviour and authority" (Middleton, 1960, p. 33). It is this second category that Middleton calls 'ghosts'. These ghosts may be recently dead or the apical ancestors of lineages. In either case a ghost, "who is defined by his having a shrine for himself, is a respected ancestor and so also a responsible one". (ibid., p. 34)

Lugbara have an ideal of the unity of the lineage and of peaceful cooperation among its members. But at the same time, men are ambitious and want power, although for a man to be accused of personal ambition is to label him a deviant from the ideal, a man who thinks more of his own position than that of the welfare of the members of the lineage. Now the balance between legitimate ambition and lust for power, between good industriousness and over-conspicuous selfish success, between reasonable and too much luck, between admired skill and the exhibition of others' deficiencies, as Gluckman says, is a very fine one. This is in addition to the problem of distributing one's scarce means to satisfy all one's watchful and numerous fellows' rightful demands, and those of one's spirits. In the context of these interrelated groups, striving for legitimate power becomes rising at other people's expense.



Upright behaviour to some becomes defaulting to others.

"Lugbara realise that men are ambitious and want authority. They also realise that it is proper for them to do so, but that some men try to acquire authority which they should not possess, and that others abuse it when they have acquired it." This problem, of when men may legitimately seek and possess authority, naturally involves competition with elders, and together with the question of when a man in authority is abusing it, is framed in mystical terms. "An elder who is insulted and disobeyed by a junior is said to feel 'ole' (indignation) because his status in the lineage is thereby dishonoured; but an ambitious and selfish man who must obey a senior also feels 'ole', although in this case it is not indignation as such but rather envy or resentment at not getting his own way." (Middleton, 1960, p. 82) In the first case, the elder has the power legitimately to curse his subordinates by invoking ancestral spirits' wrath against them. The second kind of 'ole' motivates witches. Middleton's analysis shows clearly the closeness to one another of ancestral right and wrongful witchcraft.

When a subordinate suffers a misfortune, his elders and even his competing near-equals will strive to be divined as the righteous invoker of ancestral wrath. This would validate a claim to authority over the subordinate. When a lineage is about to segment and claim independence, then

its senior male will try to have himself divined as the invoker of ancestral wrath against his and his competitors common dependant. A group that is about to segment in fact shows a high frequency of claims to invocation, both by its senior elder and by the heads of its component segments. Conversely, if it seems that the power of a family head has caused the misfortune to one of the dependants of a rival, the struggle will be to have this declared to be a use of witchcraft, and not the invocation of the ancestors. In general, fear of being thought a witch stops a senior man from being too overbearing and abusing his powers of ghost invocation, for a group within which there is much conflict being played out in ritual terms may appear to outsiders and members alike to be riddled by witchcraft. Witchcraft is a symptom of a dissension and tension, and high amount of accusation and invocation are said by lineage members to show that all is not well with the group, and that segmentation should take place to resolve the internal tensions and quarrels. In other words, the patterns of invocation and witchcraft accusations are closely connected with patterns of lineage segmentation.

Through time, segments within the lineage become large enough to seek independence, and begin to require more land than is available to them while they live with their fellows in one village. Social values demand that they remain

together: economic factors and 'legitimate ambition' drive them apart. These problems and conflicts are worked out in terms of compulsions exerted by mystical agents. The social values are embodied in proper kinship behaviour, infringement of which will cause the dead to send sickness. The dead do so either at the invocation of living kin or on their own responsibility. Oracles are consulted to discover which. The sickness is lifted by the promise of a sacrifice - which is performed after recovery. At the communion that follows the sacrifice, the lineage group is seen as composed of men whose hearts contain no anger: here is represented the ideal of a stable kin-group. It is contrasted to the unstable and intrigue-ridden kin-group of actuality, and communion removes the idea of this unstable group and so removes the instability.

Segmentation and amalgamation of lineages, which take place primarily at the minimal lineage level, occur and are chiefly meaningful in ritual situations, at which realignment actually occurs. They are the only occasions at which all the members of the local community, or their representatives, living and dead, meet together. The reason for their meeting is the occurrence of sickness brought in response to certain anti-social actions, which have destroyed or weakened the kin ties which compose the social relations of a given group. At the meeting a new balance of authority

comes into being. Lugbara usually conceive of the situation as being one in which the status quo is restored: they regard their society as being unchanging. But this is by no means so. The reorganization of relations is carried out by being recognized, in fact, in Middleton's words - in ritual. The giving of the ritual address is important in this context: for it tells of the accepted pattern of organization and provides mythical and legendary validation for it.

"Our ancestors" are seen by Lugbara as good people who set an example that men should follow and who maintained the social order and of social behaviour merely by their having lived as they are said to have lived. They were not stupid or weak as men are today, but always had the interests of the lineage at heart and behaved as senior and respected men should do, 'slowly', and with dignity. "Our ancestors" are considered to have been men of integrity and worth. Offerings made to them are made with sincerity, and their right to send sickness to their descendants is not begrudged them: it is proper that they should do so. The living act as temporary caretakers of the prosperity, prestige and general well-being of the lineage, on behalf of the ancestors who did the same during their lives. Middleton suggests that Lugbara are not aware at every moment of the day that their ancestors are watching them either to chide or guard them.

It is only when sickness appears, if sent by the dead, that the more or less latent relationship between the living and the dead is actualised. In everyday life people merely know that the dead take an interest in them, and expect to be respected by having meat and beer placed for them at their shrines. The living should speak well of them and follow their precepts and especially the words said on their death-beds to their children. The proper relationship between dead and living is for the former to stay quietly under the huts, which they will do so long as they are contented and well-treated. The relationship becomes precise and meaningful at sacrifice, when it acquired a social content by becoming part of the set of ties that compose an actual network of relations of authority between living men. So, here again, as in West Africa, we are dealing with problems arising from the distribution and extent of jural authority.

Now a man has no jural authority in his family and lineage, whatever his standing may be in wealth or influence or prestige, if he has no ancestors and until he acquires the status which permits him to officiate in the cult of his ancestors. Authority can come only by assumed devotion from ancestors, can be acquired only by succession. Conflicts of authority arise, both between the lineage elder and the heads of families, and also between these heads of families, and also between these heads of families

and their sons. As the authority of the senior men and fathers is questioned more and more, they have to use the authority of the dead (by invocation) to enforce their own authority. During the period before the group finally segments into two or more new lineages, the heads of the competing segments invoke the ghosts no longer merely against their own dependants, but also attempt to invoke the dead against each other's dependants. If a man can show that the dead have listened to his invocation against a dependant of one of his rivals in the lineage, this is tantamount to their showing that they have confidence in him alone, and no confidence in his rival. Final segmentation occurs typically only at the death of an elder who has managed to hold the group together while alive.

The cult of the dead, therefore, operates in the attempt to resolve conflict, to sustain and regulate lineage authority, and to validate changes in its distribution. The rites of the cult of the dead are performed at points of crisis in the perpetual process of realignment in relations of authority in the lineage. These points occur when there are changes in the internal structure of the lineage as men reach various stages of social maturity, and as resources in land, women and livestock are redistributed to meet changing needs of the lineage members. Incidentally, the Lugbara conception of witchcraft makes it impossible for them

to think of witches as a separate class of people. They use the same word ('ole') for the feeling of anger at the wrongdoing of others which can inspire the ancestral ghosts to punish the wrongdoers, as for the envy felt at the success of others, which can bring harm to the envied. If a man causes sickness where he has no authority to do so, he is practicing witchcraft. Thus the same action is or is not witchcraft according to the attitude of the people looking at it; it is those who are seeking to establish their own position as independent elders who make the accusation of witchcraft.

## CHAPTER X

### BUNYORO, BWAMBA AND KAGURU

Bunyoro is a kingdom also in western Uganda, not far from the Lugbara (J. Beattie, 1964, pp. 127-151). As among the Lugbara, but unlike the Tallensi, there is no elaboration of a hierarchy of ancestors corresponding to the relationships of clans and lineages. Again like the Lugbara, the dead become socially relevant only when illness or other misfortune strikes. But unlike the Lugbara dead, the dead among the Banyoro cannot be invoked. They only act on their own behalf. They generally attack people against whom they had a grudge in life, so that when ghostly activity is diagnosed, the ghost is usually that of someone who was injured or offended before he died - or in certain cases of someone whose ghost was neglected after he died. Obviously the belief that ghosts can injure and even kill living people, and that they are likely to do this if they were ill-treated or neglected, is a powerful incentive to treat one's fellow men properly, and serves as a powerful sanction for conformity with accepted social norms. For the most part, ghosts are feared, not loved, and much of the ritual concerned with them is aimed at keeping them at a distance, rather than achieving closer relations with them. This is



clearly only to be expected if they only become relevant when misfortune strikes. Bunyoro say that when a relative dies, he ceases to think of his kin as "his" people; as a ghost he no longer takes a warm and friendly human interest in the welfare of his living kin, as his own flesh and blood. Other than ghostly vengeance, misfortune may be divined as caused by sorcery, or by one or more of the wide range of nonhuman spirits.

Thus the ghost cult is essentially a moral one. For the Bunyoro, as for members of many Western European societies not so long ago, illness and other misfortune are thought of as being somehow "deserved". And just as orthodox Christianity threatened wrongdoers with hell-fire in the afterlife, so the Bunyoro ghost cult threatens them with illness or other misfortune in this life.

The hierarchy of subordination and superordination in the political sphere, between affines, especially mother's brother and sister's son, in the sphere of kinship obligations, and between slaves and their owners, is a relationship which is reversed in ritual, so that the subordinate after death will be more dangerous. The more 'outside' a ghost is, the more dangerous it can be. Ghosts of a man's mother's brother and of his sister's son are more dangerous than that of his father. In fact, the most dangerous of all ghosts is that of a sister's son. Unrelated ghosts are among the

most dangerous, a fact clearly linked with the fear in daily life of outsiders - slaves, members of other clans, strangers.

