

## THE BASIS OF AFRICAN RELIGION

Some time since I wrote for this journal an article entitled "Some Aspects of Thinking Black." In that article some references to religion were made, but they were necessarily brief. In the present one I am passing in review the religious or spiritual side of the African's mentality, at the same time endeavouring to furnish a summary of the bases of his religion.

Before proceeding I will repeat a caution I have made elsewhere, namely, the great difficulty a European has in getting an exact answer from a black man, all the more when the latter does not desire to give it. One may ask such a question as "Has the motor-car gone?" At once somebody, possibly the native clerk concerned with its despatch, will answer, "Yes, it has gone." Others will confirm the fact, "Yes, it has gone." One goes and looks for oneself, and sees it still there. Unabashed and indifferent, they will say, "But it wanted to go, and we thought it had gone"; or, "It has come back to fetch some small thing." When such-like information is supplied in matters of everyday life, it can be seen that little reliance can be placed on the answers an enthusiast gets on abstract subjects.

At the very beginning of one's subject one is confronted with a difficulty—that is, to find a name for the religion of the African. It may be thought that the name matters little. This, however, is far from being the case. Many schemes, many ideas, many matters and even persons have been failures through having inappropriate names. Perhaps the spiritual side of the negro has also suffered not a little in this respect. It has certainly been much misunderstood on account of the names that have been invented for it by writers on the subject.

I think it may be accepted that the spiritual life of the nations that have attained to the higher planes of civilisation

has been under the control of what is called Religion if the Deity is a personal element, but is designated as a System of Ethics if the Deity is but vaguely, if at all, considered therein. Whatever differences or likenesses there may be, each is a system of its own, and in each are certain rules and obligations which are clearly defined. In none of them is the individual a law unto himself.

In dealing with the negro race as a whole, and omitting such portions of it as are more or less Mohammedanised or Christianised, it is clear, and was so to the earliest European voyagers, that neither religions nor codes of ethics were, in the common acceptance of the terms, in existence among them. Not knowing what to make of that which they observed, but seeing that inanimate objects received marks of respect if not adoration, the apparent religion of the natives was called idolatry. The Portuguese, the earliest voyagers to West Africa and settlers there, called it "image" worship, and the word for amulet or charm or small image in that language being "feitiço," the word "fetishism" became in time incorporated in all European languages. It may be asked why the plain word "idolatry" was not used straightaway and adhered to. This was evidently because it was recognised by succeeding students that the worship was not purely that of an inanimate object. There was something behind it that needed distinction; and so a new word was called into use. Unfortunately, having invented a new term, it became necessary to live up to it, and it may be said that subsequent accretion to the supposed meaning of the word "fetishism" has done much to obscure to Europeans the working of the mind of the negro when directed away from the materialistic part of his daily life.

There is another word of more recent origin which has probably done as much to obscure issues as the word "Fetishism." That is "Animism." Derived from the Latin "anima," soul or ghost, in its literal meaning it is the direct opposite to "Fetishism." Yet it is used for the same idea. It briefly means the cult of the belief that every object has a soul, or, perhaps, rather, can have a soul. I doubt if Pantheism would not be a better word, though even that leaves much to be desired. As a name Animism takes the reverse

view to Fetishism. Fetishism looks to the object as the embodiment of the spirit. Animism looks to the spirit that has taken a local habitation. The former, as might only be expected when the study was new, indicates that attention was primarily directed to the object in which was the spiritual essence. The latter looked to the spiritual essence, and the object it resided in was of less importance. Both, however, indicate that the spirit requires a material body. Even this supposed necessary union is not absent in what we regard as the highest form of religion. In Christianity the Deistic essence has to be humanised to be comprehensive and brought within the range of intelligence of the average man and woman.

There is another objection to the word "Animism." That is, that at first sight it seems to have some connection with "animal," which tends to throw one unconsciously and involuntarily off the track.

Through the invention therefore of words which have not a clear meaning much obscurity has grown up, and many theories evolved which will have to be swept away before the subject can be fully understood.

