CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

IT would be presumptuous for any European to imagine that he could fully penetrate the depths either of the actual psychology of the African, or of the African's thought about his own soul and being. The subject is so intricate, and largely uncharted, that it is no wonder that many writers have given it but scanty attention.

In the last thirty years the beliefs of many African tribes, in gods and ancestors, have been investigated by trained field workers. The comparative study of African religion has begun. But the idea of the soul is less prominent, and there is no comparative account of West African psychological beliefs, such as will help the student of comparative religion and psychology at home, and the colonial worker abroad. This present study essays to present such a comparative account, not completely but as accurately as possible, from the facts as given by African and European observers.

The first danger which confronts the student is that of translating African ideas into European categories. The best authorities have noted this. Thus Dr. M. J. Herskovits, in his great work upon Dahomey, writes: "Few aspects of West African religion have produced such contradictory reports as those dealing with indigenous concepts of the soul. This is in part due to the fact that field investigation has been carried on by many who were under the influence of the animistic preconceptions held by the early workers in the field of theoretical anthropology—a preconception treated by these field-workers as a position to be validated rather than as an hypothesis to be tested."[1]

French scholarship has recently produced one of its finest pieces of African research in the posthumous publication of Dr. Maupoil's study of the Ifa divining system. Maupoil also declares that "the problem of the soul deserves a special study", but rather pointedly adds that "we admire those authors who succeed in making the 'soul' of others the object of recapitulatory tables, complete with decorations".[2] This is a sly dig

[1] *Dahomey, An Ancient West African Kingdom*, New York, 1938, p. 231.
[2] *La Géomancie à l'Ancienne Côte des Esclaves*, Paris, 1943, pp. 378 and 405.

at the four pages of classified "Names for the Soul", given by P. Amaury Talbot for the southern Nigerian tribes.[1]

Even more stringent warnings are uttered by the Dutch father, Placide Tempels, in a very important little book, whose value is out of all proportion to its size. It is on the philosophy of the Bantu of the Congo, but its thought may be applied also to much in western Africa. Father Tempels says that, "He who would enter, for example, upon the path of research into what words correspond, in Bantu dialects, to our notions of soul, spirit, will, feeling, etc., would postulate already that the Bantu divide a man as we do into soul and body, and that in the soul they distinguish the various faculties just as we do. This would not be a study of Bantu psychology, it would be, on the contrary, denying the existence of their own psychology, in supposing that it suffices to translate our terminology. To prevent this false start, it is necessary on the contrary to make a *tabula rasa* of our own conceptions in psychological matters, and prepare ourselves for the eventuality of ending with a very different conception of man from that which we hold in honour. We have nothing better to do than to listen to and analyse what the black people themselves say about this being that we are accustomed to call a 'reasonable animal'. . . . We do not pretend that the Bantu are capable of presenting us with a treatise of philosophy, explained with an adequate vocabulary. It is for us to make a systematic development of it. It is we ourselves who can tell them, in a precise way, what is their intimate conception of beings, and they, recognizing themselves in our words, will then acquiesce by saying: 'You have understood us, now you know us completely, you "know" in the way in which we "know" . . . you speak like our fathers; it seemed indeed that we must be right.'"[2]

In face of these solemn admonishments, one must indeed proceed warily. But it is evident that a study of the ideas about the nature and soul of man, such as one can discover, is necessary not only because of the general ignorance of the ideas of the soul which West Africans hold, but also in view of certain terms used by older writers and travellers, which have come to be used somewhat indiscriminately as sufficient representations of mysterious African notions. Terms such as "external

[1] *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, 1926, vol. ii, pp. 275–278.

[2] *La Philosophie Bantoue*, traduit du néerlandais, Elisabethville, 1945, pp. 20, 74–76. I am indebted to the kindness of the Belgian Colonial Secretary in London, in presenting me with a copy of this book at a time when it was very difficult to obtain it through the normal channels.

soul", "bush soul," "dream soul", "volatile soul", "over-soul". On the other hand, Father Tempels castigates the efforts of more modern anthropologists to avoid committing themselves, by using circumlocutions: "It is no longer possible to be content with vague locutions as: 'mysterious forces of 'being', 'certain beliefs', 'indefinable influences', or 'a certain conception of man and nature'. Similar definitions, empty of all content, have exactly no scientific bearing."[1]