The Bunyoro can hardly be described as ancestor worshippers, but the ghosts of the father and the father's father are nonetheless regarded as important, and sacrifices and other attentions should be given to them from time to time. Such sacrifices provide occasions for feasting. The ghost of a man's dead father is thought to retain some concern for the well-being of his sons and his other descendants. A person may look to his father (and to other patrilineal ghosts) for support, as he does to his father while he is alive. Just as people are dependent on the good will of ghosts, or at best on the suspension of their ill-will, so ghosts are also thought to be dependent on people who, through rites of sacrifice and possession, provide them with what they need. Like most of their social relationships, the Bunyoro's relationships with ghosts are ambivalent.

We have seen how the Lugbara dead punish breaches of proper kinship behaviour by their descendants, while the Bunyoro dead merely take vengeance for injuries suffered while they were alive. In both cases the power of the dead acts as a sanction for conformity to accepted norms of behaviour, but in one case the sanction is a delayed punishment. A further variation in the interest shown by people

in their ancestors is provided by the Amba, also of western Uganda (E. H. Winter, 1956, Ch. V). Here, although the ancestors reveal themselves again by causing illness or misfortune, or in dreams, they show an Olympian detachment from the moral order. The Amba live in large compact villages, which are composed of agnatic lineage kin, with some immigrants, especially sister's sons.

The cult of the ancestors consists in regular sacrifices made to them, both as a matter of course and when it is believed that they have brought about some misfortune, such as sickness. For the ancestors are seen as individuals who must continually be pacified in order to keep them in good humour. They do not normally punish individuals for infringement of the social norms. Thus if a man does not aid his brother to gather the necessary bridewealth, he does not have to fear any punishment by the ancestors. Should he subsequently fall ill, he does not suspect that he has angered the ancestors and that he is now being punished for his meanness. The only thing that the ancestors do punish is the failure of their descendants to sacrifice to them often enough. Amba believe that misdeeds are punished automatically - and this punishment is not linked with the ancestors. So, by regular sacrifices, a man hopes to ensure that at least one area of potential trouble will be eliminated from his life and thus he will be able to devote

his attention to other obstacles in daily life. Unfortunately, there is no absolute certainty in the efficacy of regular sacrifices because at times ancestors cause misfortunes completely arbitrarily. Dead parents sometimes appear to their children in dreams and point out to them that they have committed a misdemeanour. They may also advise their children to do the right thing. This Winter sees as the operation of the individual's conscience in terms of internalised norms, rather than as a contribution to the system of sanctions by the ancestor cult.

Filial piety is one of the main reasons for sacrificing to the ancestors, for normally a man sacrifices to the ancestors of his own lineage as a matter of course, but also sacrifices are made in order to prevent the ancestors from causing trouble, or if they have already done so, in order that they may cease their attacks. As elsewhere in Africa, sacrifices are made almost entirely by men, and by men whose fathers are dead. For a son to sacrifice in his father's presence is considered an usurpation of the father's role, which is tantamount to a death wish against the father.

Winter claims, rather weakly, I feel, that although the ancestor cult has little concern with the moral order, it is probably of indirect significance in that it increases the sense of group identification and group solidarity among the members of the lineage. This acquires increased importance

due to the fact that the system places so much emphasis upon subjective feelings of solidarity to achieve group harmony, as his analysis shows. However, it should be noted that the ancestor cult is only of significance for members of the lineage and thus it is not tied directly to the local community.

The Kaguru of Tanzania provide an example of the classic type of ancestor worship (T. O. Beidelman, 1964, pp. 109-137). They are matrilineal people, with localised clans and lineages. The Kaguru world of beings is divided into two halves, between which persons are perpetually exchanged. The newborn come from the land of the spirits and ghosts must be comforted for the temporary loss of their fellows. The dead cannot speak and can only make their wants known through a disturbance of the normal order of human affairs or a disturbance of natural phenomena. These disturbances must then be interpreted through divination, to find out their meaning and moral significance. If the dead are disturbed by some immorality of the living or because they have been forgotten by their kin, they will cause misfortune. Thus a quarrel between kin is believed often to end in the intervention of the ancestral ghosts who cause difficulties until the dispute is settled. When continued disaster cannot be traced to any infraction of morality, to a witch, or to the forgetful neglect of the dead, these dead may then be

sought to intercede with the highest power of all, God, for help.

Kaguru beliefs in the power of the ancestral dead links up with social conformity and cohesion not only because infractions are thought to bring on the harmful vengeance of the dead, but also because only senior members of the groups involved are able to propitiate these dead. Such beliefs further provide Kaguru with an explanation for troubles and misfortunes which otherwise would not be easily accountable within their moral system. Finally such beliefs with all their associated symbols have as a consequence the reinforcement of the values associated with the most important Kaguru social group, the matriclan, or matrilineage.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE PLATEAU TONGA AND PATTERNS OF MORAL SANCTIONING

Evidence in greater detail on the role of ancestor worship in the life of a matrilineal people is provided by Elizabeth Colson for the Plateau Tonga of Zambia (E. Colson, 1954, 47:21-68). These are a people without chiefs, whose society is complicatedly integrated. Individuals and groups are linked together through a wide variety of different types of ties, all enforced by various pressures, including mystical sanctions. The crosscutting of these ties is so complicated that it is virtually impossible for permanent hostilities to continue, despite the absence of chiefly authority. If a man seeks to act in terms of one set of obligations, he is faced by counter-demands in other sets, and his entanglement of obligations will lead him to seek an equitable or compromise solution in terms of a moral code - which is mystically validated by spiritual powers. It is doubtful that the system would work without this mystical validation. Colson decided, in her analysis, to use the Tonga word 'mizimu' instead of ancestors, because of differences in Tonga and English usages. When a Tonga dies, he is believed to leave two spirits: a 'ghost', originating at his death, and a mizimu, which was given him at birth. As a person matures

and takes a position of responsibility in his matrilineage, his Muzimu becomes eligible to turn into an ancestral spirit at death. Thus only those who have achieved a certain status can become ancestral spirits after death.

Each person receives his initial position within society as a member of his own matrilineal group and as a child of his father's matrilineal group. The two groups indicate their acceptance of responsibility for him by giving him a name which is associated with a guardian muzimu. During childhood and youth, the person is equally dependent upon his two groups, and their role in his life is roughly similar. The guardian mizimu may thus be viewed as symbols of the identification of a person with his kinship groups. As well as guardian mizimu, there are mizimu for the whole matrilineal group. Tonga say: "We are members of the same group because we share the same mizimu".

Although the Tonga see the matrilineal group as a unit held together by a mystical relationship involving a common set of mizimu, the mizimu are seldom invoked to enforce the obligations of kinship. The mizimu are thought to send illness because they want offerings, and not because they wish to punish internal dissensions within the group, or to uphold a more general morality. In part this may be due to the fact that the Tonga do not conceive of the mizimu as having a more moral nature than they themselves. The



mizimu are neutral in disputes between kinsmen. Colson suggests that this indifference can be related to the diffused nature of the obligations of kinship arising from the dogma that the group is undifferentiated. The Tonga insist that all members of the group have equal rights and obligations. The mizimu are believed to leave men free to settle their own affairs, hampered from intervention by the dogma that they are equally attached to all members of the group rather than to smaller units within it.

Although there is no notion that the mizimu would intervene to restore harmony between quarrelling kin, there is a notion of an automatic punishment for intra-kin group offences, as among Amba.

Colson gives as a summary a list of correlations between the cult of the mizimu and the social structure and way of life of the people. We have noted that the possibility of the mizimu of the matrilineal groups of either parent affecting one reflects the affiliation of each individual with the two matrilineal groups of his parents. Connected with the system of matrilineal inheritance and descent is the belief that at death one's own muzimu is inherited by one's matrilineal successor. The cult of the mizimu unites the whole group and the undifferentiated nature of the cult reflects the undifferentiated nature of the matrilineal group, for mizimu may affect any member of the matrilineal

line. There is no instituted formal leadership, and no one plays the part of priest to make offerings to the mizimu on behalf of the group as a whole, or of any unit within it. Thus every adult may approach the mizimu of his line. Because of the local dispersal of the matrilineal group, there are no local shrines for the propitiation of the mizimu. The mizimu are primarily concerned with the household and all that concerns it, and the importance of the household is reflected in the belief that only men and women who have formed their own households become mizimu in their own right when they die. Within the household the mizimu of the husband are supreme, and may send illness to the husband, wife and children. This is clearly because of the dominant role of the husband as representative of the household.

Gluckman, in arguing for the role of religion in the maintenance of order in stateless societies, gives the example of the New Guinea taboo on eating your own pig or that of a close relative, so that you are compelled in the end to give it to others and to seek pigs from them. The Nuer are a patrilineal people without instituted chiefs. Despite the emphasis on patrilineality, the curse a man most fears is that of his mother's brother, a member of another patrilineage. Although the maternal uncle can bless his nephew, his curse "is belived to be among the worst, if not the worst, a Nuer can receive, for, unlike the father, a

maternal uncle may curse a youth's cattle, as well as his crops and fishing and hunting, if he is disobedient or refuses a request or in some other way offends him. The curse may also prevent the nephew from begetting male children" (Evans-Pritchard, 1951, pp. 164-165). Similarly, the Tonga husband's father's spirit, who is a member of neither spouse's matrilineal group, is supposed to oversee the household. Thus frequently ritual and mystical power is strongest where there is least secular power. If a man consistently ignores his obligations, he will naturally lose the support of those persons to whom these are due; and since misfortune happens to all men, but is especially oppressive to those who have lost that support, his fate will in the end justify faith in these beliefs.