One of the greatest obstacles to the full understanding of such a subject as a religion of which the origin is buried in the mists of antiquity, and, indeed, of all civilisations and tribal origins as well, is man's inability to think backwards for thousands of years with any degree of clearness. Archbishop Ussher still dominates many minds either consciously or unconsciously with his date 4004 B.C. worked out from the Bible as the date of the creation of the world. As nearly precise as it could well be for the historical period, his chronology has set an unfortunate limitation on events in the pre-historic period. It has narrowed the outlook, and has prevented subjects being seen in their true perspective. Even the moving back of Egyptian civilisation to a slightly earlier period has not removed the cramping effect. There has been insufficient time provided for the development either of a race or a religion, and in many cases for an art, in a continent subject to such slow changes as Africa. If, however, we boldly look at the fact that the negro race was much as it now is per-

haps 150,000 years ago, we can give ourselves time for many processes of evolution, not the least important being those on the mental side.

In claiming such a long period for its development one is of course called upon to produce some evidence in its support. I will quote three items. In the Grotte des Enfants near Mentone, in the south of France, were found buried 25 ft. below the surface stratum of the cave a mother and son of distinct negroid features. There were three interments representing different ages above them, the one next above being a Cromagnon man 6 ft. 2½ in. in height. According to Penck's chronology the age of the remains must be assigned to the beginning of the third inter-glacial phase. This lasted 100,000 years, and was of course anterior to the Neolithic age, which is given as much as 25,000 years as a maximum. In German East Africa there were discovered in 1913 or early 1914 human remains buried in the fourth of five strata opened up. This individual, which was negroid, and with apparently filed teeth, seemed to have been drowned, and not to have received formal burial. The discoverer, Dr. Hans Reck, estimated the age of the remains at 150,000 years. Further, I have myself, in Ashanti, unearthed pottery in a deposit which also indicates very great antiquity.<sup>1</sup>

Now even if such a vast period of years for the existence of the negro race as clearly differentiated from the white and yellow races be unacceptable, there is, nevertheless, a very wide margin between 150,000 years ago and 6,000 years ago. In that space the black race, as a whole, has had time to work out many religions and to have abandoned them in turn, supposing it had sufficient genius for such spiritual development, long before the Egyptians appeared as a separate nation. When we find that in the time of Ptolemy, the geographer, in the second century A.D., several negro nations, among them the Mandingo, and also the light complexioned Fula, were then located where they are now, we have reason to believe in a certain stability of superstition and religious thought which may have continued unchanged from a very long anterior period.

<sup>1</sup> Described in *Man*, 1917.

This digression has been made to show that we must not limit ourselves as to time in dealing with such a subject as the religion of Africa.

The mixture of materialism and spiritualism in the mentality of the negro is somewhat difficult of comprehension to the European. To many he seems to be little more than the embodiment of sustentation and procreation. This general view is not entirely wrong, because possibly he is that at bottom. His environment, one in which Nature predominates and man is secondary, has, however, forced upon him something else, and that something else is a spiritualism. Finding himself primevally dominated by the forces of Nature, his dawning intelligence, or his full intelligence if he were thrust into such conditions from another region, discovered objects of fear all around him. The more he explored, the more he searched for food, the greater terrors he met with. The limb of a great tree would suddenly fall from far aloft without warning and narrowly miss killing him; great monsters in the river to which he went to drink would threaten to seize him; wild beasts would hunt him by night. There were terrors by day and terrors by night; and his mind was stimulated beyond its mere attention to its animal wants. There was some thing or things intangible about which he could do nothing. Most of them were dangers to him. In time, that is, if he had not brought sufficient requisite knowledge with him, he learnt that these forces of Nature might in many cases have their dangers modified—in fact, they might be appeased. For instance, the crocodile at the shallow place where he could cross the river might be quiescent after it had taken one individual, and the rest of the family or tribe would be unmolested for a time. Hence a sacrifice was useful. Further experience might show it need not necessarily be one of themselves. If, therefore, one terror could be appeased, why not others?

Arrived at this stage, the foundation of spiritualism became laid. The superstructure could be added and subsequently altered to suit local requirements. In all cases, however, it was Nature pressing on man. His own volition was small.

So it has remained all these ages. The reason of absence of change has been that the environment has remained the same.