Readers will be familiar with Sir James Frazer's chapters on "The Doctrine of the External Soul".[2] Frazer has done monumental work, collecting and comparing masses of material from primitive and from more developed religions. One disadvantage of his method, however, is that it often appears, at least, to suggest that similar ideas are current everywhere among primitive peoples, unless the contrary is definitely stated. Thus we are told that "the savage thinks of it [the soul] as a concrete material thing of a definite bulk, capable of being seen and handled, kept in a box or jar, and liable to be bruised, fractured or smashed to pieces".[3] Fortunately the word "savage" is undefined here, and we are happy to claim exemption for most West Africans from this category, on the grounds, amongst others, that the majority of them appear to have no ideas concerning the soul which might justify such a description as that of Frazer's. We cannot but recall some of the amusing words of Mary Kingsley: "I would break a lance with Noah's Ark. I mean the 'Homogeneity of the Human Race'. . . . Jevons and Co. are caulking and breaming it with the assistance of Frazer, and the whole affair is highly irritating to a high and dry Darwinist like me."[4]

We do not forget that Mary Kingsley herself spoke of a "bush soul". But that was among the peoples of the Congo. I cannot say whether that expression was accurate, or now capable of definition in more precise terms, for the Congo peoples, having myself no experience of them. But, as far as my research and reading go for West Africa, I may affirm that this is a notion foreign to the tribes in this area, with the possible exception of some of the eastern Nigerians, whose beliefs may approximate to those of the Congolese.

The value of the comparative method, nevertheless, is undoubted, provided that its limitations are clearly realized

[1] *La Philosophie Bantoue*, p. 20.
[2] In *Balder the Beautiful*, 1913, vol. ii; also *The Golden Bough*, vol. iii.
[3] *Balder the Beautiful*, vol. ii, p. 95.
[4] *The Life of Mary Kingsley*, by Stephen Gwynn, Penguin edition, p. 104.

and indicated. It is because I believe this, that I have myself embarked upon studies in comparative religion and psychology, while endeavouring not to gloss over distinctive ideas held by different tribes.

In the following chapters, it will be seen that while, for the sake of convenience and order, there has to be some grouping and systematization, yet an effort has been made not to make general statements about any tribe that have not the support of positive research. In the present state of our knowledge, it is not always possible to present as complete a description as one would wish, nor to answer all the questions that might occur in the mind of the reader. But all that is stated has been checked from serious research.

One may enter here a claim for the rights of the comparative study of religion. Many of the religious and psychological beliefs of Africans have been reported under the heading of anthropology or ethnology, together with masses of more truly sociological and anthropological detail. It is, indeed, an interesting sidelight upon the psychology of anthropologists themselves that, while some are apparently agnostic in regard to Christian faith, they have become fascinated by African religion. Unhappily some missionaries, who have a theological training, have been either fanatically opposed to or totally uninterested in African beliefs. There are, happily, great exceptions. But the study of African religion and psychology is surely within the province of theology and philosophy. At least, Africa presents much matter for comparative religious study, beyond the most primitive.

There are those who deny almost entirely the validity of the comparative method, who consider each tribe to have its own special form of religion, playing its unique role in that particular society, and incomparable with any other religion. This is an exaggeration. A great authority on African religion has said recently: "In spite of these cultural diversities there is, I believe, an underlying identity in religion. I do not deny or minimize the differences you may find between the highly organized Yoruba or Baganda, with their hierarchy of gods, on the one hand; and the more simple peoples, on the other hand. But the difference is one of emphasis and development, not of essence. There is sufficient identity to warrant our speaking of African religion. . . . But there are inquiring minds in Africa which do not accept the generally prevalent notions. There are sceptics and agnostics in Africa. There are idealists

and materialists; the introspective and non-introspective; the devoutly religious, the intermittently religious, the indifferently religious."[1]

The practical importance of the comparative study of African religion and psychology should become evident to all who are interested, either personally or professionally, in religion; and not remain only the concern of those who care for the curious and the unusual.

Even the most "fundamentalist" missionary, who goes to Africa to "save souls", should realize the importance of discovering whether the African thinks he has a soul that can possibly be saved. What would his reaction be to such a revelation as that given by Dr. Smith regarding the Ba-ila of Rhodesia? "The soul as we speak of the soul, it is doubtful whether the Ba-ila believe in it. Certainly we have never found a word that would be a satisfactory translation."[2]

It would be beyond our scope here to examine European ideas concerning the soul, either the classical notions or the conceptions of modern psychologists. Brief reference to the current denotation of the terms used will be made, however, in the appropriate chapters, to clarify our use of such terms.