Professor de Waal Malefijt suggests that the ancestral gods of the Lovedu of the Transvaal have no interest in the morality of their descendants because living parents do not discipline their children: a parent loves his wayward son as much as he loves his virtuous children, and would never withhold his protection from him. Unfortunately, her exposition of evidence from the Plateau Tonga, to support the opposite correlation, is faulty. As we have seen, the mizimu do not reward the maintenance of norms and punish deviance. Such a correlation, between the amount of disciplining by parents, and the intervention by the dead in

order to uphold social norms, is rather too simple. In fact, the evidence we have reviewed so far from West, East and Central Africa, suggests that very few correlations can safely be made. Even when misfortune is deemed to have come from the ancestors, we have seen that it is not safe to assume that this action of the ancestors is linked in any way to patterns of moral retribution. The data from the Amba and the Plateau Tonga showed that the cause of affliction was nearly always the spirit's desire for offerings, not its interest in punishing a descendant's wrongdoing.

Professor Edel has shown the same thing for the Chiga of south-west Uganda, who hold that the actions of the ancestors are essentially whimsical and selfish (May Edel, pp. 377-380). The malevolent power of a Chiga ancestral spirit has a span of no more than two generations, so that any serious illnesses thought to be caused by such spirits were attributed to a deceased close agnatic kinsman. The cause is always the spirit's desire for offerings. Now it is not the case that the sick descendants can be defaulting on their offerings to the deceased, i.e., that neglect of ritual duties is at issue. For Chiga offerings to ancestors are not set within a framework of automatic requirements. Offerings are made only when, by his smiting someone in the family with illness or other diagnosable misfortune, the deceased has given evidence of a desire to be recognized.

In fact, many Chiga men have no ghost hut to their own dead father, since a father is not considered usually likely to make a nuisance of himself.

Professor Edel suggests that there is a congruence between the extreme unreliability and malevolence of Chiga ancestors, and certain features of the social organization and interpersonal relations. The Chiga kinship system is characterized by a shallow depth and by constant fissioning, and also by a lack of deep bonds of reliance and obligation, even within the small lineage. There is even profound mutual distrust between brothers. In line with this view of social structure congruence, Tallensi ancestors by contrast show deep moral involvement with patrilineal obligations, and this would be so, of course, because of a more permanent bond to a continuing ancestral line, fixed in time and space. However, this feature of malevolence and moral unconcern on the part of the ancestors is not special to the Chiga and other societies with shallow-depth lineage systems. Beside the Amba and Plateau Tonga that we have looked at, it is found in traditional Ruanda. The Ruanda take pride in long genealogies for their lineages, partly perhaps in order to legitimate their possession of the country, and their ruling position in a quasi-caste society. Interpersonal relations within the lineage are not of the type described for the Chiga, and yet the ancestral

spirits are whimsically non-reliable. Clearly the malevolence of the ancestors and the relation of this malevolence to punishment and justice are not so easily explained.

It is possible, as Professor Edel suggests, to compile a list of many different sanctioning devices which would fill the gap left by the moral unconcern of the spirits. All of these evidence the role of human agents in the activation of supernatural forces in moral sanctioning. They would include such devices as the righteous invocation by elders of ancestral wrath among the Lugbara, the role of 'licensed sorcerers' among the Chiga, who use their black magic for socially approved ends such as thief-catching, and the Nyakusa 'breath of men', the unspoken and unconscious curse which takes effect when provoked by wrong-doing, not by sheer malice. Investigation of these would take us away from our concern, but we can see that the relation of the ancestors to the moral structure is not an inevitable one, and that the ancestors are only one type of sanctioning device. When we include sorcerers and witches as functional analogues of the dead, both in the field of moral sanctioning and in the field of responsibility for personal troubles, we are confronted with a bewildering variety; and it is probably that any explanation for these variations would have to involve the collection and evaluation of far more data than are at present available. One thing we can say for certain is that

the dead, and characteristically the recently dead, are held responsible for people's personal misfortunes, sicknesses, failures and deaths. But the dead are not only a cause of personal tragedy: they are also used as a cure. (Here it must be remembered that we are back on the personal level of religion.) For the dead can be invoked by rituals of expiation, propitiation, or the laying of ghosts, to bring relief. Thus, both the explanation for suffering, and its cure, are dealt with on the human level. Whether the dead are indiscriminately malevolent or justly visit harm on descendants for violating moral relations with kinsmen, they are a cause and cure which is readily understandable. Certainty and security are provided, with consequences for social stability and personal adjustment.

Before leaving Africa, mention must be made of McKnight's illuminating analysis of the powers of extra-descent group ancestors. I have already referred to the difficulties raised by the hostility and aggressiveness of maternal ancestors among the patrilineal Tallensi and paternal ancestors among the matrilineal Plateau Tonga for Fortes' theory of ancestor worship as the ritualisation of filial piety, involving as it does ideas of ambivalence and projection. McKnight suggests that Fortes' theory that the latent hostility between father and son in life is converted into the hostility of the father's spirit after death fails

to explain why the mother's spirit among the Tallensi is so powerful, or why extra-descent group ancestors are held to have great power in many African societies. He suggests that the reason why these ancestors are held to have such power is to be sought in the very nature of the descent group. If, as Fortes suggests, we are dealing in many African cases with the existence of a 'lineage principle', then it is easy to understand that outsiders will be regarded with suspicion. Many African peoples have the saying, "We marry those we fight". Among the Tallensi, wives are not incorporated into their husbands' descent groups; thus, they are not members of their sons' descent group. Granted the importance of lineage solidarity, this would seem a reasonable explanation for the hostility of extra-descent group ancestors. For example, they may have power to afflict misfortune on members of an affinally related descent group when bridewealth has not been paid (McKnight, 1967).



CHAPTER XII  
THE NAYARS OF SOUTH INDIA

Professor Kathleen Gough's descriptions of the Nayars of the Malabar coast of India concern those Nayars living in villages in the former Cochin Kingdom and in the former Kottayam Kingdom. In Cochin the Nayars were the professional military caste, while in Kottayam they were cultivating landowners and only occasionally warriors. Some four to seven matrilineal lineages of Nayars occupied the high caste area of the village. These lineages were exogamous, and had a depth of from ten to fifteen generations. They were corporate for certain purposes, but the more significant economic unit was a lineage segment (taravad), whose members jointly owned property including an ancestral house. The eldest man of this group was its legal guardian (karanavan). Among Cochin Nayars, the men tended to be absent from the village for part of each year in military training or war, and it is partly because of this occupational mobility of the men that plural marital unions were customary, both for men and for women. Residence was duolocal. Among Kottayam Nayars, residence was mostly virilocal and avunculocal. There was some polygyny, but polyandry was forbidden. A Cochin Nayar man had no rights in nor obligations to his

children, and exact physiological paternity was clearly often unknown; while Kottayam Nayar fathers had morally though not legally recognized rights in an obligations to their children and a strong affective bond with them.

Professor Gough's analysis of the Nayar cults of the dead is both sociological and psychological (E. K. Gough, 1958, 71:446-478). That is, she attempts "to relate the role-structure and social functions of the cults to those of legal and economic institutions, and to relate the emotional content of the cults to that of certain relationships among the living". The Nayars participate in three kinds of cults of the dead. The first is a collective cult, by the taravad, which is the matrilineal property group, of the ghosts of matrilineal forebears, i.e., lineage ghosts. The second comprises various kinds of offerings by individuals to the spirits of dead kinfolk at funerals or on the anniversaries of deaths. The third comprises various cults of the ghosts of persons who were not members of the Nayar's own lineage - 'alien ghosts'. Here we are concerned mainly with the cult of lineage ghosts. We shall be using the ethnographic present.

On the days when offerings are made to propitiate the lineage ghosts, food is cooked and placed on a plantain leaf for each ghost. These leaves are placed by the karavanavan before the stools of the ghosts in the shrine room which

is contained in each traditional Nayar house. The shrines of taravads of aristocratic lineages may contain recordings of twenty or more karanavans extending back over two or three hundred years. Commoner Nayars, caring somewhat less for their ancestry, have sometimes only three or four stools for their lineage ghosts and remember only those who died within the last hundred years or those whose lives were in some way remarkable. Regular offerings are made only to karanavans, for not only are they the ones who have legal authority but only their names tend to appear in documents which survive for posterity. In emergency a taravad may, on the advice of an astrologer, propitiate the ghost of an ancestress or of a man who died before becoming a karanavan; but such ghosts are always those of people who died within the lifetime of living members. There are regular days during the year for the propitiation of lineage ghosts. A few minutes after the food has been offered, the karanavan reopens the door of the shrine and distributes the food, to be eaten by all members of the taravad. The taravad men may become drunk on the toddy and arrack served with the food, and in this condition one or more young men might undergo possession by one of the ghosts, dancing frenziedly and calling out with the voice of the ghost, declaring its will and thanking or threatening the taravad on its behalf.

In some taravads, propitiation of lineage ghosts accompanies that of various deities associated with the taravad,

especially the lineage's patron goddess.