Local wind puffs might come and disturb the existing state of quiet; but they would pass over, and in a comparatively small number of years, if years be a right period to measure with, the pre-existing state would be restored. We may therefore assume, without a wide margin of error perhaps, that as we find so many tribes at the present day, so there were tribes, predecessors of these, with an identical mentality and with the same methods of expressing that mentality even a hundred thousand years ago.

In the fear of actual or imaginary things possessing great and incalculable powers lies the origin of those intangible essences which may be called spirits. Whether they have any independent existence or not depends on the mentality of the individual. If his mind permits him to believe in such a world as the spirit world, there is no limit to its extension. It is, indeed, a peculiar circumstance, but one which is, after all, only an example of the system of balance or compensation in Nature, that a mind with, say, very materialistic tendencies in many respects can also be found capable of very high spiritualistic conceptions, and its view of the range of intangible influences may be very far-reaching. It is thus that one finds in the negro to no small degree a combination of extreme materialism and high spiritualism. His religious frenzy can be great, and he can detect a spirit where less materialistic persons of other races fail to perceive one. To him the world is peopled with spirits. Many airy nothings are accommodated with a local habitation and a name. His imagination plays him many tricks. If he apprehends that a spirit is somewhere, his comprehension requires it to be brought into the realm of practical politics.

This is the spiritual belief that has been named Fetishism and Animism. It's really pure Spiritualism.

With spirits playing so great a part in a man's life, it cannot be supposed that such phenomena should exist without some effort being made to turn them to his use or to prevent them from doing him harm. Certain persons, therefore, in the community would have to give special attention to spiritual matters. Every tribe accordingly has a priesthood of some kind. For the most part it is not in the hands of the

executive chief, except as regards ancestor worship, when the chief or head of the family performs such ceremonies as may be necessary. He, having his time taken up with mundane affairs, cannot attend to spiritual affairs as well. Hence the beginning of specialism. When one considers the ages that have elapsed since the negro race was differentiated, it cannot, further, but be supposed that different systems grew up. That there is so much general similarity can only be put down to the environment of which the tendency is to reduce them all to one level. The negro race inhabits for the most part either dense forest or savanna country (*i.e.*, grass land with scattered trees), and accordingly there must exist strong distinctions depending upon whether they inhabit the one class of country or the other. Features, however, peculiar to the one may be found with the other, indicating that there has been some enforced change of habitat in past times.

In addition to the rites of their religion being exercised by authorised persons having tribal recognition, individuals, both male and female, very commonly like to practise rites on their own account. Some of these may be harmless, such as making a small offering of food to propitiate some local spirit before undertaking something, or tying a fragment of cloth to a tree as a sacrifice in the hope of not falling sick. On the other hand, the act may not be quite so innocent. A person may make a small fire secretly in his or her house, and pour liquor on it, and make a form of words that So-and-so may fall ill and die. This latter class of rite-making is really a claim to witchcraft. The person may be a real witch, according to local repute, and be feared accordingly, or be only pretending to have such powers—"to have power" being a great desideratum with all negroes. There are therefore two sets of claimants to intercourse with the spirit world, the regular priests, who are trained up from youth or from childhood, and the irregular practitioners, who may or may not have some connection with the others. All are indiscriminately called by Europeans, and by natives speaking English, Fetishmen or Fetishwomen. They are held in more or less awe, and acquire wealth in proportion to their skill. Another name for them, which is used in the Niger delta, is Juju-man.

With so vast a period of time behind them such as has been indicated above, it can only be supposed that the tribal priesthoods have successfully worked up a number of very skilful deceptions and practices, and have surrounded their cult with so great a cloud of concealment that for a stranger to acquire a knowledge of it in all its details is an impossibility, much less to trace its origin. A European can only learn what is immaterial, and what every other uninitiated native can learn; and it will only be externals. The rest he must arrive at, so far as he may, partly by inductive reasoning, which will not carry him far, and partly by deduction and intuition, aided by long acquaintance, if he is fortunate enough to have it, with their mode of thought.

As can be seen, the combination of a multitude of spirits with a vast period of time cannot have failed to produce much mystery. The only marvel is that, comparatively speaking, the mysterious element is so small and so uniform in its externals. This must be entirely put down to the dominating influence of the tropical region of the world with its comparatively small change of seasons, and especially, as said above, to the vegetation, against which man is so feeble. The tendency to luxuriance in the cult of spirits is therefore held in check. Man is not the dominant factor within the tropics, not even the European, with all his capital behind him.

