

Personal Testament

147

by Michael Kelly

I should like to record something of the result of an experience which I had from 1961–1964. I was working as a schoolmaster in Ghana for that time. The school was in routine and academic syllabus an imitation of European, mainly English, practice but we were fortunate in being far removed from the main centres of European expatriate concentration. To be precise we were 130 odd miles from Accra and 70 odd from Akosombo which were the nearest and most accessible European centres. In a town of 10,000 inhabitants throughout our stay at most 40 were expatriates, at the least 20. They included from two to four priests, the Presbyterian missionary and his wife, the two mission doctors and their team of from four to six nurses. This situation could mean virtual isolation in a tiny social world where contacts with Africans and adaptations of ways to theirs were kept to a minimum, or it could provoke a more or less natural interchange between African or expatriate which the circumstances made easy and spontaneous, rather than condescending, folkloristic or exotic. It would be untrue to say that it did not involve a conscious decision, but the decision was an easy one.

Old attitudes die very hard even in so out of the way a place. Many of the Europeans did choose to huddle together to lick over each other's sense of isolation endlessly; contacts with Africans were kept to a minimum, formality of occasion was encouraged, any crossing over of racio-customary lines was seen as daring and by no means habit-forming. In such a small community such attitudes could lead to great strain: one drank himself to a state of breakdown, one couple left after two months, one violently promiscuous fraterniser with Africans reacted after transfer to another community equally violently in a refusal, he asserted, ever to accept an African on terms of friendliness or equality again.

Such a situation could be very narrowing and disturbing.

It was on the other hand also a liberating and awakening experience, a positive revelation. I do not mean this in any anthropologising picturesque sense, but in a spiritual sense. I do not want to go into the fascinating details of eating, sleeping, natal, marital, funeral and religious customs that were gradually unfolded to us in precept and practice. I simply want to cut behind all the surface manifestations and make my testimony that three years were enough to shake some

of my most profound mental, social and spiritual assumptions, to raise questions of the most fundamental kind where I had not imagined there to be any question of questions, at least as far as I personally, a moderately thoughtful, interested and articulate product of my culture, was concerned. But the experience did not only raise questions, it also gave satisfying alternative responses to those I had assumed were both necessary and sufficient. Whether I return for good from the non-European environment to England or whether I go back to Africa again, I have been marked internally for life, I think.

To attempt to define without descending into anecdotalism is difficult and runs the risk of an assertiveness and pretentiousness which I should like to avoid. I am not a trained philosopher or theologian and my experience precisely operates at the level of experience, of involvement with life and what I see and feel as reality, rather than in the realms of theory and analysis, even though I hope intelligence is engaged in my experience as well as emotion and the senses.

I think it would be true to say that the main areas of awakening were in the following manifestations of African attitude:

Ubiquitous and continuous spiritual presence;

Prime practical importance of sociability;

General permissiveness.

Something of the impact of these things may be crudely expressed in biased form by the expression 'culture-shock' which was used by U.S. Peace Corps Volunteers to describe one aspect of their local indoctrination courses. In these the concept appears to have been used defensively to describe the physical and emotional shocks of sudden exposure to difference, with the built-in qualification that the American way of life is best and forewarned is forearmed and don't lose your balance, gang, you'll be going home in two years' time, so don't lose your medical kits or your touch at the PX or forget to boil your water.

It was at first surprising, later not surprising at all, since Americans are human, how quickly many of them became un-American under African influence. It seemed, in the circumstances I have described, that anyone with goodwill was subjected to a mind-opening modified melting-pot experience which temporary presence and difference of race did not manage to make either unreal or superficial.

1. *Ubiquitous and continuous spiritual presence*

This, whether vestige of animism or not, characterised the attitudes to reality of Christian and pagan, educated or illiterate Africans. No fact or event in nature, no word or deed by humans were without spiritual significance and value. Intellectually this may be nothing new but to find it in practice, everywhere, at all times, at all levels of society, was a complacency-shattering experience. Many

Africans attack European abstractionism and materialism as glibly as many others embrace the products of them, but in fact, in my own experience, there is a good deal in the charge as it refers to certain European processes which hitherto I had seen as laws of universal thought and practice. For example the intellectual rather than total personal grasp of truth, even the revealed truths of religion, I had seen as more of an ideal than a disaster. Anything else in the Catholic schooling of my youth was looked down upon as 'emotional', 'primitive'. Yet intellectually God's immanence, man's united physical-spiritual nature are asserted in that same tradition as ineluctable realities. The Africans practised these realities with a total acceptance of the rightness of this world view which put my European detachment and analytic verbalising tendencies to shame. Many of these Africans may not have been highly educated in the European sense but they were not primitive in the sense of being thoughtless, stupid, superstition-ridden or wrong. Of course these drawbacks abounded as they do in all communities perhaps but individual manifestations of fault did not discredit the considered yet spontaneous, intuitive and profound practical realisation of creation's complete impermeation by spirit which I found among the Africans of my acquaintance and was awakened to with gratitude. In such a world picture material things are given a real value and importance but materialism cannot but be seen as ridiculous.