The ghosts may inflict misfortunes on one or more members of the group because of failure in hospitality to guests, or if income is squandered, or property neglected. But the offence most likely to provoke retribution is failure to propitiate the ghosts correctly. On the other hand, if offerings are made correctly, they will help preserve the taravad from misfortune. To some extent all ghosts are capricious: a small offence may provoke stern retribution, even upon another member of the taravad. Sometimes vengeance may be wreaked by a forebear who was injured or insulted by juniors even down to the seventh or eighth generation. The ghosts vary in their severity and in the wrongs they are held to punish. For example, a karanavan who amassed much property is very likely to resent extravagance on the part of his successors. Those who died prematurely are held to be more punitive than those who died peacefully in old age. Many kinds of sickness, barrenness, miscarriage, crop failure and the deaths of babies or cows are attributed to the wrath of ancestors, but these misfortunes may also be inflicted by the lineage goddess or by alien ghosts, or by witchcraft or sorcery. Nayars do not restrict particular misfortunes to particular agents. On the occasion of a misfortune, the karanavan often consults the village astrologer to discover the responsible agent. The astrologer then advises how to propitiate it or control it. Clearly, in small villages

whose population is stable, it is not too difficult for the astrologer to know all the affairs of his clients and thus to diagnose appropriate causes for their misfortunes.

Judicial functions among the Nayars were held by the karanavans, village headmen, district chiefs, caste assemblies, and by kings or Rajas. Different kinds of offence were tried by different of these authorities. The legal rights of the karanavan, for example, were the punishment of offences within the taravad and of offences against caste law for which the caste assembly held the taravad responsible until justice had been done; expulsion from the taravad for incest and murder within the lineage; and, in the case of grave insubordination by a junior member, denial of maintenance or access to the ancestral house until he mended his behaviour.

Gough claims that it is because human authorities of various kinds had strong judicial functions, deriving from their incorporation in a kingdom, that supernatural agencies have played only a minor part in punishing offences between men. (They would continue to punish offences against themselves, of course.) This argument, if valid (although contrary instances can be pointed out) would seem to contradict that of Fortes. Instead of putting the final source of jural authority and right beyond challenge, as Fortes claims for the Tallensi, the Nayar supernatural agents primarily acted to force the human authorities to carry out their judicial duties, especially

following failure to excommunicate for sin, or when a crime such as incest goes undetected or unpunished. And, although the lineage ghosts had only subsidiary judicial functions, their cult served in many ways indirectly to maintain right relations within the taravad.

Firstly, the ghosts provided some sanctions against a karanavan's misdemeanours, by bringing misfortune on his taravad if he disgraces its reputation for hospitality or squandered its property or wronged subordinates. This is important when we remember that the karanavan is not chosen by his wards and cannot easily be manipulated or removed by them. Part of the karanavan's duty to the ancestors is to provide happy and prosperous offspring, as well as to ensure their good conduct. These offspring, by their own later ancestral offerings, will save their forbears' spirits, and the karanavan's, from suffering in the life after death. The karanavan also has the responsibility to his juniors to ensure the favour of the ghosts, but if he does not keep the taravad in good order the lineage ghosts may inflict suffering on all, including himself.

The taravad is an economic and legal corporation; property is jointly owned, and the debts of one are a group responsibility; male members support each other in feuds against other lineages; there is collective responsibility in most social and legal affairs. The whole taravad is polluted if one member breaks a caste rule, or if a birth or a death occurs.

Because the ghosts are seen as a common threat to all members of the taravad, for all may suffer from their anger at the offence of one person, the ghost cult enhances the sense of unity and common destiny of taravad members. Collective responsibility is carried into the realm of supernatural sanctions, and the concept of being members one of another in secular affairs is projected into the realm of mystical retributions.

Thirdly, the cult of the lineage dead shares with the other cults of the dead in providing one explanation for misfortunes, and offers a course of action by which these may supposedly be allayed.

Finally, the cult reflects the legal and economic power and judicial authority of men in the taravad, as opposed to women. Women are excluded from the shrine on days of propitiation. They played a very minor part in economic production, for most of this was done by the lower castes. Throughout life they were under the legal guardianship of men, and in all legal matters were regarded as subordinate. However, female procreation was very highly valued and male envy of these functions was overt.

Professor Gough's psychological analysis of the cult of the lineage ghosts was summarized in Chapter One, and here I shall recapitulate it in slightly more detail. Nayars believe that lineage ghosts are powerful beings who can help or harm the living, but their punitive characteristics are

those most emphasized. The lineage dead are not idealised as morally superior beings, whose wrath is always just. They are held to be human in their failings and bad temper, and are almost as likely to exact vengeance for accidental mistakes in the performance of rites as for wilful immorality. It is easy to see that these attitudes to the ancestors are directly related to relationships with the senior generation among the living. For a man's relationship with his mother's brother is one of stern discipline, right from childhood. There is a marked lack of intimacy between senior and junior men within the taravad. A nephew will fear punishment rather than loss of love, for karanavans do not exhibit personal tenderness to their juniors, and in fact neither party need feel that he has to love the other in his heart. Dignified and respectful behaviour is the ideal, but this will give way to publicly acknowledged hostility under provocation, and even, on rare occasions, to physical aggression on the part of the nephew.

Among both Kottayan and Cochin Nayars, the husband's lineage ghosts were not believed capable of affecting welfare of a wife and her children, even though it might be expected that, in Kottayam, where fathers traditionally had a protective and intimate relation with their children, the father's ghost would figure in some way in the cult of the ghosts. It seems that among all Nayars the ancestor cult mirrors the legal structure and collective responsibility of the taravad, which



are identical in Cochin and Kottayam. The father belongs to a different taravad, and in death as in life has no publicly supported authority over his children. Professor Gough suggests:

...that cults of predominantly punitive ancestors are likely to be accompanied by kinship relationships in which the senior generation retains control over the junior until late in life, but in which major figures of the senior generation are not highly idealized. It seems probable that the chief sanction against value-violating behavior will be fear of some tangible form of punishment, rather than fear over loss of love, and that although open expression of aggression towards disciplinary figures is controlled, the aggressive component in the ambivalent relationship to seniors will be strong and not deeply repressed. (Ibid, p 457).

The ambivalence in the relations between the generations is clear, and is acknowledged by the people themselves, and

to the extent that a man is not able fully to accept his own aggressive feelings he seems to project these in the belief that his superiors are even more punitive than they may really be. A portion of this projected aggression his culture encourages him to displace on the figures of lineage ghosts who can inflict even more serious punishments than can living superiors. (Ibid.)

In order to clarify the nature of traditional Nayar relationships to their lineage ghosts, Professor Gough contrasts them with those of the Brahmans. The Tamil Brahmans of Tanjore are a caste of landowners and ritual specialists who have patrilocal extended families and patrilineal lineages. There is no collective cult of lineage ghosts as among the Nayars, and each son propitiates in his own home the ghosts of his parents, paternal grandparents and great-grandparents.

Offerings are made to them thrice daily to ensure their safety in the life after death. If offerings are not made a spirit can fall into hell. After a period in the abode of the ancestors the spirit is reborn, and its estate depends on its merit or demerit during life and the piety and offerings made by descendants. The ultimate aim of the soul is to escape the cycle of rebirths and find union with the divine. Only the spirits of those who died prematurely and violently are believed still interested in this life and may inflict sickness; the spirits of normal ancestors are not at all punitive.

This benign relationship between a man and his paternal ancestors reflects the relationship between father and son during life. From childhood this relation is held to be one of deep personal devotion and mutual dependence, and even aggressive thoughts toward the father are thought to be sinful. "The parents are highly idealised and enveloped in an aura of sanctity". At the same time the son may not permit himself the thought that his father is punitive towards him; so that, although the relationship with the father may be highly ambivalent, any aggression against the parents seems too deeply repressed for them to be thought of, alive or dead, as themselves aggressive. "Instead, the Brahman seems to effect a reaction formation against his aggression which appears in unusual concern for the ancestors' safety, and in the anxious need to perform numerous rites which will ward off from them the punish-

ment of the god of death". The contrast with the typical Nayar handling of aggression emerges clearly.

If this view is correct reprojection of the harsh superego onto ghosts in times of misfortune must serve to reduce guilt. For the offences which the ghosts ostensibly punish with sickness are often inadvertent or trivial ones, such as failure in the correct performance of rites. The astrologer's diagnosis may thus permit [a man] to focus his generalised guilt (concerning deeper, unconscious aggressive impulses) upon a specific minor lapse of duty on the part of himself or one of his kinsmen. He is then able to take practical steps to alleviate his guilt through propitiation of the supernatural agents. The Brahman's offerings on behalf of his ancestors also seem to serve as an alleviation of guilt, but in a different manner. For instead of reprojecting his harsh superego onto ancestral figures, the Brahman apparently projects it wholly outside the area of human relations onto a vindictive god of death, whose hell he believes endangers both his own and his parents' souls. He appears to alleviate his guilt through rites designed to preserve them and himself from this fate. (ibid. p460).

This hypothesis of reprojection would explain also why the dead are so much more punitive than living elders. (Although, in other important respects the relationships with ghosts are similar to those with living elders.) For natural misfortunes fall more heavily and capriciously than do the punishments of living elders.

The transfer of aggressive feelings from inside to outside the group in the projection of aggression and guilt feelings upon the ghosts, probably enhances the internal solidarity of the taravad. "The cult thus brings together in rites of propitiation these very kinsmen who (in one aspect of their relationship) hate each other, and forges renewed bonds of

mutual devotion in the appeasement of beings whom all of them fear".

To summarise Gough's argument: Nayar authority figures (the mother's brother) retain control until late in life, and are not highly idealized - they become hostile ancestors. Brahmin fathers also retain control until late in life, but the Brahmin socialisation process idealizes the father - Brahmin ancestors are lenient and benign. In other words I believe that it is possible to present Gough's argument without the need for psychological jargon words. The psychology is not essential to her thesis. What it boils down to is that someone with power during life will be credited with power after he dies, and the nature of this power, kindly or punitive, will depend on the socialisation process. It is difficult to think of a society where father figures are not idealized, but in any case, how is the level of idealization to be measured? This is important if her theory is to be tested cross-culturally.