Whilst there are local distinctions in religious ceremonies, national in their nature, the tendency to uniformity is maintained as well by the all-pervading spiritualism which is universally believed in, and which, being all-pervading, does not in consequence admit of much variation. Nevertheless, there do exist some distinctions. For instance, perhaps we may separate tribes which, while recognising the ubiquity of spirits, recognise a one great God of heaven (Mende is one) from those with whom the ubiquity of spirits is united with a worship of the spirits of their ancestors (such as the Ashanti) and with whom the one great God of heaven seems to have but little influence and is scarcely heeded. Amongst others, too, *i.e.*, the Efe group of tribes (Gold Coast, Togoland and Dahomey), phallic worship seems to have some prominence. There are possibly other lines of cleavage that could be drawn.

To dogmatise, however, on the presumed religion of a tribe, without very perfect acquaintance with it, is a source of danger. All sorts of hidden elements may at any moment be brought to light and met with most unexpectedly.

When St. Paul divided the new religion he preached into the three sections of Faith, Hope, Charity, he covered the ground of his own religion in particular, and that of every other as well. In fact, the whole realm of spirituality is embraced therein, and a ready index for comparison supplied.

I cannot expound the religion of all the tribes of Africa nor even of one. The only course open therefore is to take these three great divisions and illustrate their position in regard to the mentality of some of the black nations of Africa, and West Africa in particular.

As to FAITH, I have already said above that that rests primarily on the existence of a host of spiritual beings with little or no dependence on each other, and the origin of this spiritual host to be in large part based on fear of the unknown.<sup>1</sup> Each of these spiritual beings has the ordinary human attributes, *plus* some special attribute, which may be peculiar to itself. The essence of the latter is "power," and the net summary of the belief of the negro is therefore a host of supermen, each of whom has his special locality and name. If a spirit's power be very great as the result of much success, it may be revered or feared even beyond the limits of its own tribe or group of tribes. Its habitation may be a rock, such as the rocks on which are built the castles of Elmina, Cape Coast, and Anamabo, on the Gold Coast; it may be a big tree, as the great sacrificial trees until recently standing in the middle of Kumasi, of which only two or three now remain; it may be a river, waterfall or whirlpool. In fact, practically every conspicuous natural object is the abode of a spirit. The most powerful spirits reside in steep hills or piles of boulders, a few of which will be mentioned below. There will often be a shrine in the vicinity (in local English "Fetish-house" or "Juju-house"). The powers and attributes of all these spirits are, of course, of different natures. They work in different ways and for different purposes, just as did the gods

<sup>1</sup> See my *Earliest Man*, chapter on religion, etc.

of ancient Greece and Italy, and as do the localised saints according to the belief of the peasantry of Roman Catholic countries. They all have separate attributes. Some, too, are descendants of others, as Obo, in Western Ashanti, who is reputed the daughter of the River Tano.

According to Ellis, the Twi-speaking peoples of the Gold Coast recognise good and bad spirits, or, as they are usually termed, "beneficent" and "malignant" spirits. The latter receive most attention as they are powerful agents for harm. The others, only doing good, and not having it in them to do harm, need not be troubled much about, unless something special is needed, when they have their attention drawn to the needy supplicant by the offer of a gift. No doubt other tribes and nations may have the same division among their spirits. All the same this division does not seem strongly traceable among the Mende—at least it has not come to the writer's notice—and, should this be so, possibly it is not strongly marked in other tribes.

