

THE SACRED IN SOCIAL LIFE:

THE SENUFO EXAMPLE

The rapid rhythm of material and psychic evolution that the non-industrialized (or insufficiently industrialized) societies of the African continent follow in this day and age inevitably outdates the writings of ethnologists at a similar tempo.

Nevertheless, the correctives that can be brought to bear on a vertical section often appear less considerable than the spectacular surface changes would have us presume. This is due, quite simply, to the remarkable resistance of the deep layers of the soul which conceal the obscure dynamic forces that model mentality or, if one prefers the expression, the *ethnic personality*.

In these circumstances, one has doubtless underestimated the coefficient of cultural adaptability of the human complex which has been given the convenient generic term *Senufo*, but which, when looked at more closely, appears as a rather ill-welded conglomeration of more or less autonomous tiny ethnic units.

Translated by Simon Pleasance

Contrary to the expectations of most observers, the Senufo have in fact manifested their disposition to assimilation to a fairly high degree, at the same time preserving a certain measure of suspicion with regard to progress, which is only natural in any good peasant.

The initially slight exodus of young people towards the coast and the large markets—the industrial plantations of the interior—is today widespread: the migratory movement thus under way is therefore a logical factor in the frame of the socio-economic problems which all the young independent African States are having to face. For a society as strongly attached to their territory as the Senufo, this fact may seem surprising: it is however very real, despite its relatively modest demographic volume. But one certainly cannot foresee what the future holds in this field.

Seen from all the angles, the example of the evolution of the Senufo may in this way be valuable as a test, applicable—except in extreme cases—to other West African communities in analogous circumstances.

As it is, the path has already been cleared of obstacles and is advancing in the only direction possible. To reach his destination, the traveller must abandon some of his luggage.

In more concrete terms, one could give the bearing of the situation as follows.

Dominated by tradition, as in the past, the Senufo has states of dilemma in the run of his existence, which demand from him not only a supplementary stock of energy (physical and moral) but also a change of perspective in his vision of the world.

The daily routine of the villager, henceforth integrated in a supratribal, national, political context, undergoes numerous modifications: the dynamic process, baited from now on, seems to be characterized by a slackening of the customary rigor on the one hand, and by a fuller display of the fan of experience on the other. For the most part, in any case, it is a question of quite new experiences.

The older generation, still attached to the archaic type of collective existence, keeps in step, after a fashion, with the imperatives of progress in this period of social readjustments which are like real upheavals of the established order. At times it tries to tack between the two currents, adjusting to the young torch-

Notes and Discussion

bearers; at others, it allows itself to be submerged without too much resistance. Whatever the case may be, the sympathy it shows for the revolutionary pressure of events is seldom sincere—which is understandable enough. Certain customary institutions, in particular, are assimilated with difficulty, and struggle to survive even when mutilated.

It is undeniable that civic formation of the traditional type, as received in the various colleges of the *poro*, always exercises a strong hold over all those who have at one time passed through it. This initiatory system, today shaken in its functioning if not in its foundations, was formerly an omnipotent mechanism which controlled more or less all the fields of action both of the individual and of the community. The Senufo oligarchs, having had to renounce the not inconsiderable material advantages that proceeded from their position as leaders, have naturally preserved a certain nostalgia for them.

The younger generation, which numbers only people who are not initiated into the *poro* (or are imperfectly initiated) and schooled on the occidental model, constitutes—in the conventional acceptance of the word—a marginal society.

Before being perfectly integrated in the modern world, in fact, this generation has broken almost unconditionally with the past and in consequence finds itself in a sort of void. It is true that the rupture appears all the more brutal and definitive because these young people, who are vaguely instructed in the fundamental disciplines handed out according to the French teaching program which is more or less adapted to the African mentality, not only have little knowledge of their own history but, above all, do not *feel* it. The sensation of destruction consequently presents itself, at least in theory, less acutely in them than in their elders; exceptions, which are comparatively numerous in the context of the rural zone, are doubtless the result of the retrograde influences of the family environment.

In return the large built-up areas favor the rhythm of spiritual and intellectual transformations which act on compact human units.

The public school, the quality of which remains irregular (compared with the rare private establishments of good quality but which do not have sufficient breadth), therefore appears less

an instrument of knowledge than an agent of *detrribalization*, or, if one is not averse to neologisms, *deculturation*.