Again, the application of terms such as 'projection', 'introjection', 'reaction formation' and the like in non-Western cultures is not something which can be automatically assumed. Freud may not have cross-cultural validity. Also there is the perennial problem of the unfalsifiability of psychological explanation. Gough realises this as can be seen in her frequent use of 'seems' and 'appears'.

In more detailed criticism, I will refer to the last

two sentences of my last extended quotation from Gough. She talks of the Brahman's harsh superego without accounting for it: indeed the argument up to that point would hardly lead one to expect a harsh superego among Brahmans. Secondly, the two sentences together contain some very dubiously posited links. By her use of 'apparently' and 'appears' Gough seems to realise that her theory here is untestable. Finally, and in general, one is left wondering whether the whole-point of comparing Nayar and Brahman is not invalidated by the fact that for the Nayars we are dealing with taravad heads and mother's brothers rather than fathers.

Gough's theory does not explain why the Nayar worship only selected ancestors, and not all ancestors. Presumably she would claim that for the Nayars belief in the power of the ancestors is not needed in order that the final source of jural authority and right can be put beyond challenge. As noted previously, supernatural agencies play only a minor part in punishing offences between men. A more useful approach, however, would look at the facts that (a) Nayar children do not grow up with their fathers, (b) the ties among family members are tenuous and ephemeral, (c) there is a hierarchy of administrative officers whose status and role is unconnected with kinship, and (d) there are overriding obligations to gods, sages and holy men. As a result, only the 'ghosts of selected elders who are noted for some special achievement are worshipped.

Hsu (1963) takes the supernatural-centredness of the Hindus, as opposed to the family-centredness of the Chinese, as explaining why Hindus, unlike Chinese, can conceive of their ancestors as capricious or in need of propitiation. The evidence from Japan would seem to contradict Hsu here, for although the ancestors are likewise thought of as benign, actual kinship is a negligible factor for group membership by comparison with other factors. However, the Japanese data do support a possible correlation between length of control by senior over junior generation, and hostility/lenience, as I shall show.

### CHAPTER XIII

#### THE CULT OF IMMEDIATE JURAL SUPERIORS: THE DATA FROM CHINA AND JAPAN

Chinese ancestors, like Brahman ones, are benign (cf. M. Freedman, London 1967, pp. 85-103). It is true that they will punish their descendants if they are neglected or offended in some direct way (especially for failure to secure for them a firm line of descent), but essentially they are considerate of their issue, benevolent and protective. Their behaviour is not capricious. They are tended, revered and fed regularly. They are acknowledged as superiors by the living, who owe them a debt for their lives. They are responsible for the goodness of their descendants' lives. For they endow their descendants with the merit they themselves accumulated. For these reasons their due is gratitude and praise, and in paying them their due, the living are made conscious of the groups within which they worship.

Members of households and extended families worshipped their ancestors in shrines which were part of the domestic architecture, and worship at a common shrine maintained the unity of families in different households. Each territorial group was also a kinship group, and as a village the community expressed its identity in religious life by maintaining a temple to the earth god; but as a group of agnates and their wives,

it fell into a series of religious units which defined themselves in relation to common ancestors. Special halls were required for worship by higher segments of the lineage.

At the domestic level, people were involved with the dead whom they had known in life and towards whose happiness in the other world they could make some contribution. In the halls, on the other hand, ancestor worship was essentially a means of group action in which the power and status structure of the community was given a ritual expression. There was tension between these two principles, the principle by which families related within the agnatic line were ritually encouraged to come together and the principle according to which they might legitimately conduct their own domestic rites as separate units. In the latter case, the members of a family which individually performed rites before ancestors several generations distant did not link themselves by that act with all their agnates in other families sharing the same ancestors. In such a case the ancestors had ceased to be foci for segments in a lineage, as they were worshipped separately in the several households formed by their patrilineal descendants. The devotion accorded them did not directly therefore relate to the maintenance of kinship unity beyond the range of one family in a household. These types of rites, in which ancestors were cared for simply as forebears and independently of their status as ancestors of the agnates of the worshippers, were initially



called "memorialism" by Freedman, but more recently, in trying to give a name for the thing that must be distinguished from the cult of descent group ancestors, he has written about the cult of immediate jural superiors. The latter can of course exist without the former, as in Manus and, indeed, in our own society. Once a Chinese ancestor had been placed in the hall shrine, he ceased to be an object of personal devotion and became part of the ritual centre of a lineage segment, with a remoter and less individualised personality. Freedman's most recent paper shows that whether in isolation or in conjunction with a cult of descent group ancestors, the cult of immediate jural superiors raises some highly interesting questions about the relationship between domestic authority and the attitudes maintained to recently dead superiors.

Hsu criticises Freedman on this point (Hsu 1963 pp 65-66). Hsu claims that there is no sharp differentiation between domestic worship of ancestors and common worship of ancestors in the common clan ancestral hall, because there is no sharp distinction between clan and sub-clan (tsu and fang). The latter may range in size from one nuclear family to several generations, and according to Fei, whom both authors quote, the clan (tsu) will not be subdivided if there is no increase of members. In fact, Hsu characterizes the tsu by lack of fission due to internal tensions and cleavages. "The well-to-do will include in ... worship as many lineal ancestors as they

possibly know of. The poorer families will worship their ancestors at least up to the third ascending generation" (Hsu 1963 p.41). He also claims that it is not uncommon, on occasions of worship, for representatives of each localised clan sub-group to pay visits to all the temples where there are clan ancestors. Hsu therefore denies Freedman's claim that there was tension between the demands of domestic and clan ancestor worship. In his more recent book (1966) Freedman reviews Hsu's disagreement with him and insists that competition and conflict are inherent at all levels of the social system, and that it is therefore both useful and essential to make a distinction between the two levels of ancestor worship.

In dealing with the problem of why Chinese ancestors are benign, Freedman attempts two approaches. In the first of these, he asks whether Chinese ancestors are kindly, because, in making them ancestors, their descendants are not conscious of having displaced them from coveted positions of power. Fortes is wrong to claim that in the Chinese case there is a tight relationship between the transfer of jural authority and property rights from a recently dead man to his son and the worship by this son of his father. (Fortes, 1961 pp 179-180) He quotes Hsu, who states that: "The father has authority of life and death over the son, and the son has to reverence and support his parents". This is to a large extent true, but the dependence of Chinese sons on their father has been greatly

exaggerated. Chinese filial piety (hsiao) might better be translated "obedience", and while it is a virtue to be obedient, this is not a moral value which carries a great deal of weight. In other words, filial piety is not, pace Fortes, the "foundation stone" of Chinese social organization, and it is possible to exaggerate the importance of the patri-filial nexus and of primogeniture in the Chinese family and descent system. In fact Freedman criticizes Fortes' citation of Chinese evidence because (a) the evidence does not support a thorough-going primogeniture, (b) it is not all of a period, and (c) there is no prohibition on junior sons carrying on independent worship in their own houses. (cf. Freedman 1966 pp. 148-150).

For the last two millenia in China, since the feudal system was superseded by the centralised state, the principle of equal inheritance has existed alongside the principle (essentially ritual) that the oldest son was to succeed his father. For the Chinese family is a property-owning estate which dissolves on the death of each senior generation to reform into successor-estates, none of which can be said to have the identity inhering in its predecessor. As each son is born, he is automatically endowed with a potential share in the family estate. On the death of the parents, the estate divides, and the family segments into new units which are residually, economically and ritually distinct. If a family head dies leaving a married and an unmarried son, they

will continue to form one family until such time as the junior, now married, asserts his separate rights. The ritual precedence of the oldest son does not confer on him the authority to control his younger brothers; the fraternal bond in Chinese society is very fragile. It follows that no one son can step effectively into his father's shoes to exercise authority over the same range of people. Not only this, but even during his life a father as head of the family may need, through sickness, senility or incompetence, to shed some of his authority. The transfer of authority is gradual. The Chinese father does not see his married sons as a threat to his position, and they, for their part, do not look upon him as a serious barrier to the attainment of their economic and ritual maturity. Even after death, when installed as an ancestor in his tablet, a father does not in any precise sense support the authority of his sons over their juniors; he is not used as a major instrument of domestic discipline, although occasionally a woman may attempt to use her husband's otherwise benign ancestors in revenge as the origin of misfortune. A dead father symbolizes ancestral authority and the honour of the family. But a head of the family cannot call down ancestral sanctions on the people under his hand in an effort to maintain his authority. For these reasons, Freedman suggests that for modern China, ancestors are kindly, at least from the point of view of the men, because in the absence of a corporate family,

in the turnover of the generations a new head does not effectively displace his predecessor. This is the main contrast with the African data.

Hsu's explanation of the kindness of Chinese ancestors is less open to testing. He links the inability of the Chinese to believe that their own departed ancestors would be the voluntary cause of their troubles to the strength of family feeling among them. In contrasting the Hindu and Chinese families, he says: "In content the Chinese family has greater cohesion and greater continuity than the Hindu family. The bonds of the Chinese family members are unbreakable, but the ties among the Hindu family members are much more tenuous and ephemeral, though stronger than among their western counterparts. To the Chinese his first and last duty is to his forbears and his descendants; while to the Hindu, his obligations to the gods and certain strangers (sages and holy men) take precedence over his obligations to all others". (Hsu 1963, p.47).

In another approach, Freedman wonders whether Chinese (and Japanese) ancestors are benign because the societies are highly differentiated. In small-scale societies (in which the same people are bound together in complex webs of many types of relationship) evil and misfortune are seen to be embedded in personal ties, and afflictions and misfortunes tend to be ascribed to the actions or evil impulses of people with whom the sufferers are intimately connected. In such societies

witchcraft, sorcery and ancestors are agents of misfortune; (remember that ancestors, though dead, are people with rights that can be infringed). But Chinese society does not in any marked way predispose its members to seek explanations of their misfortunes in the evil thoughts and mystical malpractices of their kinsmen and neighbours. Their dominant mode of explanation is impersonal: misfortune is either the bitter reward for misconduct or the effect of some non-human power or entity undirected by men on earth.