This recognition of the two principles of good and evil is very important. I do not mean to say that there are tribes or even individuals who have no knowledge of these different principles. The division is of importance when a religious system is built up on them. Easy-going in their lives as negroes are for the most part, whilst evil is recognised in the abstract, though not very deeply in practice, the opposite state of virtue is but little to the fore. There are so few means in a primitive state of society of giving the existence of a virtue ocular demonstration. This will appear all the more prominently when dealing with the subject later under "Charity." How the distinction arose, and whether indigenous, is hard to say, for, as we have seen, the leading attribute to induce fear, by which alone a spirit's existence could be recognised, was some evil-working, *i.e.*, malignant influence, which had to be appeased. Such spirits were all local. Now it is hard to conceive any locally situated spirit that could possess some beneficent influence unless derived from elsewhere. I think it may be surmised that the beneficent spirits are extra-mundane in origin. They would include such spirits as that of vivifying rain, the spirit that gives

a good supply of fish, whether in the sea, or a river, or the like, and so in general the spirits that make food crops to grow. In high altitudes the warming influence of the sun may perhaps have some spiritual recognition, but for the most part in the tropics the sun is ignored. Seeing that in most regions near the equator the food supplies are very regular, the influence of beneficent spirits has little scope, and, therefore, until some urgent need should arise little attention would be given to them. It may be said that it would only be as late intrusions, in fact, as after-thoughts, to account for certain phenomena that beneficent spirits would come into the common faith.

In addition to these localised spirits, there are besides the souls of men, which are believed to exist apart from the body when the body dies. The name given to the human spirit may be the same as that given to the local spirits, as in Mandingo and Mende, or it may be different, as in Twi. These spirits during a man's lifetime seem not to be endowed with independent existence. The trouble begins when the body dies. It is then that the spirit has to be taken in hand with some ceremony, and not without involving some considerable financial outlay; if not, it will continue to plague the person's family, exceptions being made with slaves, which are not worth troubling about. If all goes well the soul will go to the place of departed spirits, which is underground, according to the belief of the Mende, and never be heard of again unless specially invoked.

A peculiar feature, which must not be overlooked seeing that it is very widespread, is the virtual "creation" of a spirit. This can be effected with comparative ease. A town decides it wants a deity for a certain purpose, or none in particular. The image is made, and on completion, after certain ceremonies, it becomes endowed with a spirit, which henceforth resides therein.<sup>1</sup> Ellis, further,<sup>2</sup> has a long account of the creation of tutelary deities by the individual himself without the aid of a priest, but the spirit he calls into it is part of the spiritual essence of a greater deity.

<sup>1</sup> See Mende story in *Man*, 1917.

<sup>2</sup> *Tshi-speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast*.

With all the African's faith in spirits the influence of both localised spirits and such as are the souls of men is not too far-reaching. Spirits which are powerful, for evil of course, to the inhabitants of the country—in fact, to their owners—do not always count for much to strangers. A native who will fear greatly and absolutely refuse to walk in his own bush at night will travel all night alone in a strange country and hold the local spirits in derision. This requires the aid though, of, say, British rule, and would not have been the case in former days. Nevertheless, some local spirits hold their own. The great spirit of Krobo Hill, in the south-east of the Gold Coast, is one. Although this hill, rising from the plain with steep sides, is surrounded by open country, strangers fear greatly to pass round it at night even in a big party. It is, of course, up to the guardians of a local spirit to see that it is respected, for even spirits require the aid of personal and material assistance. Strangers are thereby reminded that the local spirit has strength and should not be despised. As to the priesthood, they naturally like to see their own deity widely venerated or feared. It gives them importance. Their past methods may perhaps be regarded as unscrupulous in these days of European rule. They cannot, however, now go far, and their influence is practically confined to their own tribe and others more distant, but speaking a cognate dialect. For instance, the Krachi spirit (Gold Coast), commonly called the Krachi "Fetish," of course, located in a heap of great boulders on the former German side of the Volta River, is still a power, although the Germans endeavoured some years ago to destroy it. They merely, of course, destroyed whatever was material. The reputed spirit itself they could not destroy. It is still consulted by far-off Twi-speaking tribes, though its own local dialect differs considerably. Another powerful spirit was that of the Aro, in the Ibo country, Southern Nigeria. A military expedition in 1902 destroyed its appurtenances, but presumably the spirit still exists, and if so will resume its power again should it come about that European influence be one day only a memory in that part of Africa or perhaps not even as much as that.