Despite certain losses in the moral order, the real extent of which one cannot measure for the moment, what we have called *rupture* (which is much more an *option* for a new way of existence which one hopes will be better) nevertheless implies often painful sacrifices, the ransom being paid jointly and severally by both generations.

It is becoming evident to everyone that political revival under the national flag will only be realized over the ruins of ethnic prerogatives. In the Ivory Coast, as in all other parts of the continent, one is in effect witnessing a progressive collapse of the tribal units to the advantage of the superior idea of *nation*.

In this confrontation, traditional thought is, in short, opposed to two linked forces, the one nourished from without, the other emanating from the will itself of the progressive autochthonic elements of the group. The tension thus created gives a very specific atmosphere to the problem. Examined more closely, what in fact are the reactions of the traditional institutions subjected to the increasingly sustained impact of innovating ideas?

Formerly the most important of these institutions—the *poro*—controlled practically all public authorities, and intervened right into private life; it had in particular a strong hand in the political leadership, which can be explained by the fact that, for the traditional Senufo, the *divine*, revealed to man by initiation, incontestably dominates the *human*.

The visibly transitory present situation appears confused, offering as it does a fairly vast gamut of modalities of application: everywhere where disintegration of the social cell has already reached a high level, oral traditions (props of the judicial regime in the first place) are toned down in proportion. And as they were up to now the essential, and often the sole vehicle of the rules of collective life, proposing models of behavior to the individual, the traditional community finds itself henceforth exposed to irregularities in its functioning, or in other words, to *crises*.

While in no way wishing to suggest that the social machine has no other driving resources, no other stimulants than the popular wisdom contained in oral literature, we consider it

Notes and Discussion

legitimate to affirm in the case of the human complex in question that *mythology*, which is expressed in every-day life by various rituals, contains the substance of civic instruction, or rather the principles of collective existence.

It would however be exaggerated to give myth an exclusive significance in the unfolding of the everyday routine: even a human formation as bound to its territory as the Senufo could barely be interpreted and understood by the mythical example alone. If, to a certain extent, the so-called pre-colonial societies, feebly differentiated by definition (therefore acknowledging internal structures defined as “global”), may well seem to a chance observer to be kept *outside history* because of their submission to the sacred myth as a source of all knowledge, it cannot be denied that *mythical thought*—and not myth by itself—has been able to show an astonishing suppleness in the face of new material conditions, and is thus far from materialising any “tare of the past” (in other words a psychic *brake* imposed on progress).

In a general way, the conventional, categorical vision of the world, founded on the mythological schema, impregnates every section of conception and action, including economic and political fields. It is not at all what some would be inclined to class as a simple phenomenon of “luxury of the mind”; in fact it has a pragmatic function of great scope.

The disposition to adapt, and indeed assimilate, that we have recognized in the mythical vision of the world, has in a word nothing surprising about it, for intellectual matter conveyed by myth has itself a very high degree of permeability and, *eo ipso*, malleability.

All the accounts of primordial events form a rich cycle of fundamental importance: their mission consists in explaining the system of the world as well as defining the categories (the *names*) of beings and things.

It is nevertheless true that, in its present state of preservation, the myth of the Creation, subjected to a succession of outrages in the course of its multiple transmissions, has lost much of its clarity (one could well say its *legibility*) and that, on ground that is by definition sacred, it is in the process of sliding imperceptibly towards the open field of popular tales.

Originally, any manipulation of myth belonging to the sacred

tradition was in fact equivalent to a religious act which automatically presumed two levels of comprehension, that is, two distinct types of audience, the first consisting of the initiated familiar with the deciphering of conventional symbols (in other words understanding the allegories of liturgical language), and the second consisting of any pagan not prepared to "receive the message" but susceptible enough to grasp the clear sense of the epic theme by the interpretation of purely rhetorical effects.

In the case of the Senufo, who are particularly sensitive to the semantic subtleties and the virtues of the world, the philosophical matter of myth is the object of incessant discussion among those responsible for custom who preside at the assemblies of the elders, functioning either at the level of the village group or at the level of the whole ethnic fraction.

But the subject assumes its full breadth in the meditative atmosphere of the initiatory frame and leads to real and interminable logomachies in the mouths of the old men of the *poro*.

