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SPIRITUAL BEINGS IN WEST AFRICA—THEIR NUMBER,
LOCALITY, AND CHARACTERISTICS.

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The belief in spiritual beings opens an immense vista of the purely superstitious side of the theology of Bantu African religion.

All the air and the future is peopled with a large and indefinite company of these beings. The attitude of Creator—Anyambe—toward the human race and the lower animals being that of indifference or of positive severity in having allowed evils to exist and His indifference making Him almost inexorable, effort in the line of worship is, therefore, directed only to these spirits who, though they are all probably malevolent, are to be influenced and may be made benevolent.

I. ORIGIN.—The native thought in regard to the origin of the spirits is vague. Necessarily so. An unwritten belief that is not based upon revelation from a superior source, nor on an induction of actual experience and observation, but that is added to and varied by every individual's fancy, can be expressed in definite words only after inquiry among many as to their ideas on the subject. These, I find, coincide on a few lines; just as the consensus of opinion on any subject in any community will find itself running in certain channels, influenced by the utterances of the stronger or wiser leaders.

(1) It appears, therefore, that some of the spirits seem to have been conterminous with the life of Paia-Njambi in the Eternities. An eternity past, impossible as it is for any one to comprehend, is yet a thing thinkable even with the Bantu African, for he has words to express it: "peke-najome" (ever-and-beyond), "tamba-na-

ngama" (unknown-and-secret). Away back, in that unknown time, existed Paia-Njambi. Whence, or how, is not inquired by the natives; nor have I had any attempt even of a reply to my own inquiries. He simply existed. They are not sufficiently absurd to say that He created Himself. To do that he would need to ante-date Himself. I have met none who thought sufficiently on the subject to worry their minds, as we, in our civilization, often do in effort to go back and back to the unthinkable point in time past, when God was not. Indeed so little is the native mind in the habit of any such research that I can readily perceive how their "We don't know" could easily be misunderstood by a foreign traveller, scientist or even missionary as a confession that "they did not know God." A statement which is true, but it is not the equivalent of or synonymous with that traveller's assertion that the native had no idea of a God. The native thought, wiser than ours, simply and unreasoningly says, "He is, He was." Conterminously with Him in origin there may have been some other spirits. This has been said to me by a very few persons with some hesitation. But if those spirits were indeed equal in existence with Njambi, they were in no respect equal to Him in character or power, and had no hand in the creating of other beings. In the Mpongwe tribe at Gaboon one winter Rev. J. L. Wilson, D.D., fifty years ago, thought the belief existed that, "Next to God in the government of the world are two Spirits, one of whom, Onyambe, is hateful and wicked. The people seldom speak of Onyambe, and always evince displeasure when the name is mentioned in their presence. His influence over the affairs of men, in their estimation, does not amount to much; and the probability is that they have no very definite notions about the real character of this Spirit." His character would be indicated by his name (O-nya-mbe (He) Who-is-bad). This name has sometimes been used by missionaries to translate our word "Devil." (Perhaps the idea of the word itself came from long-ago contact of this coast-tribe with foreigners.)

(2) A second and more recognized source of supply to the company of spirits is original creation by Njambi. While this origin is named by some I have not found it believed in to any very great extent. Even those whom I did not find believing it had very vague ideas as to the mode or object of their creation. Of the creation of mankind, and even of the Fall, almost all of the tribes have legends, more or less distinct, and with a modicum of truth, doubtless derived from traditions coinciding with the Mosaic history.

But of a previous creation of purely spiritual beings I have found no legend nor well-defined story. If such specially created spirits exist at all their relation to Njambi is of a very shadowy kind. They are, indeed, inferior to Njambi, and are in theory under his government in the same sense that human beings are. But Njambi, in his far-off indifference in actual practice, does not interfere with or control them or their actions. They are part of the motley inhabitants of "Njambi's Town," the place of the Great Unknown, as also are all the other living beasts and beings of creation. They also have their separate habitat, and pursue their own devices, generally malevolent, with the children of men.

