Seeing, Healing, Reasoning: The Mandari Way of Thought

by Adrian Edwards, C.S.Sp.

Knowledge that the author of a book between one's hands died before its publication inevitably affects one's judgement of it. At first reading, the late Dr Jean Buxton's *Religion and Healing in Mandari* seemed to me to lack complete integration as a book, to be rather a collection of extremely interesting and thoughtful chapters loosely strung together. Further reading, however, has suggested to me that this impression is a superficial reaction to a remarkable quality in the book, its capacity to give attention to several different themes in succession, or rather, to give each theme its own value in the overall pattern of Mandari thinking and doing, without either isolating it from the whole, or giving the totality an imposed, schematic unity in the service of some favourite formula. Dr Buxton refused to see Mandari reality as a collection of bits and pieces or as a shapeless mass or as a geometrical pattern.

The Mandari are a people of the southern Sudan, numbering, when in the nineteen-fifties Dr Buxton did her fieldwork among them, some 15,000. They are linguistically and culturally different from the Dinka and Nuer, even though in the present century they have undergone considerable influence from the latter. Dr Buxton had already described their social institutions in her earlier *Chiefs and Strangers;*[2] her theme here is in fact wider than the title suggests, since, in so far as a central theme gradually emerges from the rich and fascinating material here presented, it is how the Mandari order and arrange in a rational way what they see and experience. Nothing is in the mind which is not first in the senses, said the old scholastics; or, as an excited disciple of Chomsky exclaimed: 'The human mind exists'. Dr Buxton would have accepted both these statements; but it is her merit that she has shown how they apply to an obscure, poor and non-literate people in the circumstances of the culture they have formed and the environment which dominates them.

Mandari belief affirms a Creator, on whose nature the Mandari refuse to speculate; 'Creator has not been known or seen'. Yet the Unknowable is also the approachable; Creator may be approached in prayer at any time, some Mandari at least having an abiding faith in Creator's continuing care. At the same time, Creator—because of be-

[1]pp. xiv, 443, illustrations, maps, Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press. £6 in U.K.

[2]Published Oxford, 1963.

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ing the perfect model of unity, and because, the Mandari feel, it is really impossible to make a gift to the Creator of all—is not worshipped with sacrifice. Creator is then a universal principle and at the same time a personal deity.

There is, however, one important social rite which is concerned with Creator, a monthly ceremony of seeking forgiveness for all hidden sins and omissions, performed for every homestead, for sin is to the Mandari specifically an offence against Creator. This sounds banal; in fact, as Dr Buxton draws it out, it is subtle.

Sin for the Mandari is not an unconscious breach of a taboo nor just the equivalent of grave moral faults, some of which seem subject to merely social sanctions. Sin is any attack on human creative capacities, any exposing of human life and society to the danger of destruction. Hence, sexual sins figure prominently, but they are linked with sins of bloodshed and sins of speech, quarrelling, abuse, and malicious gossip, whether true or false, all of which in some way endanger or distort human possibilities. The Mandari are not prudish, and do not regard lawful sex as in any way polluting. If the sexual sins of women are regarded as more dangerous than those of men, this is not due to male hypocrisy, but rather to a quality of respect for women as being more deeply involved in procreation than are men. Dr Buxton draws attention to the analogy in Mandari thought between women and chiefs. Both are thought of as having especially creative roles, and therefore of having particularly destructive capacities as well.

Creator, then, may be prayed to, and may be sinned against; but, unlike the God of the Nuer, does not receive sacrifices.[3] Yet there are manifestations of God which relate to the Mandari sacrifices for well-being. These are Spirit-of-the-Above, associated with the sky, as opposed to the earth, and Spirit-of-the-Below, associated with the earth, as opposed to the sky. I have called them 'manifestations of God'; but they might also be called 'refractions of God,'[4] or 'autonomous spirits', or 'personifications' of the physical sky and earth', or personalisations of the ritually significant directions of up and down': the trouble is, that none of these terms is entirely incorrect, but none of them is entirely satisfactory either. The question *what* they are seems to be really a non-question; if we ask *how* they are, the answer would seem to be that they mediate, not simply between Creator and man, but rather between the notion of the universality of Creator and the attribution of particular localised happenings to divine action.