The means are of little importance: what is sure is that, by starting from such exegetical debates, an authentic ethical doctrine, constantly changing in its constitutive details, is elaborated, which will find practical application in the field of human relations. In a sense this ethic presents itself as a theological sum, a *theology of territory* which, in a disorder which is more than apparent, implies the intervention of strongly heterogeneous elements: divine entities, mediatory genii, exemplary heroes of primordial myth, tutelary ancestors are all mingled with living human beings in a promiscuous mass.

In such conditions one can understand that no strict objective separation between the natural and the supernatural is even imaginable—it is useless for the intuitive direct perception of the universe conceived as a conceptual system. It is normal that this manner of perception falls within the limits of what one could call the *oikouméne*, an idea coinciding with the zone of sensitive experiences.

In the mystic thought of the Senufo, phenomenological preoccupations do not exist, or scarcely: the ideas of *profane* and *sacred* interpenetrate, impregnating all fields of human activity, especially when it is a question of "matters of the soil," that is to say ritual agrarian practices.

Notes and Discussion

The primary concept of habitable and cultivable land occupies a middle stratum between the top layers of the mind and the bottom of the matter. It is the favorite place for encounters between the representatives of the invisible world and the delegated human sacrificer: cultivated ground it thus likened to a sanctuary which serves as a basis for liturgical action. For the Senufo, the fulfilment of these rites is considered vitally indispensable for physical preservation and, if one can use the word, salvation. For body and soul pose man fatally inseparable problems.

The principal components of the individual Senufo are expressed, briefly, by a binomial uniting two ideas *tier* and *pil*, the former denoting the carnal organism, dead or alive, and the latter an immortal reincarnatable substance endowed with dynamic potentiality and analogous with the spiritual principle currently defined by the term "soul."

In general, all the points marking existential space are more or less sanctified beforehand, as the mythical theme of the Creation anticipates, which is the same as saying assimilated to the holy places destined to remind those who use them of the structure of the organized world and, thereby, of the rules that direct life.

The formal presentation of models of behavior equally implies the no less formal enunciation of sanctions foreseen for cases of non-observance. Here myth quite evidently plays the role of *judicial codifier*.

All the doctrines passed on in this way from generation to generation are made up most of the time by elements with a coercive character relative to civic duties; to ensure their widest diffusion, they are drawn up preferably in a clear language. Certain passages, however, contain what could be qualified as *esoteric instruction*: they are evidently for the use of the initiated.

This goes to prove, once more, that oral tradition always manifests two symmetrical tendencies (which may appear diametrically opposed but which are not in reality), the one looking for the widest possible publicity in the interest of the harmonious advance of society, and the other, on the contrary, utilizing various camouflage procedures to restrict the propagation of knowledge to the leaders (eventually including their hierarchical acolytes), with the patent intention of reserving all the resources of religious

and political power exclusively for them. *Tiga*, the secret language, provides these privileged people with one of the most efficient means of this camouflage—but preventive measures exist which are certainly infinitely more drastic.

Furthermore, the Senufo village, which is a faithful replica of the initial center preserved in the memory of the trustees of the myth, must itself be regarded as an eminently sacred space according to the norms of African theology. Its traditional topography obeys an immutable archaic plan and the various districts reflect the structure of the social cell contained in them to the smallest architectural detail.

In the same order of ideas, the *sinzanga*, an initiatory enclosure situated in a residual copse on the outskirts of or outside the center, assumes all the more importance when ontologically projected, because it was formerly revealed to the people at the end of the highest level of initiatory instruction as a reduced model of the universe. Put under the joint aegis of divinities and ancestors, this *sinzanga* therefore answers to the definition of the *microcosm*, enclosing in substance all the substructures of life. All forms of existence in fact develop in the shadow of the *poro*.

But beyond its appearance as a source of radiation, the exemplary role of the *sinzanga* embraces more or less all the horizons of human thought. We have just mentioned, more particularly, that it contains the embryos of all forms of existence, concrete or transcendental: not only does it *contain* them, but it is a permanent illustration of them. Comparable to a real *imago mundi*, it offers the human user at once a code of civic conduct and a “manual” of etiquette, of liturgical attitudes.

Besides its function—which is in a word passive—of setting an example, the *sinzanga* constitutes a giant inexhaustible condenser in the eyes of the Senufo, from which emanate the necessary energies for the preservation of all the works of the Creation, with the human species automatically as the head.