(3) But the general consensus of opinion is that the world of spirits is peopled by the souls of dead human beings. This presupposes a belief in a future life, the existence of which in the native mind some travellers have doubted. I have never met that doubt from the native himself. While I do not impute to the travellers referred to any desire, in their efforts at describing the low grade of intelligence or religious belief of certain tribes, to misrepresent, I fully believe they were mistaken; their mistake arising from misunderstanding. It is not probable that they met, in the course of their few years, what I have not met with in a lifetime. It is probable that natives had expressed to them a doubt, or even ignorance, of a general resurrection, and may have said to them, as a few have said to me, "No, we do not live again. We are like goats and dogs and chickens. When we die that is the end of us." Such a statement is indeed a denial of the resurrection of the body; but it is not a denial of a continued existence of the soul in another life. The very people who made the above declaration to me preserved their family fetish, made sacrifices to the spirits of their ancestors, and appealed to them for aid in their family undertakings. The few who have expressed a belief in transmigration did not consider that the residence of a human spirit in the body of a beast was a permanent state; it was a temporary condition assumed by the spirit voluntarily for its own pleasure or convenience and terminable at its own will, precisely as human spirits, during their mortal life, are everywhere and by all believed capable of temporarily deserting their own human body and controlling the actions of a beast. This belief in transmigration, though not general, has been found among individuals in almost all tribes.

It being thus generally accepted that all departed human souls become spirits of that future that is all around us, there is still a

difference in the testimony of intelligent witnesses as to who and what or even how many of these souls are in one human being. Ordinarily, the native will say in effect, "I am one, and my soul is also myself. When I die it goes out somewhere else." Others will say, "I have two things—one is the thing that becomes a spirit when I die, the other is the spirit of the body and dies with it." [This "other" may be only a personification of what we specify as the animal life.] But it has frequently occurred that even intelligent natives, standing by me at the side of a dying person, have said to me, "He is dead." The patient was indeed unconscious, lying stiff, not seeing, speaking, eating, or apparently feeling; yet there was a slight heart-beat. I would point out to the relatives these evidences of life. But they said, "No, he is dead. His spirit is gone, he does not see nor hear nor feel. That slight movement is only the spirit of the body shaking itself. It is not a person. It is not our relative. He is dead." And they began to prepare the body for burial. A man actually came to me once asking me for medicine with which to kill or quiet the body-spirit of his mother, whose motions were troubling him by preventing the funeral arrangements. I was shocked at what I thought his attempt at matricide; but subsequently found that he really did believe that his mother was dead and her real soul was gone.

Such attempt to distinguish between soul-life and body-life has not infrequently led to premature burial. The supposed corpse has sometimes risen to consciousness on the way to the grave. A long-protracted sickness of some not very valuable member of the village has wearied the attendants; they decide that the body, though mumbling inarticulate words and aimlessly fingering with its arms, is no longer occupied by its personal-soul; that has emerged. "He is dead." And they proceed to bury him alive. Yet they deny that they have done so. They insist that he was not alive; only his body was "moving." Proof of premature burial has been found by discoveries connected with a certain custom performed when a village has been afflicted with various troubles after the death of one of its members. The village, after ineffectual efforts to drive away the evil influences that are supposed to cause these troubles, decide that the Spirit of some dead relative is dissatisfied about something, and order the grave to be opened and the bones rearranged, or even thrown into the river or sea. On opening the grave, corpses that have been buried in a recumbent position have been found in a sitting position. It is possible for one thus prematurely buried to change posture in a

dying struggle ; for mostly heathen graves are shallow (even among those who so dig graves at all), and are hastily and not always filled in.

Another set of witnesses will say that, besides the personal-soul and the soul of the body, there is a third entity in the human unit—namely, a dream-soul. That it is which leaves the body on occasions during sleep, and, wandering off, delights itself by visiting strange lands and strange scenes. On its return to the body, its union with the material blunts its perceptions, and the person in his efforts to remember or tell what he has seen relates only the vagaries of a dream. [A psychological view which, under the manipulation of a ready pen, could give play to fantasies, pretty, romantic and not unreasonable and not impossible.]

Some who are only dualists nevertheless believe in the wanderings of this so-called dream-soul, but say that it is the personal-soul itself that has gone out and has returned. Both dualists and trinitarians add that sometimes in its wanderings this could lose its way and cannot find its body, its material home. Should it never return, the person will sicken and die.

A fourth entity is vaguely spoken of by some as a component part of the human personality ; by others as separate but closely associated from birth to death, and called the Life-Spirit. Some speak of it as a civilized person speaks of a guardian angel. Regarded in that light, it should not be considered as one of the several kinds of souls, but as one of the various classes of spirits (which will be discussed in a subsequent chapter). To it, worship is rendered by its possessor as to other spirits ; a worship, however, different from that which is performed for what are known and used as “Familiar Spirits.” Others speak of the vague Life-Spirit as the “Heart.” The organ of our anatomy which we designate by that name they call by a word which variously means “heart” or “feelings” ; much like our old English “Bowels,” the same word being employed equally to designate a physical organ and a mental state. Considering the organic heart as the seat (or a seat) of life, the natives believe that by witchcraft a person in health can be deprived of his Life-Soul or “Heart” ; that he will then sicken ; that the wizard or witch feasts in his or her magic orgie on this “Heart” ; and that the person will die if that heart is not returned to him.