As to the methods of appeasing spirits, they are many and

various, so that they can only be briefly glanced at here. The code of offerings seems to be precise. The highest sacrifice is that of a human being, descending thence in the scale of magnitude to a sheep, a fowl, and smaller living things still, as a wild bird or a lizard. Material non-living things may vary between an idol to represent the spirit itself, food, a rag from a worn garment, the hair cut from a person's head, or the finger-nail parings. Alcohol is also offered, but the offerant and the priest drink it, and the bottle is laid before the spirit's abode. As a few examples I may quote the following. A great pile of empty gin bottles lies at a shrine at the junction of two creeks near Galo, in the Volta delta. It has to be approached by boat. In the hut of the river spirit of a stream near Akukoa, in Ashanti, I saw once a big, well-defined five-fingered yam hung up as an offering. My followers, who did not fear, took it after I had passed and ate it that evening without dying afterwards. In the hut erected to the river spirit of the stream at Ejura, Ashanti, which hut was erected about four years ago, and fell down in 1917, I have seen eggs, plantains, ground-nuts and other vegetable foods laid on the ground, if anything at all were in it—sometimes an empty bottle as well. Foreigners feared to enter the unclosed doorway. Since the hut has fallen down offerings are still laid on the old floor. A white fowl has to be sacrificed to the spirit of the river at the ferry over the Pra, on the road from Elmina to Tarkwa, by persons crossing there. Food is laid on the ground at the entrance of a village to keep off sickness. These are a few examples.

The spirits of small streams, it must be noted, are regarded as beneficent spirits, and the offerings are for the most part made by women who desire a child. Men may also make them. I am informed that spirits of streams are also supplicated by women as far off from Ashanti as the Mende country, so that presumably the practice applies to the thousand miles, nearly, of territory lying between, and possibly extends much farther.

Having given some account of the belief in minor deities, the next point to consider, and in the eyes of many it will be

regarded as the greatest point, is what belief there also is in a Supreme Being and what function this belief performs.

Whatever may be the faith of negro peoples in other parts of Africa, in all probability all the nations of West Africa have some belief in a Supreme Deity. He is ill defined, unlike the local deities, and is generally, if not invariably, found to be identified as the god of heaven and his name to have some connection with the sky. It is this name that missionaries in translating the Bible have adopted as the equivalent of the Jewish and Christian God. This Supreme Being is never found to have a separate cult or priesthood, at least so far as I have ascertained. Whether this may be a fact as regards Borgu, where remnants of what is presumed to be Christianity survive, I have not been able to ascertain. Whether the belief in a Supreme Deity is derived from Christian or Muhammadan sources, dating from some centuries back, or is indigenous is debatable.<sup>1</sup> Among the Twi-speaking peoples Nyankupon does not seem to enter much into everyday affairs. He is, however, recognised in certain phases which are entirely beyond the powers of any local deity. For instance, a chief of Sefwhi (Gold Coast), hearing that a certain European of great stature was the thirteenth child of his parents, gave an upward glance and said, "God (Nyami) has given your parents much strength." Among the Mende, Ngewo is principally of use to be invoked in oaths, as when an untruthful person desires to emphasise the fact he is speaking the truth. He also recognises that his life is in the hands of God; and on Him it depends whether he lives or dies. Accordingly Ngewo is frequently called on in pious exclamations to this effect.

When we come to the next phase, HOPE, we have advanced a stage further. It may be asked what generally are the hopes of the black race both as regards this world and a future life. As regards this world they are two, one to feed himself, the other to propagate his species. Subsidiary to these, and pertaining to the first, is the desire of power and wealth. This has arisen with the break-down of the communal system in recent times since the economic development of Africa by Europeans began. In the long anterior period there

<sup>1</sup> This was discussed in the *AFRICAN JOURNAL* for October, 1916, p. 94.

may have been disturbing causes, too, such as the rise of autocratic military rulers; but the general effect would be small and would affect village life and customs very little. Left in his primitive condition, food production and propagation were the principal features of his life, and the emergence of the individual, who is practically a law unto himself, and who preys on whom he can, is a recent development under European rule. Formerly chiefs alone had this power. With limited hopes or expectations in this world, the spiritual hopes of the average native are limited also in like proportion. These spiritual hopes are not the same for all, and one would feel inclined to the opinion that the spirits of chiefs and important persons alone have any real existence in the future world. Curiously enough, the belief among the Mende is that the future world is underground, and women and children and even white men all meet there. They can also be recalled to life by charms.