2. *Prime practical importance of sociability*

This means that personal relations are in practice the most important things in life. It is a simple matter to find anthropologically satisfying reasons why in small isolated communities of an agricultural bent this attitude should arise. But I am not so much interested in historical explanations as in present manifestations. The African environment is changing rapidly in the technological, material and educational respects of international twentieth century advanced practice, but many of the old attitudes are showing a fine resilience and adaptability to new circumstances. (I am afraid, in my ignorance, the only supplement of an academic nature which I can give to my own impressions in this respect is the monograph by David Broken-sha: *Social Change at Larteh, Ghana*.¹) The belief in sociability is I submit one of these.

In many industrialised cultures personal relations seem to be seen as essentially sentimental, leisure time, feminine pre-occupations. In Africa a sense of man's absolute spiritual significance, the relative unimportance of concerns and activities which imply a denial of this, is paramount. Of course, aspects of this clash with certain prized European assertions. For example, one explanation of chronic African unpunctuality is that time is man's servant, especially gregarious man's servant, not the other way round. That unpunctu-

¹Oxford University Press, 1966.

ality can be remedied for the convenient and efficient running of modern society without destroying sociability is in process of demonstration in African states. The African argues that the European makes a fetish of what is after all a convenience, a means, and begins illogically to assert impersonality and ultimately indifference to people as a virtue.

Work involving a high degree of personal isolation and apparent subscription to European industrialised norms of efficiency and ruthlessness has to be done in African states, but this need not destroy sociability. One reason for this is that, paradoxically, traditional African sociability does not lead to the cult of individualism, though the production of massively individual characters by illiterate communities was one more surprise my *evolué* condescension had to undergo in Africa.

Many Europeans do not seem able to believe that belief in the paramount importance of the human person does not imply an eccentric, otherworldly, indulgent or cranky cult of the individual, which means the impractical, inefficient, uneconomic and time-wasting. That African sociability is more profound, balanced and generous than individualism indicates to me the possibility that it may survive the strains of adaptation to new physical environments, new educational facts or techniques, transport and communications media.

Senghor has argued that one mission of Africa is to instil a spirit of humanity into the materially developed, mechanised, industrialised world being produced in our time. In my experience the hope is neither so vague nor so unlikely as it might at first seem.

3. *General permissiveness*

I should describe this as being in the nature of a view of life and conduct rather than a formulated consistent philosophy. Indeed a high tolerance of apparent inconsistency seems to me one of the more desirable African attributes. My experience confirms the impression left for instance by Barrington Kaye's book *Bringing up Children in Ghana*² that in many small matters and specific areas discipline of children is both strict and harsh. In many respects strictness and harshness also characterise reactions to behavioural problems in adult life. But, paradoxically, in many other respects the most amazing permissiveness of variety, apparent offence and oddity is in evidence. I cannot explain this but I can note it. I sometimes wonder if it is a practical manifestation of an awareness that all explanations are incomplete and therefore in practice allowance must be made, however haphazard and contradictory it may seem, for a startling variety of reactions to behaviour. Certainly behind and beneath so many outbursts of dramatic righteous indignation, interpersonal crises and apparent issues of principle in which I have been involved

²Allen and Unwin, 1961.

either unintentionally or by invitation or as an observer, I have found a substratum of genial fatalism which has led to amazing volte faces, contradictory settlements, discarded agreements, together with apparent mutual satisfaction. I do not think that this is cynicism: an exhibition has been made, therefore respectability or face has been saved, even though the ideal result was never expected. I do not think this is the spirit of palaver or talking things out to a generally satisfactory conclusion. I think that it is by way of being a gesture or series of gestures whose absolute validity is a matter of creative scepticism: if they work, good; if they don't work, we are learning.

I find this immeasurably more realistic than the European tendency to make moral blue prints, binding principles and conceptual explanations of society, human motive and meaning, which are neither flexible enough in practice nor profound enough in spirit. Many Europeans find African moral attitudes inexact, incompatible, shifty, devious. I think a truer explanation would be that they have escaped the endless European dualism of right/wrong, either/or with its guilty compromises in practice, scrupulosity or cynicism and practice an inclusiveness and generosity of spirit which underlies all specific moral instances and gives a comprehensive tolerance, open-mindedness and geniality which I see as a real form of charity and humility.

The Complete Monk

Vocation of the Monastic Order

DOM DENYS RUTLEDGE

Father Rutledge wrote in an earlier book about his period in India, where he founded a small Benedictine community. He has for many years been interested in living the monastic life in various parts of the world. In this new work he investigates the vocation of the monastic order and writes at length about the people of the remote district of Chile where he lives now. He believes that there, among folk who are not Christians, and were not influenced by the Spanish civilization he has found soil in which the seed of the monastic life can flourish.

illustrated, 50s

ROUTLEDGE & KEGAN PAUL