II. NUMBER.—But what even this human soul may be, whether existing in unity, duality, trinity, or quadruplicity, all agree in

believing that it adds itself, on the death of the body, as another in the multitudinous company of the spirit-world. That world is all around us, and does not differ much in its wants and characteristics from this earthly life, except that it is free from some of the limitations to which material bodies are subject. In that spirit-world they eat the same food as when on earth, but only its essence, the visible substance, remains. They are possessed of all their passions, both bad and good. Men expect to have their wives with them in that future. [But I have never heard the idea even named, that there is procreation by spirits in that after-world.] Not having believed during this life in a system of reward and punishment, they have no belief in heaven or hell. All the dead go to Njambi's Town ; and live in that new life together, good and bad, as they lived together on earth. [The "Hell" spoken of by some of my informants, I believe, is not a native thought. It was probably engrafted on the coast tribes by the Portuguese Roman Catholic missionaries of three hundred years ago.]

If, therefore, the spirits consist entirely of the souls of departed human beings, how immense their number! Innumerable as are all the dead that have passed from this life in the ages gone by, excepting those who have gone permanently into the bodies of new human beings. That form of metempsychosis is believed in. Occasional instances of belief of transmigration into the body of a lower animal do not necessarily include the idea of a permanent residence there ; or that the departed soul has lost its personality of a human being and has become that of a beast.

But the idea of reappearance in the body of a newly-born child was formerly believed in, especially in regard to white people. Thirty years ago I wrote ("Crowned in Palmland," page 234): "Down the swift current of the Benita, as of other rivers on the coast, are swept floating islands of interlaced rushes, tangled vines and water lilies that, clinging to some projecting log from the marshy bank, had gathered the sand and mud of successive freshets and gave a precarious footing for the pandanus, whose wiry roots bound all in one compact mass. Then some flood had torn that mass away; and the pandanus still waving its long, bayonet-like leaves, convolvuli still climbing and blooming, and birds still nesting trustfully, the floating island glided past native eyes down the stream, out over the bar, and on toward the horizon of broad ocean. What beyond? Native superstition said that at the bottom of the 'Great Sea' was 'White Man's Land'; that thither some of their own departed friends found their happy future, exchanging a dusky

skin for a white one; that there white man's magic skill at will created the beads and cloth and endless wealth that came from that unknown land in ships, in whose masts and rigging and sails were recognized the transformed trees and vines and leaves of those floating islands. When on the 12th of July, 1866, a few with bated breath came to look on my little new-born Paul—the only white child most of the community had seen, and the first born in that region—the old people said, 'Now our hopes are dead. Dying we had hoped to become like you, but verily ye are born as we.'"

Not long after I had arrived at Corisco Island in 1861 I observed among the main people who came to see the new missionary one man who quietly and unobtrusively, but very steadily, was gazing at me. After awhile he mustered courage and addressed me: "Are you not my brother, my brother who died at such-a-time, and went to White Man's Land?" I was at that time new to the superstitions of the country; his meaning had to be explained to me. His thought of relationship was not an impossible one, for many of the Bantu negroes have somewhat Caucasian-like features. I have often seen men and women, at the sight of whom I was surprised, and I would remark to a fellow-missionary: "How much this person reminds me of So-and-So in the United States." This recognition of resemblance of features to white persons living in the United States was the third step in my acquaintance with native faces. At first all negro faces looked alike. Presently I learned differences; and when I had reached the third step I felt that my acquaintance with African features was complete.

III. LOCALITY.—The locality of these spirits is not only vaguely in the surrounding air; they are also localized in prominent natural objects—caves, enormous rocks, hollow trees, dark forests, in this respect reminding one of classic fauns and dryads. While all have the ability to move from place to place, some especially belong to certain localities which are spoken of as having, as the case might be, "good" or "bad" spirits. It is possible for a human soul (as already mentioned in this chapter) to inhabit the body of a beast. A man whose plantation was being devastated by an elephant told me he did not dare to shoot it, because the spirit of his lately deceased father had passed into it. Also a common objuration of an obstreperous child or animal is "O na njemba" (Thou hast a witch).