A further important insight of Freedman's is the demonstration that geomancy - in its relation to burial - is an aspect of the cult of the ancestors and that we cannot understand the latter without tackling the complexities of the former. The geomancy of graves is part of a large system of ideas and practices in which topography and man are made to interact. Because, for the Chinese, men are members of the universe, not intruders.

By geomancy, men use their ancestors as media for the attainment of worldly desires, (riches, progeny and success). And in doing so they have ceased to worship them and begun to use them as things. The authority implied in descent is ritualised in the worship of the ancestors. In geomancy, the tables are turned; descendants strive to force their ancestors to convey good fortune, making puppets of forebears and dominating the dominators. In ancestor worship the ancestors are revered, in geomancy they are subordinated. In the former, the ideal ties between the generations are reinforced; in the latter they are denied. In the first, men are brought together to underline their common group membership and solidarity; in the second they seek to differentiate themselves from one another, each individualizing his face within the common fate procured by the ancestors. (Ancestor Worship, p. 86, 1967.)

Thus men are conscious of deriving benefits from ancestors in their shrines (through their merits and their blessings) and from ancestors as bones.

It is worth glancing briefly at the evidence from Japan. Here, too, the ancestors are benign despite the appearance that the situations were well-designed to produce disciplinary ancestors. In Japanese society the family is ideally a perpetual unit, each head of the family being replaced by a single successor. Sons failing to secure the succession must become members of other corporations or start their own. For these and other economic reasons there is considerable mobility of population, and frequent inclusion of non-agnatic kin in local groups, such that actual kinship is a negligible factor for group membership by comparison with the residential and economic factors. Far from being hostile, the ancestors are felt strongly to be friendly and supportive. The key to the friendliness of the dead is perhaps in the manner in which the succession to family headship is effected. Ideally, succession should precede the death of the senior male in the family in order that he may, along with his wife, enjoy a period of retirement before he joins his ancestors. So that, as in the Chinese case, the death of one generation and the coming to power of the next are not coincident events. As Freedman puts it, "One steps into a live man's shoes".

We have noted that although the ancestor is the justifying authority for the cooperation of the living members of the group, the way an individual is related to the ancestor in terms of descent is not primarily important. This leads us, of course, to modify Radcliffe-Brown's definition of ancestor worship still further. Having already decided not to limit the term to rites of kinship solidarity in which the ancestor is celebrated as a religious manifestation of social bonds, but to include "memorialism", in which ancestors are cared for simply as household forebears, regardless of their status in wider kinship units, we now have to deny that the "cult group in this religion consists solely of persons related to one another by descent in one line from the same ancestor or ancestors". (Structure and Function in Primitive Society, p. 163, 1952). For, in Japan, the term "ancestor", which usually conveys the notion of descent, is subject to economic and local factors. The modification of a category originally counting descent by economic and local factors seems a widespread native principle in Japan, and is in decided contrast to the situation in China, where the patrilineal principle strongly adheres and there is no inclusion of non-patrilineal kinsmen in the ancestor-worshipping group, and a set of ancestors of a localised lineage is recognized as one of the segments of a wider unit.

The general Japanese concern for pragmatic adaptation



has also been recognized in their view of what the ancestors think of change. In the normal Western view, ancestors are supposed to be a kind of deadweight from the past, fostering a past-time orientation and a conservative way of thinking. But the Japanese do not conceive of their ancestors in this way. The ancestors do not demand that life continue exactly as they knew it; instead they demand any effective action that will assure the continuity of the household line. Far from hindering change, as Plath points out (*American Anthropologist* 66, 1964, p.312 also Chie Nakane, 1967, pp. 4,16 ff.) ancestor worship in Japan at least can be a spur to it.

## CHAPTER XIV

### MELANESIA

In this chapter we shall be concerned with data from the Ngaing and the Mae Enga of New Guinea and from Manus. The Ngaing live on the seaboard and the Mae in the Highlands, and they seem to represent extremes in the degree to which religion dominates the epistemological systems of the peoples living in these two areas.

The Mae, while relying on religion - especially ritual for the dead - for general economic and social welfare, still regard purely secular techniques as the only valid avenue to success in many important tasks. They stress hard physical work, and power deriving from personal and military strength as the primary qualifications a leader must possess. The Ngaing, on the other hand, believe that they can achieve success in major undertakings only if they buttress secular techniques with ritual. For them, work necessitates co-operation not only between men themselves but also between men, deities and spirits of the dead. Only those who show that they can guarantee this total cosmic collaboration can aspire to leadership (Meggitt and Lawrence, 1965, pp. 18-19).

In crude terms, the difference is, then, between a tendency towards secularism in the Highlands and towards religious thinking on the Seaboard.

The Ngaing make no terminological distinction between distant and recent ancestors, but their interest is concentrated almost exclusively on the recent dead, i.e. men and women whom they can still place in their known genealogical structure

(which is based on double unilineal descent). They regard it as improbable that distant ancestors would intervene in their daily lives, and names of the dead are forgotten above the third ascending generation. As protectors of their living descendants, the spirits of the dead are regarded as extremely important in human affairs. They bring messages about the future, ward off illness, confer special benefits in warfare, hunting and agriculture and in the inland give presents of valuables. But their goodwill must be ensured by according them special honour. Thus all mortuary ceremonies - attendance at a funeral, formal weeping, exchange of property and disposal of the bones - are designed to show the spirit the sense of loss his relatives feel. Members of hunting and raiding parties carry relics of the dead. They offer food to spirits during departing, and rely on ancestors to help deflect missiles, drive up plenty of game, and help their arrows reach their mark. At planting there is also invocation of and offering of food to spirits of the dead. The ancestors are supposed to guard the land they worked, protecting the crops from disaster, mainly incursions of wild pig. The dead are especially honoured during the celebration of the Male cult - i.e. at the Harvest Festival and the Kabu ceremony - when no women are allowed to be present. The Harvest Festival is to thank the spirits for helping bring the crops to maturity. They are called up from their pools and led to the settlements, where they are escorted

to the cult house and invited to eat. There are extensive exchanges of food at both the main Male cult ceremonies. In fact, in all myth and ritual there is a strong emphasis on economic resources; for example, there is ritual to ensure that gods and spirits protect crops from danger and bring them to maturity, and make fish and game abundant. The idea is, that, properly approached in ritual, the deities and ghosts will automatically serve man's interests. As a result, the criterion of true knowledge is the mastery of ritual, for it ensures for men beneficial relationships with gods, spirits and totems. This is the basis of leadership, and ritual techniques are the most valuable knowledge in man's possession. Together with this pronounced view that spirit-beings react immediately in ritual correctly performed goes a weak association between religion and morality, for the spirit-beings are under man's direction.

For the Mae Enga, on the other hand, there is a close connection between religion and morality, but not in the sense that the dead reward the good and punish only the wicked. Not a day passes but someone refers publicly to the activities of ancestral ghosts. The people attribute almost every affliction and misfortune of consequence to ancestral malice, and they employ a variety of ritual techniques to divine the intentions of the dead, propitiate them, or drive them away. Most injuries, illnesses and deaths are attributed to them. It is mainly recent

ghosts who are potentially malevolent, while distant ancestors are, while collectively powerful, on the whole beneficent.

A person need fear only the ghosts of certain relatives, especially those of the father, mother, siblings, and those offspring who died unmarried; clearly family relationships among the Mae are the source of many tensions. Mae hold that the father should choose spouses for his sons and daughters and need not consider their feelings in doing so. Moreover, his sons may compete with him for control of pigs and other valuables in the family estate, and to discipline them he may try to withhold land and brideprice. Given such conflicts it is no wonder that people regard the father's ghost as threatening and those of the children as vengeful. Men say, "The ghost of my father's father killed my father, and my father's ghost will kill me".

When misfortune comes, pigs are killed to placate the ghost thought to be the cause, and while the ghost eats, rituals are performed to drive him away. If a sick man does not recover, then his agnates have killed too few pigs, or killed the pig in the wrong way, or selected the wrong ghost. Then it is usual to resort to one of a number of divining techniques to ensure that the next pig-killing is effective. If the misfortune affects a whole area, the elders announce that the ancestors as a whole are angry, and their displeasure is usually attributed to delinquencies such as the clan's failure to pursue a vendetta, or to preserve the boundaries of the clan territory, laxity in

observing the rules of clan or sub-clan exogamy, neglect of the ancestors in not performing placatory rituals often enough, or, more commonly, simply to the fact that the ancestors hunger for pork and wish to force the clansmen to kill pigs for them.

Clearly, success in ritual is not automatic, as among the Ngaing, but depends on securing the goodwill of spirit-beings. Deities, ghosts and distant ancestors are accorded freedom of action; they have to be propitiated and bargained with. Man cannot invariably rely on their support and hence is very often thrown back on his own purely human intellectual resources. Hence Mae stress hard work and purely secular techniques as the only valid avenue to success in many important tasks.

Mae ghosts, whether acting individually or in concert, are not benevolently disposed to the living. At best they are neutral until some human action or omission angers them; then they become positively malicious and try to injure the offenders. Often, as in many East African cases, Mae ghosts appear to be malevolent without reason.

Nevertheless, despite the malignity imputed to ghosts, the Mae maintain a quasi-social relationship with them in order to keep open a channel of communication and negotiation. Two factors reinforce the people's attitude. Firstly, they believe that ghosts remain members of existing social groups. Thus long after a man's death his ghost may intervene in the affairs of his domestic unit; then when the ghost finally loses its individuality, it joins the corpus of ancestral ghosts whose actions affect the fortunes of the clan parish as a whole (Meggitt 1965, p. 120).

