



AFRICAN COSMOLOGY AND THE PARANORMAL *

Ayisi, Christian Harry, M.A., Ph.D. (Lond.)
University of Ghana,
Legon,
Ghana, West Africa.

INTRODUCTION

It has been my special preoccupation to find out some special features of activity, experience and philosophy peculiar with the African which explain, in a significant way, some of the mysteries surrounding the paranormal. In this pursuit, I am currently engaged on research in Ghana into sources of psychic power; and I have been studying the activities of various well-known cults as well as a number of individuals privately engaged in occult practices. From my researches, I have found that there is a close link between the paranormal and cosmology, as conceived by the traditional African. Cosmology explains the flow and balance of the subtle energies in the universe which bring about and affect all life processes. But beliefs concerning cosmology are prescribed by culture and traditions; and although it is difficult to identify the various peoples of Africa with one type of cultural persuasion there is nevertheless a sense in which some features of a people's philosophy and behaviour could be regarded as being typically African. In this paper, therefore, I am making some generalizations from my Ghanaian experience, based on the Akan persuasion (The Akans constitute the dominant ethnic group in Ghana; and, broadly speaking, Ghanaian cultural style is set by them.)

The central theme of this Conference is: "Psychotronics - our inner cosmos". We are focusing attention on Man's inner space, with a view to proclaiming the ideal of micro- and macro- cosmic unity.

*Paper prepared for the Fourth International Conference on Psychotronic Research, Sao Paulo, Brazil, June 30 - July 7, 1979.

It seems to me that African cosmology throws some light on this. I therefore propose, in this paper, to relate elements in a typically African cosmology to paranormal practices, and then draw some implications for psychotronic research.

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN COSMOLOGY

The traditional African sees the universe with some kind of wholeness; it embraces both the visible world and the invisible. The African draws no line between material and spiritual forms of existence; both have reality to him. He sees the universe as invested with mystical power. This power is ultimately from the Supreme Being; but, in practice, it is inherent in, or comes from or through physical objects and spiritual beings. What this means is that to the African, the universe is not static or 'dead': it is a dynamic, 'living' and powerful universe.

The forces which control the universe are the Supreme Being, Spiritual beings, and Mother Earth. The most important of these is the Supreme Being ("Onyame", "Onyankopon", meaning 'the shining one' and 'the only great one, Onyame'). He is also "Odomankoma Obogede", i.e. the Creator. He is "Onyankopon Kwame" ("Kwame", meaning a male who was born who came into being on a Saturday). "Onyame" is also used as a term designating the firmament.

The Supreme Being retains ultimate control over events and sustains all rules over the world He created; but He is also viewed as transcendent and in some respects remote from his creation. This attribute of transcendence carries the concomitant belief that He has delegated power to other agents - the Spiritual beings ("Aponhom") - that more directly interact with human beings. These other agents are accordingly treated as if endowed with an independent ability to act; and they are recognized in their own right as well as in their role of intermediaries with the Supreme Being.

Mother Earth or the Earth Goddess is designated "Asase Yaa" "Yaa", meaning a female who came into being on a Thursday). She is the ide expansion of earth, and is thus polar to "Onyame", the firmament. She embodies the concept of fertility. She supports all matter and all forms of biological life, and has thus the attribute of 'dependence', i.e. one depended upon. Africans have their own ontology, which may be divided up into the following five categories:

- (i) God - the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of both man and all things;
- (ii) Spirits - superhuman beings (e.g. demons, and "little people" i.e. "dwarfs" - "Mmoatia") and the spirits of human beings who died long ago (ancestral spirits, "Nsamanfo");
- (iii) Man - who is a fusion of a soul ("Okra") from God, a 'blood-element' ("mogyaa") from the mother, and a 'personality-spirit' ("ntoro") from the father;
- (iv) Animals and plants - the remainder of biological life;
- (v) Phenomena and objects without biological life.

Man is the centre of this ontology, in the sense that God is the originator and sustainer of man; the Spirits explain and influence man's destiny; animals, plants and natural phenomena and objects constitute the environment in which man lives, provide a means of existence, and man establishes a mystical relationship with them. This is how the microcosm relates to the macrocosm.

In addition to these five ontological categories, there is vital force, power or energy permeating the whole universe. This force, "sumsum" (i.e. "sum-sum" - "move-move": moving force) what anthropologists call 'mana'; and it may be equated to the "psychotronic energy", the Hindu "pranic energy", the Soviet "bioplasmic energy", or the Chinese "chi energy".

"Sunsum" is inherent in people, animals and things. It is a potent yet neutral energy which can be turned to good or evil ends. God is the source and ultimate controller of this force; but the spirits have access to some of it, and some human beings have the knowledge and technique to tap, manipulate and use it. The multitude of different types of spirits in the universe are unified by their indispensable possession of "sunsum". The "sunsum" is the essence of the being or object, its intrinsic activating principle; and, as well as designating the activating essence of particular beings and things, it also refers to the general power to act in non-ordinary, non-physical ways. It is the primary cause of all unusual or inexplicable events. It is thus the power behind all paranormal events.