Their habitats may be either natural or acquired. Natural ones are—for the spirits of the dead, in a very special sense—the villages

where they had dwelt during the lifetime of the body. But the presence of the spirits of the dead is not desired. It is one of the pitiable effects of superstition that its subjects look with fear and dread on what the denizens of civilization look with love and tender regret. We in our Christian civilization cling to the lifeless forms of our dead; and when necessity compels us to bury them from our sight we bid memory call up every lineament of face and tone of voice, and are pleased to think that sometimes they are near us. But it is a frequent native practice that on the occasion of a death, even while a portion of the family are wailing, and to all appearances passionately mourning the loss of their relative, others are firing guns, blowing trumpets, beating drums, shouting and yelling, in order to drive away from the village the recently disembodied spirit. On consideration it can be seen that these two diverse demonstrations are sincere, consistent, and, to the native, reasonable. With natural affection they mourn the absence of a tangible person who as a member of their family was helpful and even kind, while they fear the independent existence of the invisible thing, whose union with the physical body they fail to recognize as having been a factor in that helpfulness and kindness. This departed spirit, joining the company of other departed spirits, will indeed become an object of worship—a worship of principally a deprecatory nature; but its continued presence and immediate contact with its former routine is not desired. In Mashonaland the native “fears that death or accident may overtake him through the instrumentality of some fellow-being who may perchance hold against him a grudge. But a greater dread than this is of a visitation of evil by the spirit of a departed friend or relative whom he may have slighted while living.”

A village in Nazareth Bay—the embouchure of one of the mouths of the Ogowe River—is called Abun-awiri (awiri, plural of ombwiri—a certain class of spirits; and abuna—abundance).

Large, prominent trees are inhabited by spirits. Many trees in the equatorial West Africa forest throw out from their trunks—at from ten to sixteen feet from the ground—solid buttresses continuous with the body of the tree itself, only a few inches in thickness, but in width at the base of the tree from four feet to six feet. These buttresses are projected toward several opposite points of the compass, as if to resist the force of sudden wind-storms. They are a very noticeable forest feature. They are very commonly seen in the silk-cotton trees. The recesses between them are actually

used as lairs by small wild animals; supposedly also a favorite home of the spirits.

Caverns and large rocks have their special spirit habitants. At Gaboon, and also on Corisco Island, geological breaks in the horizontal strata of rock were filled by narrow vertical strata of limestone, between which water-action has worn away the softer rock, leaving the limestone walls isolated, with a narrow ravine between them. These ravines were formerly revered as the abodes of spirits. When I made a tour in 1882, surveying for a second Ogowé Station, I came some seventy miles up river from my well-established first station, Kangwe, at Lambarene, to an enormous rock, a granite boulder, lying in the bed of the river. The adjacent hillsides on either bank of the river were almost impassable, being covered with boulders of all sizes, and a heavy forest growing in among, and even on, them. This great rock had evidently in the long past become detached by torrential streams that scored the mountain side in the heavy rainy season and had plunged to its present position. The swift river current swirled and dashed against the huge obstruction to navigation, making the ascent of the river at that point particularly difficult. Superstition suggested that the spirits of the rock did not wish boats or canoes to pass their abode. Nevertheless, necessities of trade compelled, and crews in passing made an ejaculatory prayer, but with the fear that the "ascent" in that part of the journey might be for "woe." Whence they called that rock *Itala-ja-maguga*; which, contracted to "*Talaguga*," I gave as the name of my new station, erected in 1892, in the vicinity of that rock. During my eight subsequent years at that station I did, indeed, meet with some "woe," but also much weal. And the missionary work of *Talaguga*, carried on since 1892 by the hands of the *Société Evangelique de Paris*, has met with signal success.

Capes, promontories, and other prominent points of land are favorite dwelling-places of the spirits. The Ogowé River, some 140 miles from its mouth, receives on its left bank a large affluent, the *Ngunye*, coming from the south. The low point of land at the junction of the two rivers was sacred. The riverine tribes themselves would pass it in canoes, respectfully removing their head coverings. But passage was forbidden to coast tribes and other foreigners. Portuguese slave traders might come that far; but, stopping there, they could do trade beyond only by hands of the local tribe. [Evidently superstition had been invoked to protect a trade monopoly.] A certain trader, Mr. R. B. N. Walker, agent for the English firm of *Hatton & Cookson*, headquarters at *Libre-*

ville, Gaboon, in extending his commercial interests, made an overland journey from the Gaboon River, emerging on the Ogowe, on its right bank, above that sacred point. Ranoke, Chief of the Inenga tribe, a few miles below, seized him, his porters, and his goods, and kept them prisoners for several months. Mr. Walker succeeded in bribing a native to carry a letter to the French Commandant at Libreville, who was pleased to send a gunboat to the rescue. Incidentally, it furnished a good opportunity to demonstrate France's somewhat shadowy claim to the Ogowe. After the rescue a company from the gunboat proceeded to the point and lunched there, thus effectually desecrating it. Mr. Walker made peace with his late captor, and established a trading station at the Inenga village—Lambarene. For years afterward natives still looked upon that point with respect. My own crew, in 1874, sometimes doffed their hats. But before I left the Ogowe, in 1891, a younger generation had grown up that was willing to camp and eat and sleep there with me on my boat journeys.