To keep all this radiant force for this miniature world, the human users have recourse in their own interests to multiple rites, all of them supposed to give invigorating results. The transfer of beneficial fluids therefore operates in both senses, in the terms of an unwritten but rigorously observed contract, such

Notes and Discussion

as was established from time immemorial between the two partners, god and man.

Consequences of an organic order, highly important for the smooth running of the world, spring from the respective positions of the parties engaged in the eternal dialogue. The contacts are on several levels, each of which then engenders a particular category of being. From top to bottom the building thus constructed is in principle composed of three floors: 1st, the air; 2nd, the earth's crust; 3rd, what lies beneath.

The spaces of cosmic infinity, inheritors of the great chaos, are inhabited by far-reaching divine entities, beginning with the creative Spirit Kulotiolo and ending with the celestial intelligences in charge of the administration of the world.

Mounted on a sort of absolutely inaccessible empyrean, these spaces accordingly shelter all immaterial creatures, to which, apart from the exceptions, the theoretician would attribute the epithets *uranic* and *atmospheric*.

The middle floor, the earth's surface (pervaded by water which is an essential part of it) occupied by living beings, offers a stage to the lesser divinities associated in one way or another with the destiny of their predecessors. On the pragmatic level it is naturally this space, definable as *chthonic* or *telluric*, which has the greatest significance for the religious man, founder of cults and builder of altars.

Thirdly, there are the obscure subterranean layers, mystically connected with the entrails of the mother-goddes Kâtieleo, which serve as a resting-place for the potential palingenetic essences of the dead ancestors. Filial relationships naturally take place on earth in the frame of a living cult, organized either on the scale of the *nârigha*, a family grouping, or on the scale of the whole initiatory collectivity.

All things considered, the existential problem can then be resumed by a linear equation at the extremities of which are, respectively, god the giver of goods and man the beneficiary. More closely examined, however, it appears more simple: in all circumstances, mutual relationships seem to be dictated by a *pact*, the clauses of which are preformulated in the original myth and the ways of application by the collection of literary precepts. And it is explicitly recognized by both parties that punctual fulfilment

of their obligations is to their advantage, even indispensable for the preservation of their status.

The justification of this sort of mystical cooperation (in a vertical line, one is tempted to specify) is similarly quite simple: it rests on the conviction that any substance with a transcendental character, from the humble tutelary ancestor to the supreme deity, would lose its active force without a minimal fortifying dose which must be periodically administered by the human subject using blood-sacrifices for the most part. According to the well-known theorem, blood spilt for the allied succouring entity invoked is allegorically identified with the quintessence, the very vector of life.

In the mechanism of ritual sacrifice, in fact, blood is the most precious element in the whole operation, while the victim's flesh is of only secondary, complementary and functional importance, like the object of the communal meal.

The speculative mind of the Senufo, directed more at the analysis of effects than the search for causes, does not seem to be particularly concerned with what mankind owes its existence to and with its advantageous place among the other inhabitants of this planet. A superficial observation might in fact make one think that for the Senufo it is a matter of a simple statement—an uncommented acknowledgement of a *fait accompli* with no further cause for inquiry.

Starting from the same sources as the rest of the perceptible universe, biological existence is to some extent inscribed in the cosmic order. Its vicissitudes are the result of experience—purely empirical—accumulated down the centuries. What we have just called “vicissitudes” are however derived, for the village philosopher, less from chance than from laws which are quite precise, though hard for human intelligence to penetrate.

Up to this point everything seems more or less clear and logical. It is quite different, however, as soon as this or that individual, confronted with the material or moral problems posed by his existence, has to search for and if possible find the solutions: when this happens he prefers to call on the more accessible subsidiary divinities who will be ready to assist him under certain circumstances—he reckons it is useless to disturb the distant Creator who, in the meantime, has aged and is henceforth not interested in the lot of his creatures. These subsidiary divinities

Notes and Discussion

are neither simple substitutes nor confederates, but perfectly qualified and efficient divine essences, though lower in the hierarchy. At times anthropomorphous, at times with animal features, in their plastic interpretation (in the form of masks or statues), the metaphysical figures of this latter category thus give birth, in particular or more rarely with a collective title, to a relatively large number of cultural institutions.

