CHAPTER 9

AFTER-LIFE AND JUDGMENT

AFTER death, the soul of the righteous is generally thought to reside in a world beyond the grave, for varying lengths of time. This world beyond is sometimes believed to be situated above the sky, but more often it is considered to be under the ground. The two notions may co-exist in the same tribe. The subterranean world would appear to be the more ancient belief, while the skyey heaven may partly be due to Islamic contacts and, more recently, to Christian teaching.[1]

Popular ideas of the after-life have much in common with those of the predynastic Egyptians; the "fields of peace" appear to have been under the ground, where the dead continued similar occupations to those in which they were engaged upon earth: ploughing, reaping, fishing. Work was thought to be lighter and pleasure more abundant than in mortal life, and some privileged souls were set apart for reserved occupations.

West African peoples commonly think that men continue their terrestrial work, interspersed with pleasures of earthly type. The world beyond is composed of towns and villages as on earth, with each tribe dwelling in its own place; to this clan a man must find his way, even if he dies far from his homeland. The classes of society are said, by many, to be maintained as on earth, chiefs and slaves occupying the same grades, hence the importance attached to maintaining the retinue of the chief in the old human "sacrifices". One does meet, however, with more democratic and levelling beliefs, or a reversal of class and even of colour in the beyond. Many believe that water, a river or the sea, must be crossed to gain the underworld, as the ancients crossed the Styx.

The notions of judgment and rewards vary in different tribes. In some places, where these thoughts are developed, it is held that God may degrade evil chiefs, and exalt the righteous poor, but some deny the possibility of change of rank, colour or sex. There is no orthodox doctrine.

[1] The Egyptians thought that kings went to the sky, while other departed spirits went underground. See W.J. Perry, *The Growth of Civilization*, Chap. IX.

LOWER GOLD COAST AND IVORY COAST

Some of the Ashanti seem to think of the world to come as situated in the heavens, for they believe that to reach the land of spirits the soul has to climb a steep hill, as is shown by the gasps of dying men, and the water that is poured down their throats to help them in the ascent.

On the other hand, the world beyond is thought of as a place of cold and dark, and no one has any inclination to go there before his time. This earth is not regarded as a "vale of tears" or a "desert drear". With all its trials, this world is warm and sun-bathed; whereas the beyond is thought of as cold and dark. Therefore the beyond is so often thought to be subterranean, and corresponding to this is the myth that men and women first appeared from the underground regions, coming out from thence on to the surface of the earth. Even with the best fortune in the after-world, the highest possible reward is to be allowed to return to this earth in a well-arranged reincarnation, in the same blood and totem clan.

A dead man receives food and clothing and money for his journey to the beyond, so that he may pass through all the trials of the way, and arrive honourably in the presence of his ancestors. If these gifts were neglected, the dead one might become a homeless and hungry ghost.

In the future world the deceased one still depends on his family for sustenance, in the form of the offerings which are made at regular intervals: the *adae* ceremonies that play such a large part in Ashanti religion. The kings of Ashanti not only had wives who were strangled to accompany them, during the funeral ceremonies, but there were other "spirit-wives" who were later chosen to minister to the needs of the kings, now regarded as their deceased husbands. These women brought food to the grave; they observed all the dead king's tabus; when the weekly time of "washing" the soul arrived they shaved their heads and dressed in white, to sit beside the bones of the king. No one could speak to these wives; they must always be chaste, and when one died another wife replaced her. A similar institution existed for the kings of Abomey.[1]

The Gã think that the dead wander about near to their earthly homes until forty days after their decease, i.e. until all the flesh on the skull has decayed. Then the spirits are believed to cross a river, and arrive at a place where their noses are

[1] *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, pp. 118, 154.

broken; wherefore dead spirits speak in nasal tones (as do some of those evoked by mediums, and some of the masqueraders in secret societies which represent the dead). After three days in this land, the dead may return to their homes, sometimes in the form of bats.

There is a vague belief in judgment, whereby the good and evil meet with due reward but, as on earth, the course of justice may be swayed by appropriate gifts, and some of the penalties may be diminished if suitable offerings are made.[1]

The Agni believe that the souls of the dead go to a place called Eboro. It is the personality-soul (*wawe*), which resembles the body in all ways, and when liberated from it sets off at once for Eboro, living there in an existence similar to that of the earth. The spirit of man (*ehonme*) stays for some time on earth, and is said to appear at times to friends and relatives. It stays around until the final funeral rites are accomplished.[2]

The lacustrine Adjukru believe that departed spirits go away to the sea, to reach the abode of the dead, the "village of the dead" (*ɔŋn-esu-baŋn*). However, some say that the land of the departed is in the heavens. Those who are drowned at sea are thought to remain always cold, and they come at times to ask for fire from the lagoon dwellers. There is but a vague notion of judgment after death. All souls are equal, and must continue to live after death, but God kills very evil souls. Sudden death, accidents, and death by lightning are said to be punishments sent by God upon the wicked still upon this earth. These latter beliefs are still held by the many members of this tribe who have embraced Christianity, but their ideas of the hereafter are much more precise and Biblical.