The scope of this book is extensive with the Guinea Coast and hinterland. West African tribes are considered, from the Ivory Coast in the west to eastern Nigeria, but many of the northern tribes are included. The three large families of Akan, Ewe and Yoruba, are those with which I have the best personal acquaintance. But I have thought it useful, for the purposes of comparative study, to widen the scope of references by utilizing the findings of the best modern investigators. Therefore, in addition to Akan, Ewe and Yoruba, on most points I have referred to some tribes of the upper Ivory Coast and western Sudan; to tribes of the northern territories of the Gold Coast; to the Ibo and southern Nigerian peoples; to Jukun and northern Nigerians. In this way a more complete picture may be obtained of West African psychological and religious beliefs.

The order of study followed will be from west to east, starting with the lower Gold Coast, about which we have most information, and the lower Ivory Coast where there are tribes of Akan stock and others that are akin in belief. The most natural division of tribe is horizontal, speaking roughly, but European

[1] E. W. Smith, *Knowing the African*, 1946, p. 99.
[2] *The Ila-speaking Peoples of Northern Rhodesia*, 1920, vol. ii, p. 162.

powers have carved out their slices of territory vertically, thus complicating racial and ideological studies.

Hence we proceed next to the upper Gold Coast, the upper Ivory Coast and Sudan; these again have kinship of tribe and belief, for political frontiers cut across tribes, e.g. Mossi and Lobi. We continue thence to Togo and Dahomey, which are inter-related, containing most of the Ewe and not a few Yoruba.[1] The northern tribes of Togo and Dahomey are practically unknown to anthropological study, and though I have travelled through part of this country I have had little opportunity of making a serious study of such interesting tribes as the Bariba, Pila, Somba, Kabre or Gur. Thence we proceed to lower Nigeria, from Yoruba in the west to semi-Bantu tribes in the extreme east and Cameroons frontier. Finally, upper Nigeria, with such knowledge as is available of its kingdoms and tribes.

Occasional reference is also made to beliefs held in East or North Africa, but only to draw a comparison or point a contrast, without any suggestion of including all African peoples in one group. Even in West Africa there is not homogeneity, and one often has to be content with indicating similarity or difference.

Finally a chapter treats briefly of the much-debated questions of Egyptian and Islamic influence on West African indigenous belief. And a concluding chapter endeavours to sketch lines of development for the beliefs, and the attitude that Europeans might adopt towards them. No African belief can be considered as static today, and while one tries to group together the pagan and the indigenous, there is a growing syncretism and absorption of foreign ideas. In this state of transition it is important to guide development, and to have some goal at which to aim.[2]

The method employed in preparation of this comparative investigation is a combination of personal enquiry, together with an extensive utilization of the works of the most modern and best-qualified field workers. One student alone, and only a part-time one at that, could not hope to acquire in many years a profound knowledge of so many tribes with their babel of languages.

All the best modern writings on West Africa have been consulted, in addition to personal enquiries in different areas. Naturally there is some unevenness in the methods employed

[1] See my article in *Africa*, vol. xvii, No. 2: "Yoruba-speaking Peoples in Dahomey."

[2] Questions of theology, such as the sense of sin, while needing study in the light of psychology, are too vast to be dealt with in this book.

by various research workers; some have dug much deeper than others. It is not always possible to obtain such complete information as one would desire. Sometimes the information recorded differs from what one would have expected. For example, it is believed by most West African tribes that the spirit of a man may be "eaten" by a witch, but that the personality or soul remains intact. A few writers state the contrary. Their remarks may be true, or may be founded upon misapprehension. I have not endeavoured to force all the information into identical categories. Where there is difference the fact is noted, and left as such in the hope that future field workers will be able further to check the point at issue.

We have to use the sole material available. It will never be possible to reveal all the beliefs of African tribes. Many are disappearing, or have already done so, under the powerful pressure of European, Christian, or Muhammadan influence. Others are surviving in distorted form. It is our task to record the facts, as now known, without prejudice.

My own acquaintance is partly with the French colonies, their peoples, and the literature concerning them. But I have the advantage, as an Englishman, of being able to give due place also to the researches of British writers. Comparative studies have become necessities, to help the general reader in studying African customs, and to save the colonial worker from parochialism. Where so much useful research has been achieved, in both French and British colonies, studies that look beyond political boundaries may assist the co-operation of the ruling powers, and help to further the unity of the African peoples.