The nature of the belief in the future life is largely shown by the funeral customs of a people. The fundamental idea with black peoples is to provide suitably for the life beyond, though the provision made would not last long according to the scale of consumption in the present world. The body is usually dressed in new or good clothes, and cooking pots and sundries are laid either on or in the grave, usually the deceased's own. Great chiefs were usually in the past accompanied by some of their wives, who were slain; also children and slaves, besides material objects. Human sacrifice was a necessary adjunct to the departure of a chief. Even at the present day there is usually a state of panic among strangers when the chief of a big town dies. Their anxiety to get away until the forty days have expired, when the final ceremony takes place, bears witness that they at least believe that human sacrifices are still performed in the Gold Coast and Ashanti. However, the wholesale slaughter of days gone by no longer exists. It is affirmed that a sheep or some such animal is slain as a substitute, and the people must make believe that sheep's blood is human blood. Whether this profession is a fact or not is another matter. The sacrifice of a sheep can undoubtedly take place, but it may be open to doubt whether it can really

be slain as a substitute. It would seem rather to be an independent sacrifice on its own account, for the wife and slave must either be with their master or not in the spiritual world. So there must either be total abolition of human sacrifice in funeral customs or the contrary. Possibly the presence of a companion to the future world may be dispensed with. Half measures seem hardly possible logically except so far as this, namely, that if any person dies a violent or sudden death in the vicinity it may be accepted as a suitable sacrifice. A sudden death on more than one occasion, to the writer's own knowledge, has been by common repute a sacrificial murder. When such occurs at the time a big chief dies, it may be surmised that in view of possible difficulties with the Government it will be accepted, and another death will not be necessary. It is, of course, believed that the person so dying has been killed with intention. Were it not so it would presumably be inefficacious. A stranger, too, is the equivalent of a slave. What occurs at the burial of many important chiefs is not known, as the time and place are secret. For instance, the burial place of the chiefs of Wassaw is quite unknown.

So it is that in the spiritual world the same life is led as in this world. It is, however, short-lived as regards the memories of the living. Yet, after all, so is the future world of the Christian. We may feel that we shall meet our loved ones again, as say our hymns, and may stake much on that belief. Who, however, would risk martyrdom for his belief that he would meet some such person as, say, Shakespeare, or Archbishop Laud, or Edward the Confessor, or Loyola? Whilst, therefore, the belief in a future life may be universal among the black race, its eternity is limited in just proportion, as the negro mind cannot grasp vast numbers with any degree of precision. His mind is limited in its scope. So is his hope in a future life; and fatalism is not prominent.

Among African nations having a long memory in connection with their deceased ancestors may be reckoned the Ashanti nation. Their history as a powerful state goes back a couple of centuries, which is a long memory in Africa. The skeletons of their kings, the bones joined together with gold wire, have been preserved, though their present locality since

they were removed from Bantama, a suburb of Kumasi, is not known to Europeans. The cult of ancestors is with this people still widely observed. The spirits of these chiefs are still recognised as powerful and able to wield considerable influence. In connection with this power, presumed to reside with them still, the relation of an episode that took place recently may not be inapposite. A matter was being pressed on the people which gave dissatisfaction, and the rumour flew round that force would be used if necessary. To remove apprehension a great meeting was held. It was then pointed out that the rumour was only partly correct. Force was indeed going to be applied; but that force would not be that of the Government, it would be of a quite different nature. It would be the moral force exercised by the spirits of their ancestors. In the old days they had coerced their subjects, and now would do the same again. At once everybody was satisfied. They would obey the spirits of their ancestors. Somehow, though, it would appear that the ghostly meeting at which a ghostly death drum was beaten, and a ghostly head fell thud to the ground, did not come to a unanimous conclusion, for the pressure exercised by the ancestral spirits was not great. In fact, practically none was exercised at all.

Ancestor worship, therefore, if this solitary instance be regarded as an example, is of no more importance in the daily life of an African than are the beneficent spirits. It seems that it requires the malignant spirits to get the necessary move on.

So much for HOPE as a form of expression for all that the future life implies. We have seen that these peoples' faith is great—in fact, without measure. Their hope is less. We next pass on to the consideration of the remaining third branch into which St. Paul divides the realm of religion, namely—CHARITY.