ELEMENTS IN THE PARANORMAL

Whenever pouring libation, the Akan invokes first, "Onyankopon Nname" (the Supreme Being), and then "Asase Yaa" (Mother Earth), before petitioning his petitions to the spiritual beings. This may be likened to applying a positive charge to a negative charge to produce electric current which, like psychotronic energy, is a very potent, yet invisible, power for all sorts of uses. It is significant to observe here that modern witchcraft, even in the West, recognizes the place of "earth" rituals: a small bowl containing earth is one of the important things put on the altar table.

Spiritual objects serving the role of intermediaries with the Supreme Being are deities ("abosom"), and talismans, amulets, charms ("asuman"). The deities are conceived as personal beings who descend to earth independently of human efforts; they are attended by medium-priests or priestesses, who invoke their power for all sorts of human situations.

A talisman has the power of passive protection against spiritual "influences". It derives its efficacy from one of the basic sources of magical power - the power inherent in any object ("sunsum"). The talisman introduces one to active magic, and is also protective in many respects. It is the product of intellectual speculation and magical fabrication. Sometimes a talisman is "charged" with magical power by ritual and incantation. An interesting example of charms in Ghana is "love medicine". Some of these, which often include sweet-smelling substances such as lavender, are simply to make the user highly irresistible to the heretofore responsive object of his affection. Women may secure love medicine by making their husbands impotent with any other woman; and a man may guard against the infidelity of his wife or girl-friend by employing medicines that will cause other men to become impotent on her.

One other type of power centres around the "little people" - visible "dwarfs" ("mmoatia"). They are invoked to perform miracles like telekinesis, teleportation, materialization, and dematerialization; their services are also utilized in paradiagnostics, paramedicine, and ritual medicine. The power of ancestral spirits ("nsamanfo") also is invoked for beneficent or other purposes. This is the power invoked and utilized in seances. "Mmoatia" and "nsamanfo" are considered to be the power behind poltergeist activities.

The power of individual human beings derives from their "sunsum" (personality-spirit, emanating from "ntoro"). It is the development of this which makes one psychic. This power is also the primary ingredient of witchcraft. Astral projection is an activity in this constituent element in man.

A special type of power which lies between witchcraft and sorcery in Ghana is "Nzima bayi", i.e. "Nzima witchcraft" (Nzima in the far western region). A person who acquires this power is

able to become very wealthy in a remarkably short space of time. To do so however, he must first sacrifice the life of the person he loves the most his own child or matrilineal relative - or else relinquish his own sexual potency or fertility. After the initial evil deed, the power acts solely for the good of the individual. But the gains so secured are often of short duration. The person lives to enjoy his new wealth for only a few years, and all his riches vanish upon his death.

The power contained in words and numbers - the most fundamental and important source of magic - is also accounted for by "sunsum". The reasoning behind the use of words and numbers is the same as in all other types of magic - that they "reverberate" through the universe, connecting with all similar (though unseen) things. Words readily lend themselves to magical use, since they exist on two definite levels: first, as objects; and second, as concentrated symbols or communicators. And there can be no doubt about their extraordinary force; for, by putting our thoughts and feelings into words, we define them and give them reality. In fact, "to name" in Hebrew means to "make appear"; and in English to "inform" means the same - to give form to something that was previously vague and indefinite. The evocation of the name of a divinity is, indeed, an attempt to dominate that divinity, to cause it to appear and to subdue its will. The power of the spell derives from the power of words and incantations. The effectiveness lies in its associations and in its methods of delivery, and in the repetition of ritual that allows its impact to be built and reinforced.

INNER AND OUTER WORLDS OF MAGIC

The African feels rather than thinks about magic; and this gives an important clue to the nature of the paranormal. To the African, belief in the paranormal has its roots in the emotions and in the imagination

It comes from the inner world of the individual. In the African's universe where everything is conceived as containing a mysterious power ("sunsum"), where rituals, spells, and incantations, and spirits are as real as any physical object, there is no clear dividing line between supernatural and natural. When operating, the magic worker does not divorce the inner world from the outer; bound up both inwardly and outwardly with the magical art, he does not attempt critically to understand what he is doing; he only exploits the imagination and its emotions; thus he achieves a cosmic unity.

Then also, the African notion that all magical processes are simply means of tapping the occult power ("sunsum") that is believed to inhabit everything - people, plants, precious stones, metals, and so on - carries with it the important idea of 'correspondences'. For example, metals have many 'correspondences' in magical thought - the parts of the body, with planets, with stars, and with aspects of the earth. The idea here may also be illustrated with the magical power found in plants, which is used extensively in Africa. A shrub which grows in various parts of Africa - the Ocimum Viride ("Onunum"), for instance, has both wide medicinal and spiritual properties. Its dried leaves contain 1.2 per cent of an orange-yellow essential oil with thyme-like odour and pungent taste which mixes with alcohol in 1:1 proportions, and is a possible source of the drug thymol. Its leaf infusion can be substituted for quinine in cases of fever of 1:1 kinds. The root, with that of Ocimum canum and of guava with the sap of the plantain stem, is a superstitious remedy in Ghana for snake-bite. In cases of delirium, the leaves, mixed with gunpowder, are rubbed on the face and body. In many parts of West Africa the