The degree of organization as well as the quality of the ministers of these cults depend, indeed, on numerous factors that we can hardly examine here in detail. But we must remember that, among the Senufo, who live in large family or community formations, the job of officiating sacrificer frequently falls to the head of the *nârigba*, that is to a profane person made sacred for the occasion. Normally, however, the spiritual office is given to a real *sacerdotal agent*, a professional in sacred matters, as happens particularly in the agrarian rituals where the action of the *târfolo* is at once obligatory and decisive. The function of priesthood, in this case, is hereditary, passing from father to son.

The simplified schema that we have just outlined of the function of the head religious Senufo has obviously more than one exception in practice.

In any event the frequentation of supernatural forces, which brings grave risks to any unqualified individual, is generally judged to be a dangerous enterprise which necessitates a special individual preparation. This preparation includes a fairly long period of apprenticeship and its various sequences follow a schema that, broadly speaking, recalls the program of collective initiatory instruction. In the event, the looked-for result is a perfect impermeabilization against the dangers implied by the use of the sacred.

The diviner and the blacksmith, in particular, are among the people qualified for this task, apart from the priests in charge of the cults. The role played by the diviner, *sandogo*, and even more the divineress, in the daily life of the village was, and still is, of prime importance, despite recent cultural changes. No decision is taken, no important enterprise realized without mantic consultation. One goes to the same diviner, furthermore, when it is a matter of the interpretation of dreams, premonitory signs and hallucinatory visions. In the technique used, the throwing of *cauris* shells is most often brought in.

As for the sacerdotal function of the blacksmith, it could not of course be put on the same level as the institutional function exercised by any chief with a religious title: his role is only complementary and the nature of his activities parallel to the official liturgy. By his professional status, which implies the right to extract minerals from below the ground, the blacksmith is connected with the forces of the earth, of which, quite logically, he is the delegate and the spokesman. There is, consequently, something disturbing about his person, which is completely impregnated with telluric fluid. Associated, if the occasion arises, with the ceremonies of circumcision (and, more indirectly, with those of excision), the blacksmith is above all in possession of formulae, magic recipes, like the maker of protective amulets or, more rarely, offensive charms. But he intervenes equally as much in intimate family matters, in particular these to do with sterility, still-birth etc., by finding remedies for their deep occult causes.

The *fono*, the Senufo blacksmith of the most simple artisan type, is by tradition the exclusive purveyor of farming tools, which, in order to be efficient—that is to guarantee good crops—must obligatorily issue from the hands of a person made sacred and impregnated with a beneficent aura. The forge itself, moreover, is likened to a chthonic sanctuary.

The *fonos* form an extremely watertight professional group subject to an endogamous regime. This existence in a closed environment partly explains the reputation of being “in possession of secrets” which the blacksmith enjoys in the eyes of the rest of the population: because of this he may be feared but without inspiring feelings of disdain or lack of social approval, as certain ethnological schools have tried to suggest in the past. The blacksmith is more often a giver of advice, thus an agent in public use, than an individual to be feared.

The blacksmith's wife, the potteress, is his counterpart on the social level and, connected like him by marriage to telluric entities, assumes a parallel function in the field of the ritual practices centred round fertility and procreation. The sacerdotal position of the potteress is nonetheless not as marked as that of her blacksmith husband. Excisers, midwives, healers with a specialized knowledge of medicinal plants and fortune-tellers are preferably recruited from the potteress environment.

Notes and Discussion

Lastly, since the recent emergence of proselytic-type cults, we find, on the edge of the traditional hierarchy of people attached to liturgical practices, the prophet-priests, individuals inspired like those who have risen to the head of an ambitious cult imported from the Mali and known as *massa*.

The career of the Horn cult—the *massa*—has not had a long history, but the period of hardly ten years which it has lasted has sufficed to overthrow the spiritual structure of the country of the Senufo from top to bottom. Not definitively, however, because the *poro*, that admirable engine behind the social machine, though at first yielding to the prodigious pressure of the new gods has quickly pulled itself together and engaged in the struggle for survival. Many cultural strongholds were destroyed by the first attacks made on the intruding divinities: consequently, however, the *massa* showed itself to be more tolerant and in the end had to bow before the resistance of the archaic tribal institutions. It is true that the *poro* has emerged from the fight with material losses; this weakening however is not due to the *massa* alone, but to the whole series of simultaneously acting deculturative circumstances.