Secondly, ghosts are placatable just as people are. The killing of a pig is not seen as a sacrifice, a piacular offering, as a surrogate offering. It is a gift made in the context of compensatory bargaining that characterizes so much of Mae social intercourse. For Mae, a gift of pork among people often heals a social breach. Eating together is a conventional expression of the creation of an amicable social relationship or of the repair of a damaged one. Thus ritual for deities, ghosts and ancestors involves the concepts of propitiation, bargaining and dependence, rather than human direction. The epistemological system, although obviously incorporating religious beliefs to some extent, still gives considerable scope to the unaided human intellect.

Meggitt and Lawrence admit that they are unable to isolate any variable that might explain the differences between interest in recent ancestors and interest in remote ancestors as shown, for example, by the Ngaing and the Mae Enga respectively. A possible answer is provided by Meggitt's hypothesis, that "the degree to which social groups are structured in terms of agnatic descent and patrilocality varies with the pressure on available land resources" (Meggitt 1965, p.279). For example, among the Mae Enga there is considerable pressure on land, and descent groups figure quite prominently, the method of recruitment to them being less flexible than in societies where there is ample land available to all. In other words, in searching

for correlations for various forms of ancestor worship, we have to consider such factors as the scarcity of land, corporateness of descent groups, methods of recruitment to them, the strength of the ideology of patriliney or matriliney, the sense of time and the interest in origins generally. It may be that, as in many parts of Melanesia where consanguinity is not essential for recruitment to descent groups and society is very loosely structured, worship of a common ancestor is not essential as one of the links holding a group together. With a shallow sense of time and truncated lineages, ancestors will not be very important. Among the Mae Enga, ancestors are important because lineages are of considerable depth. The Siane have ample land, and shallow lineages, frequently manipulating their genealogies for political purposes.

Another variation in the range of relationships possible between living and dead is provided by the Manus (Fortune, 1932, 2). Here the deviation of one individual from established norms endangers the welfare of every Manus. In every house is a shrine housing the skull of its own ancestor, Sir Ghost, who protects the family and punishes misdemeanours, such as sex offences, failure to pay debts, failure to help relatives. Now Sir Ghost can observe only what goes on in his household, and when he sees violations of good behaviour, his punishments are inflicted not necessarily upon the violators, but upon any member of the household or even a person from another



household who comes within the range of his observation. Following an illness a diviner goes round to all households to question the Sir Ghosts, and discover the culprit, for it is not always clear whose fault it is or which Sir Ghost sent the illness. The diviner makes his findings public, and demands public confessions. As a result the individual behaviour of each person in Manus society is the concern of the whole community.

The cult of Sir Ghost is an example of what Freedman calls cults of immediate jural superiors (Freedman 1967a), in distinction from the cult of descent group ancestors. Ancestral lines of ghosts are recognized in Manus, although not worshipped or tended. They are invoked to curse or bless their descendants. However, the relation between those cursing or blessing and those being cursed or blessed is a complicated one, and the ghosts invoked do not belong to one descent group.

Sir Ghost is a man's personal spiritual guardian, nearly always his own father, and between the two is a compact of mutual sustenance. If the son dies, Sir Ghost is thrown out, because he has failed to keep his side of the bargain.

## CHAPTER XV

### DISCUSSION

As in the investigation of any social phenomenon, it is useful to consider the implications of ancestor worship for the social system, the personality system and the cultural system. The contribution of religion, by the sacralization of the norms and values of established society, to social control has been generally acknowledged. It maintains the dominance of group goals and discipline over individual wishes and impulses, thereby legitimating the allocation patterns of the society, in terms of functions, facilities and rewards. The alienation and guilt of deviant individuals is also handled by religion, in the presentation of ritual means for the expiation of the guilt and the reintegration of the person into the social group. The Tallensi and the Mae Enga provide good examples of the grounding of the legitimation of the normative order in religious orientations. Among both societies, the religious and lineage systems reinforce each other, both directly and indirectly. There is a relative scarcity of arable land such as to be a significant determinant of the rigidity of their lineage structures. Both peoples emphasize the importance of the continuity of solidary descent groups which can assert clear titles to the highly valued land. The

religions are well designed to support these ends. On the one hand, rituals regularly reaffirm the cohesion and continuity of the patrilineal group; on the other, the dogma in itself implies a title to land by relating living members of the group to a founding ancestor who is believed to have first selected the locality for settlement. The rituals will involve worship of an ancestor to whom all members of the group are related.

The effect that an ethic of strong lineage cohesion has in weakening the marital bond is well shown in the evidence from Dobu, where the clash of incompatible solidarities between the lineage and marital groupings is reflected in and aggravated by the separation of ritual. For each marriage partner clings tenaciously to the ancestral spirits of his natal lineage, and religious beliefs are not shared. In fact, magical formulae, the most powerful items of religious property, are jealously guarded, being obtained by each individual from his own lineage ancestors. Even the rule of alternating residence has religious implications, because protracted neglect of the ancestral graves is believed to result in loss of magical power, the failure of crops, illness, and the operation of witchcraft. As a result there is very little affinal cohesion, for members of the lineage feel closer to one another than to their marriage partners.

A similar situation would seem to occur in China, but

with very different results, for there is no tension between lineage and marital duties. The important variable again is whether or not the wife is incorporated into the husband's group and her ties with her natal group are minimised. (cf. Freedman 1967b).

Much of the data we have examined, for example from the Tallensi, Lugbara, Nayars, and Manus, has shown that the dead are thought to be concerned to uphold the norms of society, whether in terms of day-to-day good conduct, or in terms of the proper allocation of authority and right. Even when misfortune comes and is divined as caused by nothing more than the ancestors' capriciousness or their desire to be remembered or their desire for food, it is being explained in a readily comprehensible and acceptable way, and in a way which reminds people of their common group membership, because of descent from certain ancestors. Even where, as in China and Japan, ancestors do not punish, it seems everywhere characteristic that they are invested with mystical authority and right. But they cannot exercise these powers unrestrictedly, only where they have authority, that is among their descendants who worship them. Fortes claims that the authority and right attributed to ancestors is an extension beyond death of authority experienced in life. And, in contrast to other forms of cult and belief ancestor worship refers only to that segment of social life in which descent and succession play the

organizing part.

Much play has been made with the idea of ambivalence. Bradbury (1966) for example, notes that for the Edo the relationship between a man and his senior son is apt to be fraught with conflict, since the son is bound to respect the father, who, while he is alive, deprives him of authority and whose death benefits him. There is in most preliterate societies an antithesis between the bonds of dependence, in terms of sustenance, protection, status and personal development, of sons on their fathers, and the inherent opposition of successive generations. An ancestor cult permits this ambivalence to be resolved, and succession to take place in such a way that authority, as a principle of social order, is never overturned. Fortes claims that the ideal of filial piety, as a regulative and mollifying directive to conduct, enables a son to accept the coercion of authority, both in life, and after death, for in ancestor worship we see the ritualisation of filial piety. His thesis is that "all the concepts we have examined are religious extrapolations of the experiences generated in the relationships of parents and children." He shares thereby certain psychological premises with Professors Gough and Spiro, to which we shall return in more detail later. But his approach faces the same objections as all theories that postulate common psychological origins for widely held religious concepts. Also, among more differentiated societies than the Tallensi,

it may be that the filio-parental relationship is less crucial and emphasis may be placed on other aspects of social life than full incorporation into society. We have, at least, noted that the Chinese data do not support his thesis as well as he claims. However, what I want to deal with in this section is the role of ancestral spirits in safeguarding kinship norms.

These norms are a network of mutual rights and duties between the ancestor's descendants, and they depend largely on the recognition of the authority of elders, who represent among the living the power of the ancestors, whom they will in due course join. In many cases they alone can approach the ancestors on behalf of their junior dependants. When some descendant acts so as to deny this dependance, an ancestral spirit may be divined as the cause of some immediately ensuing misfortune. We have seen that a Lugbara elder may in fact call down the wrath of the ancestors on an erring junior. Changes are bound to occur in the structure of groups because of the biological flow of a human population through a set social structure, and conflicts will be produced. Men and women will come into dispute where they are both, by different rules, right. As against the rule that a man should always acknowledge his father's authority, there is the idea that a man is entitled equally to his own measure of independence. There may be an ideal of the unity of the sibling group alongside the acknowledgement that each brother has his independent

interests. This conflict between social principles is, in Gluckman's terms, "obscured from the society's members by the raising of the axioms of kinship to a mystical plane where they are beyond question". In other words, the ancestral cult has to deal with generational changes and a relationship between kinsmen and ancestors that is often far from straightforward. Ancestors worshipped in common are foci of unity and distinction; but these foci change as men are born, mature, procreate children and die.

The worship of ancestors reflects relationships between living kinsmen in another way. In order, generally, to join in a common sacrifice, the members of a kinship group must be in sufficiently amicable relations with one another. Grievances and bad feelings may spoil the sacrifice and endanger the living. Both the Lugbara and the LoDagaa use the occasions of sacrifice to state grievances, in order that these may be discussed and remedied. Evans-Pritchard writes, of the Nuer: "Speakers and listeners also stated any grievances they had in their hearts towards kinsmen, for any of the kin of the dead man who bears a grudge against a relative must now declare it. If he does not do so now, he must forever keep silence. This is an occasion for amicable settlement of family and kinship quarrels". (Nuer Religion, Oxford, 1956 p.150). Fortes writes: "According to the ethical and religious ideas of the Tallensi, to sacrifice together is totally incompatible with a state of

hostility - that is, with an open breach of good relations" (Fortes 1945,p.98).