To all intents and purposes this is non-existent. The reason is possibly in part the social system, which is basally communism, and in part the general poverty of the individual as regards goods. In charity capitalism, whether material or moral, is a fundamental necessity, and the age-long socialism of the negro tribes is suitable ground for the production of

neither. Hence it is very hard to find instances of pure charity among negroes in their more primitive state. With those, however, who have assimilated Christianity, and acquired some share of this world's goods as their very own, there ought to be a modicum. It need hardly be stated, of course, that indifference or tolerance or hospitality even is not necessarily the equivalent of charity, nor family affection either.

Instances of charity that one can quote are scarce. There is one great historical act of charity recorded however. It is that of the negro woman of a village near Sego who took in and fed Mungo Park when he was refused food and admission anywhere by all the town. Her name, like that of so many doers of good, is unknown. Another instance is recorded<sup>1</sup> by the missionaries Ramseyer and Kuehne, when they were prisoners in Ashanti from 1869 to 1874. In the village of Abankoro they saw an orphan boy of about five years of age who went about unnoticed and half-starved because he could not speak, and was regarded as an idiot. The missionaries gave him some food, which act astonished the Ashanti inhabitants greatly. One woman was so far moved by their example as to wash the child, an act of singular compassion in an Ashanti, they observe. This woman's name is also unrecorded.

Many acts of charity might be done in secret, though there is not much that is secret in Africa except to foreigners. One act only has come to my knowledge in twenty years. I recorded it at the time, now some five years since, as it astonished me. It was nevertheless trivial. A Mende named Mosey found an old shoe a yard or two off the road, lying in the grass. He picked it up and threw it on the road. I asked, Why? He said someone passing with a sore foot might be glad of it.

A black man will never do anything for another unless there is some prospect of an equivalent or greater return. It is true that members of a tribe if away from their country, or of a family if at home, will readily assist each other. They have to. Public opinion requires it. This mutual assistance is only part of the system of primitive communism. They all know that in their turn they can appeal when the necessity

<sup>1</sup> Ellis, *Tshi-speaking Peoples*.

arises and not be refused. This, however, is not charity either in its material or moral aspect. To strangers little is exhibited but hostility.

Summing up, therefore, on these three great heads of religion, as said, Faith is great; Hope is less; and Charity almost entirely non-existent, this being entirely the reverse of the order laid down by the great authority whose dictum we have taken; and the fundamental reason may be ascribed to a socialism as near akin as possible to communism.

Subsidiary to religion are superstition in its multitude of forms, secret societies so-called, witchcraft, and following on them ordeals and practices in connection with birth, marriage, and death, etc., all of which are subjects for independent examination. In most of these practices there is some religious significance, and there are as many differences to be noted as there are different languages and tribes in Africa. Mention cannot be made of any of them in this article, which is intended to deal only with the broad aspects of religion, not with its detail.

A caution must be given in concluding. It is that in all that vast area stretching across the continent to the south of the Sahara, and on the West and East coasts, indigenous religions have had a tendency in the recent centuries to be influenced by Muhammadanism to a considerable degree, and Christianity to a less degree. Tribes may be to all appearance purely pagan, yet other influences may be detected in no small degree. Some tribes, like the Malinke, a Mandingo tribe, reverted from Muhammadanism only to tend thither again in recent years. It cannot be that all trace of their previous conversion has been obliterated, though it may not have been very deep. Among the Mende, also a purely pagan nation until a few years ago, and which is also in part related to Mandingo, there are indications of another religion which is probably Muhammadanism. Down south the Congo nation was largely Christianised three centuries ago, but when the Jesuits left, it relapsed to paganism. All that is now left of their previous conversion are a few expressions in the form of invocations besides the use of Christian signs as charms. Abandoned to themselves, the all-dominating influence of Nature, as it is in

tropical regions, brings the native back to the faith of his ancestors, and there is sufficient evidence to suggest that it will do so again and again as often as ever external force and association are removed.

A final note I would make is that I have preferred to select my illustrations from facts that have come to my own personal observation rather than borrow from other writers. The range of the illustrations is more limited, but the number on record becomes thereby added to.

F. W. H. MIGEOD