Graveyards, of course, are homes of spirits; and, of course, are much dreaded. The tribes, especially of the interior, differ as to burial customs. Some bury only their chiefs and other prominent men, casting away corpses of slaves or of the poor into the rivers, or out on the open ground, perhaps, covering them with a bundle of sticks. Even when graves are dug they are often very shallow. Some tribes fearlessly bury their dead actually under the clay floors of their own houses, or a few yards distant in the kitchen-garden adjoining their houses. But by most tribes who do bury at all there are chosen as cemeteries dark, tangled stretches of forest, along river banks, or ground that is apt to be inundated, or whose soil is not good for plantation purposes. I had often observed such stretches of forest along the river, and wondered why the people did not use them for cultivation, being conveniently near to some village, while they would go a much longer distance to make their plantations. The explanation was that these were graveyards. Such stretches would extend sometimes for a mile or two. Often my hungry meal hour on a journey happened to coincide with our passing of just such a piece of forest, and the crew would refuse to stop, keeping themselves and myself hungry till we could arrive at more open forest. Once after yielding to them, and rowing on for another hour, and the same hopelessly tangled graveyard still continued, I, famished, ordered the boat ashore. The crew obeyed unwillingly, and slowly they began to gather firewood with which to cook our luncheon. In pulling sticks from a convenient pile there

was revealed a skeleton. My hunger ceased, and I was willing to row on for another half-hour seeking for a proper camp. In eastern Africa it is believed that "the dead in their turn become spirits under the all-embracing name of Musimo. The Wanyamwezi hold their Musimo in great dread and veneration, as well as the house, hut, or place where their body has died. Every chief has near his hut a Musimo hut, in which the dead are supposed to dwell, and where sacrifices and offerings must be made. Meat and flour are deposited in the Musimo huts, and are not, as with many other people, consumed afterwards. The common people also have their Musimo huts; but they are smaller than that of the chief, and the offerings they make are, of course, not so important as his." (Dècle: "*Three Years in Savage Africa.*")

Beyond the regularly recognized habitats of the spirits that may be called "natural" to them, any other place or location may be acquired by them temporarily, for longer or shorter periods, under the power of the incantations of the native doctor (uganga). By his magic arts any spirit or spirits may be localized in any object whatever, however small or insignificant; and, while thus localized, are under the control of the doctor and subservient to the wishes of the possessor or wearer of the material object in which it or they are thus confined. This constitutes a "Fetish," which will be more fully discussed in another chapter.

IV. The character of these spirits is much the same as the human character they possessed before they were disembodied. They have most of the evil human passions, *e. g.*, anger and revenge, and, therefore, may be malevolent. But they possess also the good feelings of generosity and gratitude. They are, therefore, within reach of influence, and may be benevolent. Their possible malevolence is to be deprecated, their anger placated, their aid enlisted.

Illustration of malevolence in their character has already been seen in the dread connected with the ceremonies for the dead and at funerals. The similar dread of graveyards in our civilized countries may rest on the fear inspired by what is unknown, simply because it and they are unknown. But, to superstitious Africa, that unknown is a certainty, in that it is a source of evil; the spirit of the departed has all the capacity for evil it possessed while embodied, with this additional capacity, in that its exemption from some of the limitations of time and space increases its facilities for action. Being unseen, it can act at immensely greater advantage for accomplishing a given purpose. Natives dying have gone into

the other world retaining an acute memory of some wrong inflicted on them by fellow-villagers and have openly said, "From that other world I will come back and avenge myself on you!"

In any contest of a human being against these spirits of evil he knows always that whatever influence he may obtain over them by the doctor's magic aid, or whatever limitations may thus be put on them, they can never, as in the case of a human enemy, be killed. The spirits can never die.

Sometimes the word "dead" is used of a fetish-amulet that has been inhabited by a spirit conjured into it by a native doctor. The phrase does not mean that its spirit is actually dead, but that it has fled from inside of the fetish, and still lives elsewhere. Then the native doctor, to explain to his patient or client the inefficacy of the charm, says that the cause of the spirit's escape and flight is that the wearer has failed to observe all the directions which had been given, and the spirit was displeased. The "dead" amulet is, nevertheless, available for sale to the curio-hunting foreigner.