This need for amity will hold until a section of a kinship group is sufficiently independent to make its own direct approaches to the ancestors. Once the right to sacrifice independently has been established, a significant shift in ties, rights, and duties has thereby been marked ritually.

These last two paragraphs should not be construed as suggesting that people come together for group solidarity purposes, but rather that in many cases they see it as a prerequisite that the group be in harmony or the worship will be void.

We have seen that among some peoples, eg. the Amba and the Plateau Tonga, there is the idea that misdeeds are punished automatically, and that this punishment does not come from the ancestors. It is true that the ancestors are believed to send some misfortunes, but clearly this belief is but one attempt to explain the misfortunes which are part of the aleatory element in life. Here the ancestors serve as foci of group unity and as an explanatory device - but in neither case are they directly involved in the moral order.

A cult of the dead is the set of religious actions carried out primarily to keep the dead separated from the living. Cults of ancestor worship, on the other hand, are based on the idea that the dead remain members of the group, and they reaffirm



and reinforce the connections between the dead and survivors. In both cases the rituals aid the bereaved toward gradual adjustment. In the first case, time, effort and money or goods are given in order to keep the soul of the dead relative as happy as possible in his otherworldly existence. (There are some forms of the cult of the dead where everything connected with the dead person is obliterated. This behaviour hastens the fading of the memory by making final the separation between the dead and the living, and by indicating to the survivors that the deceased are no longer of social account.) Gluckman's study of "Rituals of Rebellion" ( The Frazer Lecture, 1952) showed clearly the safety valve functions of ceremonial, and how ceremonial could help control the development of conflicts in society and on the personality level. Undoubtedly, funeral ceremonies help control grief generated by loss and separation by providing standardised forms of its expression. And they control not only the sense of loss, the personal deprivation, but also the guilt and self-accusation that often accompany the departure of a close kinsman and that reflect the conflicts that any particular set of social relations gives rise to. This giving of controlled expression to personal emotions that demand some formal outlet is one function of funeral ceremonies. Another is the reallocation of the rights and duties of the deceased with regard to roles, property and women.

The feelings of guilt and self-accusation, of ambivalence

and hostility toward someone whom one has a duty to love, form an important central element in Professor Gough's psychological analysis of the Nayar cults of the dead. She hypothesized that aggression is handled by these people in one way by projection of aggression and guilt feelings outside the group onto ghosts. A similar method of analysis is used by Spiro in examining the beliefs of the Ifaluk (*Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 48:376-382). He noted that these people believe in the existence of two kinds of ghost, benevolent and malevolent, but that most of Ifaluk ceremonial and much of their unceremonial, life is preoccupied with the latter ghosts. Spiro set himself the problem of accounting for the existence and persistence of this "irrational" and "punishing" belief. He noted that the overt expression of hostility was forbidden and its very sensation was viewed as shameful. Nevertheless the people did have hostile drives, and these could be connected with anxiety in the Ifaluk personality. Spiro suggested that they had learned to reduce the intensity of their anxieties by projecting their hostilities onto the malevolent ghosts. The Ifaluk belief is that men are intrinsically good and that they are not responsible for hostile thoughts or acts, but that hostility is caused by the malevolent ghosts. These latter delight in causing evil and illness. Thus, Spiro suggests, the belief allows the people to reject their own hostile drives as being 'ego-alien',

and to project them onto these ghosts. The Ifaluk knows that evil people exist, for example his parents who bathed him every morning in cold water and who rejected him when he needed them; (a child is ignored when a new sibling is born). Adults also experience evil people - themselves. For everyone who experiences hostile drives within himself is evil. Thus the malevolent ghosts have their origin in the souls of people as the projection of the aggressive drives.

Psychological considerations are bound to enter any analysis of ancestor worship which sees the dead as conscience, or sees ancestor worship as a projection of intergenerational relationships, or as a method of relieving anxiety about misfortune. Most forms of religion provide means for adjusting to frustration, whether this is due to the aleatory element in life or to the institutional arrangements of the society. "The function of religion for human personalities is that it supplies the basic ground guaranteeing the meaningfulness of human life and effort, and offers an outlet for expressive needs and a catharsis and consolation for human emotions. It likewise supports human discipline by its sanctification of the norms and rules of society, and thereby plays a part both in socializing the individual and in maintaining social stability". (T. F. O'Dea, 1966, pp. 16-17).

In connection with this, it seems that the most fruitful approach to the problem of variation in the attitude of ancestors

to their living descendents is to examine the nature of the dominance of father over son during life and the extent of primogeniture as opposed to equal division of property and authority among sons. The Nayars, the Tallensi and the Mae Enga, for example, indicate that where the dominance of the father is strong and intergenerational hostility is high, ancestors will be mainly punitive. The benign nature of the Chinese and Japanese ancestors is best related to the gradual transfer of authority and property and the lack of power of the senior son over his brothers in these societies. The other problem, that in many societies the ancestors cause trouble but not in punishment of crime or sin, is clearly to be explained as a more diffuse kind of the Nayar-Tallensi-Mae Enga situation.

In the field of social control there are functional analogues to the ancestors. Ideas of typical witch-personality, for example, may form part of the system of social control, by providing a kind of anti-image, an epitome of what those who deserve the esteem of their fellows should not be. Evans-Pritchard writes of the Azande: "It is true ... that homage is paid to ancestral ghosts, though what a Zande has chiefly in mind are his dead father and mother to whom he makes supplications at his homestead shrine on such occasions as harvesting of first fruits and the building of a new home; but the cult is a purely family one and the intervention of the dead is a

sanction only between members of a family. Should such conduct not be in question and a breach of the obligations of blood-brotherhood not be an issue, Azande will attribute misfortunes to witchcraft" (Evans - Pritchard, 1967 p.11). As with the blaming of ancestors, charges of witchcraft and sorcery direct blame onto others, and are projections of hostility along lines of tension in the social structure. Whether due to witchcraft or ancestors, the divining of the origin of misfortune asserts the relevance of relationships between persons closely linked, for the divination must say that the afflicted man has misbehaved or failed in his duty towards some kinsman or neighbour or towards an ancestor, (who, though dead, is still a person with rights and duties). We have seen that among the Lugbara witchcraft is the unjustified calling down of the same evil that lineage elders can summon legitimately by an appeal to the ancestors. Thus in both ancestor worship and witchcraft evil and misfortune are ascribed to the impulses of people (alive or dead) with whom the sufferers are intimately connected.

As Sahlins points out, the invoking of ancestors or witches as explanations of misfortune is not some substitute for a matter-of-fact explanation. It is a sociological complement of natural cause. It integrates natural cause as it impinges upon the social realm, such as the fire that consumes the house, with the effects within that realm - with

whose house burned down, or with the destruction of property (Sahlins, 1968, p.109). These are issues for which no people have any good answers. But a connection between personal mores and the ordered motions of the natural world seems to be made naturally by all people. Levi-Strauss makes a set of such connections as a climax to his study of the origin of table manners: "To disregard a culinary regime, to neglect the proper use of tableware or toiletries, to make forbidden gestures - all this infects the universe, ruins the harvest, scares off game, exposes others to sickness and famine".

(*Mythologiques* III: *l'Origine des Manieres de Table*, 1968)

Thus the macrocosm actively mirrors the microcosm, and the cosmological the private. The possibility of causing a dissonance in the celestial harmony is greatly increased when, as in most African cultures, the basic moral tenet is that unselfishness is the primary virtue, and that human selfishness lies at the root of all ills. I am not denying that conflict and opposition are important components of social systems as well as harmony. But religious beliefs and practices do seem to provide a set of absolutes to which conduct can be referred, as well as a basic ground guaranteeing the meaningfulness of human life and effort. This last competence of religion is one rarely called for or resorted to in day-to-day human affairs. As Worsley (and many others) have noted at length, it is more proximate entities, such as earth-

or ancestor-spirits, or agents of magic and witchcraft, positive and negative, that are the common manifestations of the other world, rather than God or any cosmological ideas (Worsley 1968, pp. xxiii-xxiv). Ultimate explanations are rarely required, and cosmology and eschatology are neither necessary nor necessarily related parts of religious world-systems. At the same time, the primitive is not a dualist, operating with a model of two worlds, but conceives of a single order of reality, in which man may have only restricted powers but through ritual can have access to and influence over powers of a more far-reaching and compulsive kind. We must remember that by the canons of evidence available to people with limited technical knowledge, there is ample confirmation of the existence and competences of the ancestors. So that when they are faced with situations of danger, unpredictability and uncertainty, they do not see the situation as calling for a special type of activity, what we would call "ritual". Once the limits of what we would call empirically possible are reached, further activity must inevitably be non-technical, but nonetheless an appropriate way of behaving geared to achieve the given end. Worsley summarises the issue by saying that "although empirical acts are performed, what we call ritual acts are also integral, necessary and effective dimensions of social actions". In other words, the separation out of magico-religious practices

as a category of behaviour is an abstraction of the observer. Ethical, cosmological and eschatological beliefs are rarely abstractly formulated. They are embedded in behaviour, and are seen in the form of magic and ritual, when they are being used in day-to-day social activities,"with (variously) some of one's fellow men (not some abstract fellow man) in the contexts of changing situations focussed on a diversity of social activities"(Ibid, p. xxix).

Rather than attempting the futile questions 'Why do people worship their ancestors?' or 'Why do some societies have a religion structured in terms of ancestor worship?', I believe it is more profitable to ask 'Why this or that ancestor?', 'Who may worship and how?' and 'On what occasions are the ancestors thought to intervene?' In other words it is better to see ancestor worship not as a form of religion, but as an expression of (intergenerational) relationships and processes. The wide variety this expression can take means that for ancestor worship, probably more than for many other cultural 'items', there can be no cross-culturally acceptable definition and few correlations of any value.



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