Spirit-of-the-Above is seen particularly as a cause of certain illnesses, which are seen as the result of boundaries getting out of place;

[3]See E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion,* Oxford, 1956. The most striking single difference between Nuer and Mandari religion seems to be this lack of sacrifice as atonement for sin against God in Mandari practice, perhaps due ultimately to a differing evaluation of unity and division in the two systems. Nuer sacrifice restores unity; Mandari sacrifice recognises division.

[4]This is Evans-Pritchard's term for similar spirits among the Nuer.

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what has been 'up' comes down. We are told less about Spirit-of-the-Below, who is associated with ghosts of the dead, with mystical concepts of 'heat', as opposed to the cool Spirit-of-the-Above, and with the rites associated with shea-trees, whereas rites connected with rain and water are always concerned with Spirit-of-the-Above.

Interestingly, Logobong, the first man, while a figure of division in that he represents man as against the rest of nature, is also a figure of unity in that Creator and creation meet in him. 'Participating in the nature of Creator and created, Logobong reunites Creator and man, divided by the incompatibility of spirit and matter—Logobong, associated also with the east-west dichotomy and therefore identified with the opposed qualities of these spatial categories, stands for the unresolved contradiction of the human conditions'.[5] But just because Logobong so completely represents an undivided humanity, he figures little in Mandari ritual. 'The role of Logobong is to represent timeless truths and to establish them in reality, and not to enter directly into the specific human situations of sickness and death'.[6] Logobong is an unfallen Adam, rather than a pagan Christ.

Mandari medicine involves the use of plant-based medicines, but some form of 'call', traditionally from Spirit-of-the-Above, but nowadays also from 'Powers' of Dinka origin, is an absolute prerequisite for entry into the ranks of Mandari doctors, who combine a high code of professional ethics with a certain amount of personal jealousy. Dr Buxton has a good deal to say that is very interesting regarding the nature of 'spirit possession' among the Mandari, and how, so far from being a sign of mental sickness, it seems to help in maintaining good mental health. The new techniques coming in from Dinka country are compared by Dr Buxton to 'fringe medicine' in Western society; and in view of the much greater entertainment value of the Dinka-style seances, and the author's comparison of Dinka influence on the Mandari with the 'Americanisation' of Western Europe, one might see it as a medical-coloured pop culture. Mandari traditionalists refuse to grant Dinka forms of treatment the status of religion, and, the images of the Dinka 'Powers' to whom the new group of practitioners attribute illnesses fit the Mandari stereotype of the Dinka, powerful, ostentatious and grasping. There is a curious tacit alliance between the traditionalists and the doctors who treat illnesses supposedly sent by the Powers; Dinka influence in ritual is admitted, just as it is in ordinary social life, but it is admitted in such a way that Mandari feelings of moral superiority are preserved, in much the same way that European intellectuals could tolerate American films and jazz but scorn American jurisprudence and philosophy unheard.

Apart from Creator, the Spirits of the Above and Below, and the Powers, there are rituals concerned with the dead. To use the tech-

[5] *Religion and Healing in Mandari,* p. 24.
[6] p. 25.

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nical language of social anthropologists, these constitute a ghost rather than an ancestor cult, since they are concerned with dead people whose individual personalities are still remembered, rather than with the quasi-autonomous community of the collective dead. Dr Buxton acutely points out that whereas the function of ancestor cults is to support a particular group of kinsfolk over the generations, or, as Meyer Fortes has put it,[7] to maintain a ritual paradigm of human authority within the group, the function of this ghost cult is to provide sanctions for the fulfilment of obligations created through marriage ties.