The episode of the *massa*, followed by other innovating attempts which were rather sporadic due to the initiative of two or three local leaders who operated principally with miraculous water, has not ended in a definitive overthrow of the spiritual foundations of Senufo society: the movement has stopped at the surface of things, sparing the essence of the mental mechanism. There is proof, nonetheless, that Senufo thought, far from undergoing some sort of sclerosis, far from finding itself prey to a spiritual insolvency which some commentators have qualified as a *spiritual void*, is constantly evolving, always in its own manner and rhythm. It even seems to have evolved consciously, trying to express itself and eventually impose itself in the face of the world, by means of doctrines judged to be better adapted to modern requirements. There are, inevitably, periods of hesitation and groping, but the tribal dogma, as far as one can see, is adapting itself extremely well.

Religion, modified in its legislative manifestations, thus continues to penetrate the whole socio-economic sector, perhaps to a lesser degree, but no less perceptibly. Up to the present day,

in fact, basic activities such as the working of the fields, techniques of acquisition such as hunting and fishing, industries such as metallurgy, have not entirely lost their primitive spiritual character. It is probable, nevertheless, that the introduction of mechanized cultivation, stimulated by State and cooperative organisms, will accelerate the process of desacralization.

Two plants not normally used, cotton and rice, are from now on assuming a growing position in the agriculture, giving rise to hitherto unknown problems and affecting the old community structure in a truly revolutionary manner. Still little consumed by the Senufo producer and aimed above all at the large national markets, rice is grown in the southern part of the region, while the more arid north, ecologically at a disadvantage, remains dominated by the cultivation of millet.

Of all the traditional alimentary plants, the yam holds a particularly important position in all the central fractions (round Korhogo). Collected at first in its natural state, and later cultivated, the yam has played an eminent role in the rituals of generation, and this role is explained and testified to by the oldest mystical writings. Since its discovery by the first human couple (Wuloto and Wulono), several sequences in the initiatory drama recall this event. Certain *poro* colleges have even conceived a special way of peeling yam tubers, which, for their members, is a secret sign to rally.

We said above that, in working the soil, the Senufo behaves as if he were enacting a rite. This experience, while moving with time, is clearly confirmed each time there are heavy jobs to be done or the harvests to be reaped, which sets important human apparatus in motion in both sexes, at the level of the family group, the *nârigba*, or the whole ethnic fraction.

In all circumstances, the ultimate aim of this collective operation goes beyond the mere utilitarian end, which is certainly essential for the material subsistence of the group, but insufficient in itself for a profound and complete comprehension of the phenomenon. To attain the fullness of his existence, in fact, man must advance along two parallel paths, one leading to the satisfaction of his physical needs and the other to the satisfaction of his spiritual demands.

With the banal appearance of the elementary gestures of the

Notes and Discussion

peasant, the Senufo in reality reproduces the gestures of his primordial ancestor, the discoverer of this type of acquisition. In this way he carries on, for the moment, the harmonious upkeep of the world. It is, furthermore, vitally indispensable that every living human being is constantly in unison with the cosmic forces which provide him with all his means of subsistence. This effort to harmonize is, in addition, explicitly understood to be a mystical undertaking which, more exactly interpreted, constitutes a "sympathetic conquest" of the chthonic entities who distribute vegetable alimentation, the basis of the daily menu.

Collective working of the fields is effectively orientated in this direction. The field itself represents the replica of the first cultivated ground, as described by myth. In order to make it clear that it is a question of being in harmony with the pulse and rhythms of life, the groups of labourers work, in addition, to the sound of music produced by balafons and shoulder-drums, ceremonial instruments reserved for important occasions. The text of the songs is principally and quite logically related to the themes inspired by the Holy Land. Others, interspersed in the whole *ad hoc*, are composed of short recreative couplets, generally improvised.

The appropriate songs and music thus contribute to a communion with the transcendental powers of the territory. At the same time, groups of girls, responsible for providing the working men with water to drink, do symbolic dances from time to time which are meant to promote the final result. This cooperation of the two sexes on the future field of yams foreshadows in other respects a form of collective marriage, called *tieporogo*. Every marriageable woman, soon to be a mother, is supposed to bear within her a precious fertility potential which, on this occasion as on others, must not be exploited for individual profit but for the benefit of the community.