The Bete believe that the personality-soul stays near the dead man till four days after death, and then sets out for the great village of the dead. This village is believed to be situated at a great distance from the earthly residence of the tribe and to be under the ground. Its name (*ku-duho*) recalls Yoruba and Jukun roots for the dead; the Ewe word for the town of the dead is *ku-tɔmɛ*.[3]

The Baoule, of the central Ivory Coast, believe in a supreme God, Nyamye, who is evidently akin to the Ashanti Onyame. It is he who presides at the judgment of souls after death, rewarding the good and punishing the evil. The Gagou have

[1] *Religion and Medicine of the Gã*, p. 203.
[2] *Assinie et le royaume de Krinjabo*, p. 203.
[3] *Moeurs et Coutumes des Bété*, p. 70.

similar beliefs concerning their god Nyamien. The dead go off to a distant village, where they lead a life similar to that of the earth.[1]

UPPER GOLD COAST, UPPER IVORY COAST, SUDAN

Both northern Akan and Mossi believe in these villages of the dead. The Mossi think that it is situated in a sacred hill. From time to time it is believed that the sound of drumming comes out of the sides of this hill, and this is a presage of some great calamity coming upon the tribe, such as the death of their king. Nobody will go near this hill, but all endeavour to avoid it because of the supposed presence there of the spirits of the dead, who might catch hold of the trespasser, so that he would never get back to his home again. There are supposed to be mysterious paths in the bush, which appear to lead nowhere. These are spirit roads. One is said to run through a town right to the Mossi hill of the dead; men never walk along it, yet it seems to be well trodden by the spirits. These may be animal bush tracks.[2]

The northern tribes think that the departed go to the south, to Kumasi or Salaga, which were strange and distant places to them in times past, when communications were poor through lack of roads and frequency of tribal warfare. The Fanti, on the coast, think that the dead go to the north of the Volta, and that there they build villages, which some men are supposed to have visited, while some of the people in the central regions consider that the dead spirits go away to the east. Ife in Nigeria, the sacred town and traditional cradle of the Yoruba people, is a favourite resort for the departed and they may be seen there, so it is avowed by people of other lands.

The views of the Bambara upon the after-life appear in several strata. The most ancient thought seems to have been that of the metamorphosis of departed spirits into totem animals. Another old idea is that the dead go underground, but there is also the belief that they can visit the earth and their old homes.

But today the Bambara, like some of the Mossi and many tribes of the northern territories who have come into contact with Islam, believe in Lahara or Lahira. This is one of those ubiquitous Arabic words which, like the seven-day week, has penetrated far beyond the areas of direct conversion to Islam in West Africa. It has helped to crystallize ideas of the here-

[1] *Nègres Gouro et Gagou*, pp. 140, 255.
[2] *Tales told in Togoland*, pp. 33–35.

after which these tribes perhaps vaguely felt after, but had not precisely defined.

The Bambara today believe that Lahara is in the east, towards the rising sun and Mecca. It is the town of the departed ancestors, to which the spirit goes after death. Children only pass through it, and hasten to return to this earth to complete their allotted span. Older people may stay longer in Lahara and not hasten to reappear on earth, awaiting a favourable opportunity of coming into their own family, or refusing it and being born elsewhere if they are dissatisfied.

In the world of the dead the Bambara think that men eat, drink and labour as on earth, a somewhat idealized existence with less suffering than here below. It is sometimes said that light and heat are in short supply in the hereafter. The weak live in neglect and poverty; the rich, powerful, and seers, are actively and passionately interested in the concerns of their earthly families, hovering about among them while remaining invisible. All can show themselves to men, particularly at places where there are ample offerings. All the dead are superior to mortals, and have some power over wind and rain, agriculture and game. To relatives who neglect them the dead appear as frightening ghosts.

It seems that originally there was but a faint Bambara belief in rewards and punishments in the hereafter, but today a good number of them believe in a hell, where the spirits of the utterly recalcitrant are tormented and cannot return to earth. This is the lot of the few, and they do not live in terror of hell fire. This is almost certainly a Muhammadan importation, as for thirty years during the nineteenth century the Bambara were ruled by the fanatically Muhammadan Toucouleur tribe who tried by force, but without full or lasting success, to suppress all pagan worship and belief. They did succeed in introducing some of their own beliefs into the more tolerant pagan eschatology.[1]

Some of the Islamized tribes, such as the Fulani (Peuls) of the northern regions and Sudan, believe in a paradise (*ardiana*) which is the reward of the righteous, and a hell (*dianam*) where the wicked go to burn after death. Neutral people, those who are not too good or too bad, go to a purgatory (*larafo*) whence they may proceed to paradise later if their conduct merits such promotion.[2]

[1] *La Religion Bambara*, pp. 110–112; *Djénné*, pp. 132–133.
[2] *Le Noir du Yatenga*, pp. 651 ff.