The rain-making ritual is, as has been already mentioned, associated with Spirit-of-the-Above. Here Dr Buxton finds herself obliged to take up a position that goes against ideas which have been fashionable in British social anthropology over the past fifteen years or so. Ritual, it has been claimed, has essentially an expressive, rather than an instrumental function; it is a way of saying whatever is most appropriate for the situation, rather than an attempt actually to influence nature. Dr Buxton finds this is not so in the Mandari situation, where rain-making rites are actually expected to make rain. She makes it clear that Mandari ideas on the matter are subtle enough, there being a distinction between rain in general, 'rain of Creator', which falls or not, without regard to human acts or wishes, but there is also specific rain, rainfall which has become involved in Mandari society, and for which the rain-making rituals associated with particular groups and individuals are, as it were, the cheque-book.

As human actions can draw rain, water, and trees into Mandari history, and hence into Mandari ritual, so too with the animal world. Dr Buxton is doubtful of the value of imposing on her material any sharp Levi-Straussian dichotomies between culture and nature, but sees reflected in Mandari ritual a gradation of interaction between man and the wild. Thus dogs are so far incorporated in the human world that there are mystical sanctions against their wanton killing. The larger predatory animals, particularly leopards, are seen as possessing a psychic force of their own, quite different from human personality, to which it may cause serious harm. Thus there are special rites to protect the killer of a leopard from contagion by the leopard's psychic force. Like many other peoples, the Mandari believe in the possibility of man-animal metamorphosis. Dr Buxton considers that this reflects two features of Mandari environment, the relative frequency with which Mandari do have encounters with wild animals and in which they may note quasi-human traits of behaviour, and the rather marginal situation of the Mandari as a whole, a small group, itself recruited from different stocks, occupying a harsh and arid area,

[7]See particularly Meyer Fortes's essay on this subject in M. Fortes and G. Dieterlen (ed.) *African Systems of Thought,* O.U.P. for International African Institute, 1965.

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and surrounded by potentially dangerous neighbouring groups. Man can humanise some aspects of nature; but not all human beings have a humanity sufficiently radical to prevent them from having also an animal identity.

From these discussions of Spirit, Powers, man, healing, and nature, Dr Buxton moves in to a more general discussion of Mandari thinking. I have noted already her insistence that the Mandari do believe that rain-making ritual produces rain, even though it be a humanised specific rain. She notes that 'Two levels of symbolic statement are in fact merged through the linking together of religious symbols with symbols representing concrete reality'. She then suggests that this is impossible in our society, giving as an example the impossibility 'for symbols of the Mass to be meaningfully combined in a single situation with symbols used in the natural sciences'. This seems to me true, but not entirely for the reason she gives 'the importance of the rite as a part of a statement concerned with inquiry and explanation, and therefore, ultimately, with a theory of matter and forces in the physical world'.[8] Her argument is that present-day Christianity leaves the element of statement about the physical world to science, and seeks in ritual to express moral and mystical values.[9]

The Catholic doctrine of the Mass is still surely saying something about matter, even though what it says is not verifiable or refutable at the level of chemical analysis. The bread and wine are not simply used as metaphors of transformation, but as instruments of a transformation. If religious symbols cannot be meaningfully juxtaposed with scientific ones, neither does drama and imaginative literature draw to any appreciable degree on the scientific world-view, which may not seem surprising until one reflects on how Elizabethan literature drew on the pre-scientific world view. The scientific world-view does not in fact present us with a humanisable natural order, humanisable by some kind of connaturality or fellowship with man, rather than by his technical impact. Yet the prayers at the offering of the bread and wine in the new form of Mass, and the blessing of baptismal water, seem both to assert some such fellowship of man and nature; and perhaps this is what the environmentalists are ultimately after, and what the Mandari in their own way, already have.

At any rate, Dr Buxton's discussion of this point leads on to another, wherein I find no need to disagree with her, on the 'closed' or 'open' nature of Mandari thought. For her, Mandari thought is essentially an open system, consistent with the knowledge they have, but capable of revision when new evidence is produced. 'The methodical investigation of potential causes, the scrutiny of implicated individuals, is intensely practical and directed by reason and inquiry—the Mandari

[8] *Religion and Healing in Mandari,* p. 359.

[9] Professor Robin Horton has advanced a very similar argument with respect to the cosmology of the Kalabari people of the Rivers State, Nigeria.