In this cycle of ideas, fundamental mystical connexions are made between the fertility of the soil and of women, the field is compared to the maternal belly, the yam tuber to the human foetus.

But the symbolic parallelism goes still further: in certain archaic and closed fractions of the Senufo complex, for example, sham coitus to the accompaniment of obscene songs was (and perhaps still is here and there) practised to stimulate the reproductive

energies of nature, at the time of the return of the seasons and connected with the general program of agrarian ceremonies. For well-known reasons, that we cannot develop here, the role of copulating partners in the Fodon and certain of the Kufolo falls to old women past the menopause: the one representing the male has a huge artificial wooden member and two small calabashes as testicles. Scenes of this sort most often take place together with puberty rites—in particular after the operation of excision—great funeral festivities or the peripheral events of the *poro*.

In the country of the Senufo, as elsewhere in Africa south of the Sahara, preoccupations about procreation incontestably dominate all the horizons of existential thought. From all the evidence, the biological factor justifies and nourishes a very important sector of basic activities, which subsequently assume a more intellectualized aspect, if one can call it that.

When one analyzes things closely, one can confirm that most of the incantation prayers, or other forms approaching the sacred, are aimed less at “safeguarding souls”—that is, a spiritual well-being—than at the physical perpetuity of the family, the line, the group. The interest of the individual has to yield to the collective interest in a purely moral context as well as in practical judicial applications.

What has just been said is one among so many other new illustrations of the fact that traditional Senufo society deserves the epithet *global*, despite the diversity of its internal structures and despite its comparatively complex stratification and its hierarchies.

It does not however make up a perfectly homogeneous mass; rather, it gives the impression of what we have called a *human conglomeration*, when we analyzed its different components from a geo-historical viewpoint. In fact, the local cultural divergences are sometimes such that only the common language provides the indispensable cement that keeps the ethnic construction in one piece. It is nevertheless certain that, in the term of their long cohabitation, the various fractions have undergone a very sensitive cultural levelling, though jealous of their relative organic autonomy and what can conveniently be called “patrimony.”

In most cases, then, assimilation exists.

Additionally, the oral sources capable of enlightening us on

Notes and Discussion

the composition of what represents the ethnic unit of the Senufo are decidedly thin: going back in time, historical tradition is quickly blurred in mythology. Without wishing to anticipate a debate which is not closed, one has to admit that the most convincing material arguments testify in favor of the hypothesis according to which the present type of Senufo civilization would essentially result, if we start from a so-called palaeonegritic background, from Sudanese influences, carried by migrations which are still preserved in the memory of the people.

There are gaps, contradictions and considerable question marks in the oral documents. We thus have the impression, finally, that it is a question, in the event, of a *superposition*—that is to say, of the fertile encounter between a cultural archaic substance and relatively recent northern contributions: it is indeed precisely in this “neo-Sudanese” layer that the most living initiatory institutions would be found, including the *poro*. Although disturbing the affinities of the structural resemblances of the Senufo initiations with their supposed bambara models (in the widest sense of this term) are striking and almost undeniable. But the problem becomes infinitely more complex when transposed on the whole area of West African civilization.

If one wanted to resume the situation now and suggest an acceptable definition of the ethnic Senufo whole, one could describe it as an extremely diversified human bloc, in a relatively uniform physico-ecological frame and made-up of some twenty fractions which all retain a more or less marked cultural personality—to the point of not knowing their common ethnonym: in fact the term *Siena*, proposed by Maurice Delafosse, never seems to have been really adopted, and the name *Senufo*, today in use, is no more than a convenient appellative of Mande origin... On an archaic substratum, characterized by an extreme simplicity of socio-economic structures, the twenty fractions concerned have in the course of numerous generations apparently been able to accumulate specific and spiritual values. It is precisely the mixture, or better the osmosis, of all these specific elements that, by overcoming particularist tendencies, has finally led to the elaboration of a cultural type sufficiently affirmed to merit recognition as an authentic civilization *sui generis*.

And it is as well to add, in order to correct the errors of the

first Western observers, that, far from developing in an enclosed state and chained to the soil, this civilization is today showing a fairly remarkable demographic dynamism and a very high degree of permeability in its intellectual and spiritual fields, under the effect of circumstances in which the whole of the new Africa is finding itself.