

AFRICAN MAN AND TWO CLASSICAL MITHS

The debate prompted by Meyer Fortes in his account *Oedipus and Job in West-African Religions*¹ is valuable for its insight into the peoples of the Black Continent. In fact, if the basic motivations behind the two cited mythical stories can be discerned to any extent among the Tallensi of Ghana, and also, as the author suggests, within many other ethnic groups, it will be easier to establish characteristics common to all mankind, the elements of similarity being of a more primordial and significant nature than the differentiating factors. On the other hand, if the evidence is not convincing, or if the examples selected by the researcher are disputed by the outsider—who might for instance contest their long-term validity or universality—this might imply that the differences are predominant without their invalidating the overall possibility of there being a good number of common features.

Far from being purely academic, the controversy has an extremely concrete reality. If the economic-technical gap observed between the peoples of the Third World and the industrialised

Translated by Rosanna Rowland.

¹ Meyer Fortes, *Oedipe et Job dans les religions ouest-africaines*. Paris, Editions Mame, 1974. Preface by Edmond Ortigues.

nations is essentially chronological, if it is only the rhythm of historical evolution that has thus obscured the similarity, the uniformity even, then a well-prescribed and manifold therapy would allow a fairly rapid "recovery," and it is in this direction that men of goodwill should work if they wish to prove by deeds the unity of mankind: a claim which has in truth usually masked a condescending and fundamentally seignorial Eurocentricity. If, however, the differences are persistently manifest, if the divergences are shown to be substantial and desired, then we no longer have the right to impose common models; quite the contrary—we should encourage each to blossom within the terms of its own originality, which there is no reason to suppress.

Religious attitudes are the elementary and pre-eminent mode of expression in an illiterate society; thus Meyer Forbes insists: "Only the external observer can discern the abstract import of religious symbolism, by analysing it in relation to other religious institutions, in the context of the social structure of the people under consideration." Prefacing a collection of monographs compiled by the British ethnologist John Middleton, *Religious Anthropology*,² Marc Augé criticises certain "experts on the Christian religion who thereby seem to find justification for a special competence in the study of all religions," and, being a sociologist, he affirms that "the hypothesis that the religious world is a projection of social values is certainly worthy of analysis."

The reader to whom these two works are recommended will thus attempt to discover, behind the religious ritual and language, the preoccupations and conflicts of African men. The commentator hopes to encourage him in this by giving a few guidelines.

The first is perfectly shown when Meyer Fortes relates the story of the trader grown rich, the symbol of a society with a monetary economy—and therefore modern, who succumbs to the constraint of some soothsayers; in the name of the religion of ancestor-worship which they represent, they ordain that he should forsake this path and return to his village. This illustrates an apparently known fact about the only "old Africans," and, of course, about the interested parties themselves: the importance

² John Middleton, *Anthropologie religieuse, textes fondamentaux*. Paris, Editions Larousse, 1974. Preface by Marc Augé.

of traditional obligations is still a determining factor, even in circles sufficiently integrated into the contemporary world to seem detached from any "outmoded" influence. Indeed, it is as well to remember the predominance of beliefs deeply connected with the soul and the tribal lands and which, even in "acclimatized" capital cities, especially in moments of crisis, assert a distinct preponderance over alien religious, ideological and political concepts.

The social import of religion is not its only aspect. Besides being omnipresent and ineluctable it is also an aggravating factor, for, if we are to believe Fortes, who relies upon "the paradigms of Oedipus and Job," destiny is pre-natal, therefore beyond the reach of human activity, and its hold over the mind is supreme. The ancestors alone can, with time, "strangle" the evil pre-natal destiny which clearly marks "an irrevocable flaw" in the individual's development. Meyer Fortes specifies: "The crucial fact is that the individual has no choice. His submission to his ancestors is symbolic of his subjection to a social order which allows him no voluntary modification of his status or social capabilities. It is the common interest and collective ends which prevail." It must be added that these forces cannot be overcome or further sublimated, and it is a poor consolation to note that, "responsibility having been transferred to the supernatural level, the individual's feelings of abandonment and despondency are made bearable." Thus conformity, long institutionalised, becomes sanctified since "Destiny," as a concept, serves to exonerate both society and the maladaptive individual (particularly if he is a non-conformist and un-receptive to dogma), by attributing responsibility for this situation to the ancestors and by making it "stem from a pre-natal, that is to say pre-social, event."