is reputed to drive out evil spirits and demons. Thus, the belief in the paranormal has its roots in the emotions and in the imagination contained in the plant operates at different levels. One might

be an entirely natural remedy; another might be part-natural, part-symbolic; yet another wholly symbolic. This operation at different levels - (entirely natural-partly natural, partly symbolic - wholly symbolic) - conveys an important idea about all magical thinking, in the phrase: "as above, so below"; and implied in this phrase, is a vast system of 'correspondences' between all natural objects. The 'correspondence' between like things, between microcosm and macrocosm, underlies all magical reasoning. It is also an important ingredient in the magical power of amulets and talismans. Any substance - animal, vegetable, or mineral - can be used as an amulet; and the making of a talisman requires knowledge of analogies and their magical 'correspondence'.

Yet another facet of inner and outer worlds of magic can be found in the ritual. The purpose of a spell, for instance, is to use inner power to bring about a manifestation in the outer world of nature. Here also, reference could be made to the "witches' pyramid", consisting of the four cornerstones of magic from which the whole mysterious edifice of witchcraft arises. These cornerstones are: creative imagination, strong will, absolute faith, and secrecy. Without all four working together, the arts and crafts of the supernatural cannot be accomplished. But with the "pyramid" (which represents the "inner world") working for the ritualist, he is nevertheless to be sure he has ample knowledge of the universal power tides, the source and the ebb and flow of these cosmic power tides as marked by the movements of the Sun, Moon and planets through the solar system (these representing the "outer world"). The significance of the ritual can also be seen, by analogy, in the world of the child. He attempts to control the outer world by devising games and ceremonies. An obsessional adult personality attempts the same thing: by ordering the outer world (e.g. by assembling things appropriately on the altar), he strives

to control the inner (i.e. to achieve concentration on what he is doing). Actually, it is difficult to tell which world exactly this obsessional personality tries to control; there is no clear answer here, just as there is not in the world of magic, where inner and outer are one.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOTRONIC RESEARCH

The point has been made in this paper that an important clue to the nature of the paranormal is that we feel rather than think about it. Thus, the magic worker, bound up both inwardly and outwardly with the magical event, does not attempt critically to understand what he is doing. In this way, he is unlike the scientist, who isolates himself from an experiment, clearly sees the processes at work, and assumes that the results will always be the same. What this seems to suggest is that researchers into the paranormal must be very careful in assuming that formal statistical considerations based on certain suppositions about the nature of our physical universe and our expectations, necessarily apply to some of the studies they undertake.

It would also appear from this that the secrets of many parapsychological mysteries lie in the unconscious mind; and therefore our physical world, and presumably, all other worlds too, are nowhere but in the mind (at least in the form in which they are known). This seems to suggest that in some paranormal experimental design, the results probably depend on belief in them, rather than on "scientific laws". Belief, with clear thought imagery, may be needed to create a desired effect. One is here reminded of the beliefs which some psychics have in "thoughtforms" which can be created by thought, endowed with "life" and assume what appears to be an independent existence. Perhaps there are two matters here of vital importance to parapsychologists: one is that they are to look "inwards" at themselves; the other is that they are to look for new hypotheses,

perhaps in ancient literature (mostly from the East).

A further implication of their belief and perceiving the valuable elements and insights contained in them. all things are related by the intermingling of the "fields" (i.e."sunsum") of their belief and perceiving the valuable elements and insights contained in them. surrounding them, and that there are 'correspondences' between all natural objects. It would seem here that, sometimes, "right conditions prevailing" might be a better explanation of events, rather than "cause and effect". The right conditions may be, and probably are, "mental" conditions. The idea here that patterns of events naturally occur is implicit in Smuts' philosophy of "holism", and related to Jung's "synchronicity". It would seem from this that we may have to develop sometimes different ways of looking at things from those we have been taught in conventional science, if we are to advance in psychotronic research.

REFERENCES

1. Mbiti, J.S. African Religions and Philosophy, London: Heinemann, 1969.
2. Williamson, S.G. Akan Religion, Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1965.
3. Wright, R.A. African Philosophy: An Introduction, Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1977.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

African cosmology sees the universe as a totality, in which material and spiritual worlds merge as one. It sees all natural things as having animating "spirits" of their own, with "fields" of these intermingling one with another; and this seems to imply that the inner world of the unconscious accounts for much that manifests in the outer world of nature, sometimes through belief in the expected results. It is also suggested that the interrelationships of "fields" in the universe may account for those occurrences which seem "uncaused".

In the territory of the paranormal, interesting excursions are made into "inner space". In a sense, although traditional believers of the supernatural, often referred to as "primitives", generally "know" less than rational and scientific man, their freer responses nevertheless give them a contact with inner reality, even a mastery of it, that might well be every bit as valuable as that external knowledge. It may be well