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subject their beliefs to testing and reassessment and within the limits of their particular set of assumptions new theories resulting in fairly radical changes can be formulated'.[10] This apropos of rain ritual; but Dr Buxton clearly intended a more general reference, as can be seen from her comments on Mandari medicine.

The case which Dr Buxton argues so well for the 'openness' of Mandari thought is perhaps more innovatory than she herself would have claimed. She herself suggests that the Azande system of thought was more closed than that of the Mandari; but it may also be that we anthropologists have read *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azandé* far too fundamentalistically, not as a model of how beliefs and actions can be fitted. In this, we have neglected the quite considerable evidence for criticism, scepticism, and iconclasm in traditional societies, and the human capacity, in any kind of society, to live with inconsistency, and to switch from one code of values to another, according to the changing situation.

We have also fossilised Evans-Pritchard's approach by failing to study the thought of a society as a whole, mapping out the areas where set patterns of judgement prevail, those where individual opinions prevail, those where specialised knowledge is held to carry weight, and those where the dominance of guesswork and experimentation is admitted, the limits of certainty, the role of metaphor, and the capacity for change. This is not to deny the value of work such as Ruth Finnegan on oral literature, Max Gluckman on jurisprudence, Jack Goody on the impact of literature and the content of myth,[12] but none of these scholars have attempted to describe the all-round patterns of thought of a given society. Dr Buxton's book can be read as just this; and it reaches a very high degree of success, even if some aspects of Mandari thought, such as Mandari oral literature, are touched on mainly in passing.

Dr Buxton, in studying the substance of Mandari thought, did not neglect its source in sense-evidence. She discusses with extensive reference to experimental psychology and art criticism the way in which the symbolic values the Mandari give to colours relates to evidence as to the universality of colour evaluation. This leads her to qualify V. W. Turner's views on the body based nature of attitudes to white and red and black.[13] She shows also how the Madari distinguish between colours visually perceived in the environment and colours as generalised concepts, and indicates the significance of this for Mandari ritual.

[10] *Religion and Healing*, p. 360.

[11] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1937.

[12] Ruth Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970; Max Gluckman, The Ideas in Barotse Jurisprudence, Manchester University Press; Jack Goody (editor, with Ian Watt), *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge University Press; and (editor and translator), *The Myth of the Bagre*.

[13] V. W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, Cornell University Press.

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In a Concluding Note, Dr Buxton recalls some of the general principles of Mandari thought, notably the underlying order and predictable response—supported by a body of proof drawn from the careful observation of the real or supposed properties of matter at the level of practical experience. She recognises that Mandari religious categories are not linguistically distinguished from the natural, but argues that there are implicit distinctions in Mandari thinking about them. Despite their speculative bent of mind, the Mandari do not usually challenge their accepted boundaries, because they are concerned to revise on the basis of particular experience, rather than engage in generalised testing.

As I said at the beginning of this article, when I first read *Religion and Healing in Mandari*, it seemed to me somehow lacking in complete unity. It now seems to me to possess an exceptional unity, resulting in part at least from the author's refusal to force her material into some shape of her own choice. Thus, the shape which does emerge seems to be extremely true to Mandari reality. The anthropologist's 'last temptation, and the greatest treason' is to present the people studied through some projection of his or her own personality. The anthropologist's grace is to find a way of understanding through some common qualities of mind and heart. I think it was Dr Buxton's own balance, courage, and basic serenity that enabled her to find the same qualities among the Mandari.

Women and the Priesthood

by Eirene Willis

The subject of the ordination of women to the representative priesthood of the Church is often discussed in terms of objections and meeting objections. The quick exchange and the tension involved in differing considerations can often be helpful and constructive; but I have chosen simply to consider the idea of women priests in itself, in a positive way. One may very well agree with the Anglican bishop, Trevor Huddlestone, that the theological arguments against the ordination of women 'simply don't hold water'; and one may also take the view of the novice master of an anglican monastery, that the argument of the twelve apostles all having been men is New Testament

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