Fortes' scientific analysis is intensive and brilliant, but it overwhelms the Western reader not by the allusive way in which it evokes the sense of otherness, but by a poignant description of fatalistic submission. "If a man wishes to prosper, say the Ghanian Tallensi, he must be clever, industrious and thrifty. But this is not enough; his qualities will be of no avail without the benevolence of Destiny, and even profiting from Destiny is not enough, for beyond Destiny lie the collective powers of all the ancestors"... This conclusion, it cannot be forgotten, has become

no less real in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

As another guideline, one may also ask whether the reference to Job and Oedipus especially does not attest an "a priorism" which deliberately and arbitrarily governs a certain mode of thought, thus depriving it of free judgement. If we confine ourselves to these two themes, which are in fact evident in the domestic, geneological, phallocratic and cultural traditions of the Tallensi, the analogy can, to some extent, be observed. But by describing it as immutable, by denying it the possibility of any evolution, and by crowning and anointing Destiny, do we not (unconsciously no doubt) condone a certain stasis, a paralysis, a perennial helplessness. Oedipus is presented to us as a passive and trapped figure who has renounced any escape from a Fate which corners and rules him. Job certainly attempted to resist Fate—in effect the God of Israel—irascible, unrelenting and rejecting any approach short of submission, but realised that such resistance is useless, for even the plea of the just man is not taken into consideration. Meyer Fortes says: "It is, in fact, essential that God, the superior, be in a position to chastise Job, the inferior, and for the latter to be in a position to justify himself by virtuous conduct. It is true that, at first, Job feels cut off from his companions and unjustly persecuted by God. This is because he is mistaken as to his status and believes himself to be worthy of gratitude and reward according to his own standards of virtue and justice. The Tallensi would not make the same mistake towards their ancestors."

All well and good. But in 1975, who is right, Job or the Tallensi? Fortes, the anthropologist, may proceed with the analysis of Job's Fate, and he may follow Oedipus' trail among the vain and fleeting resentments of the Tallensi. Had he been able, like Augé, to break away from his stubborn search for parallels, he would also have been able to abandon easy and ready-made comparisons, for "the contingent agnosticism of the non-professors of religion may ensure this withdrawal from the object of study, a withdrawal which, in ethnology, has become a virtue and, to some extent, its scientific guarantee." He would have been able to wonder, for example, as to the possible options open to the Tallensi and others by drawing inspiration from the Prometheus myth, by setting aside the millstones, the shackles, the safe but dangerously passive habits, and by directing his

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sights, not without risk perhaps but neither disregarding their essential character, towards a more productive future.

This is not, however, the essential question. As a final guideline for today the reader might ask himself about the "sacred character" of the relationship between the young and old Tallensi, between the living and the dead, between the man, the ancestor, Destiny, and the hereafter. Such reflections might be concluded by the following comment. One can hold (as does the present writer) that basic geophysical and historical conditions are responsible for the evolution of the African man, especially in so far as he is different from the European. One might, on the other hand, defend the idea of a hiatus which is more chronological than fundamental. Having considered more subtle options than can be indicated here, the critical reader should draw very serious conclusions regarding his general attitude towards Africans—"different," or "backward"—without relinquishing intermediate or compromise positions.

In the Africans' march towards their future (I was just about to say: "towards their Fate or Destiny"...) secularisation appears to be the Royal Way, or, rather, the painful but necessary condition for any evolution, a term which more adequately implies an openness of mind, a broadening of horizons and a socio-cultural exfoliation, rather than a quantitative "growth"—usually imaginary, limited to the privileged, and promising new frustrations.

Only the emancipation from constraint—for resignation before an omnipotent Destiny always assured of the final word is stultifying and paralysing in the extreme—this alone can make the path easier or safeguard it better from further cultural tension in the widest sense of the word. Secularisation is never the result of a spontaneous process, but of a constantly renewed and overriding demand. The choice lies between submission to Destiny and the decision to seize consciously, responsibly, and rewardingly, the right to free action.