

# TRIBAL WORSHIP

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A GOOD Apartheid admirer admires chiefs, male gerontocracy, kweta circumcision and kaffir beer. He is less certain about some other things in tribal life. Are polygyny, lobolo, witchcraft, or sacrifices to the dead to be encouraged? How are they to be fitted into the divine mission of Christianizing the heathen? These are awkward questions, to be debated perhaps in missionary and academic circles, but not so as to sidetrack attention from the main idea of 'developing the Bantu on their own lines'.

This veneration for the tribal system is fairly recent. The earlier attitude of officials, traders, missionaries and employers was one of intolerance, even active antagonism. They saw in tribalism the great obstacle to the spread of civilization, meaning thereby security, land, labour, taxes and Christianity.

Hostility was shown especially towards the chief and diviner-priest. They embodied tribal values, and led their defence against the alien. Expediency might gain chieftainship a reprieve in some parts, as in Natal, but more usually the administration, in Boer as well as British territories, set out to destroy it by frontal attack or looked to its gradual extinction by indirect methods.

## THE FUTURE OF TRIBALISM

At the beginning of the century few authorities thought that Africans would not or should not abandon tribalism. This scepticism extended even to anthropologists, though they usually developed a sentimental and vested interest in its survival. Not many would have been quite as emphatic as Werner Eiselen, when a lecturer in anthropology at Stellenbosch. "It may be safely said," he wrote in 1931, "that not one of their culture elements, not even their language presumably, will be strong enough to hold its own against the onslaught of European civilization."

This is pessimism indeed! Few would agree with that part of the prediction which foretells the collapse of the African's language; but the whole of it must now seem like heresy to its author, who, as the Secretary for Native Affairs, ranks high among devotees of the tribal cult. In October, 1956, he told

an audience of chiefs, gathered to consider a proposal to establish a school for chiefs, that "it is very obvious that the old tribal organization is not going to disappear, as certain uninformed persons allege."

This assertion is a declaration of faith, not a demonstration of fact. An overwhelming weight of evidence supports Dr. Eiselen's earlier proposition. It is borne out by experience not only in Africa, but also in other countries where people have gone through the same kind of change. We may be sure that none of the essentials of tribalism—magic, the cult of the dead, a self-sufficient economy, polygony, the extended family, lobolo, male domination, hereditary chieftainship—will be carried over for long into an industrialized, urban society.

The new-found enthusiasm for tribal ways gains little support either from policies in other parts of Africa. Even the British, who claim to have invented indirect rule, have long ago abandoned it for a more modern and efficient type of local government, based on elected councils and providing scope for men with education and progressive outlook.

#### AFRICAN ATTITUDES

Our local self-appointed custodians of tribal values have not even been able to show that they are reflecting truly the hopes and fears of Africans who, one supposes, are the people most vitally affected. Restoration of tribalism is certainly no part of the programme of African nationalism; it is not being asked for by political and trade union leaders; nor does it appear in the vision of the educated élite.

We may assume that tribalism is looked on with favour by chiefs and their henchmen, but their self-interest in the matter is surely too pronounced to make them a reliable guide to the unarticulated, largely unconscious feelings and sentiments of tribesmen. Is it likely that men who spend half their adult, active life in an urban community will want to go back to the narrowly drawn limitations of tribal society?

Our question, therefore, is not whether tribalism will survive, but why it is being artificially boosted when it is in an advanced state of decomposition.

The affirmation of faith in its future has, true enough, a pseudo-scientific basis in anthropological theories that stress the uniqueness of every culture and deny or minimize the fact of social evolution. The faithful lean heavily also on nationalism

and its notion of a racial ethos that is supposed to find an outlet in a people's history and institutions. But the myth of a flourishing tribalism serves to conceal the true state of African society and the real aims of State policy.

#### ECONOMIC ARGUMENT

Tribalism is used, in the first place, as a pretext for low standards of administration, educational and health facilities, and wages.

Tribal mutual aid is a beautiful thing to the Apartheidier. On no account must it be allowed to wither and decay! Therefore it is very wrong to accustom Africans to poor relief, unemployment insurance, free medicine or free meals for children. Mealie meal is held, incorrectly, to be their 'natural' tribal diet; therefore they must not get used to eating meat, vegetables, dairy products and fruit. So also in mining compounds, Africans do not eat their food in a dining hall, around a table, equipped with crockery and cutlery, for these civilized aids to digestion are held to be unknown in the tribe.

Tribal customs are not always the cheapest. For instance, milk is a staple article of diet in the tribe. But milk and other dairy products are expensive foodstuffs. Therefore tribal practice is not a good guide in this instance. Mine owners do not include milk, butter or cheese in the miner's ration, though it is admittedly deficient in animal protein.

Housing is another case in point. In the tribe, separate huts of stone or wattle and daub are provided for each wife, the older boys and the girls, also for visitors. Overcrowding is uncommon where traditional standards still apply. But in municipal locations, site and service settlements or emergency camps, houses are usually small and overcrowded, insufficiently roomed for separation according to age, sex or marital condition, and often built out of packing cases and rusted iron sheets.

Apartheidiers like to believe that such conditions, though really more primitive than tribal standards, are acceptable and even pleasing to the tribal African. He, by definition, 'knows his place', which is that of a servant under white masters. Unfortunately, he is untamed and sometimes unpredictable. South African paternalism, compounded of condescending benevolence, tolerance towards peccadilloes, and jocular familiarity, is at its best in dealing with the old family retainer of the Uncle Tom variety.

This preference for the backward section is shared by the British, who on their own admission do not feel so much at home with the educated produce of colonialism as they do with its uneducated fathers and brothers. But the British have been obliged to overcome their distaste for the middle classes, whose knowledge and talents are needed for the now urgent business of developing colonial resources.

#### LEADERSHIP

A similar urgency would arise here if the Apartheid vision of a separate, progressive and industrialized society in the reserves were to materialize. Blueprints for this fabulous project actually provide for an African élite, occupying all positions except at the top. White South Africans would then be able to emulate the envied stereotype of colonial rule: a metropolis spatially distinct from its colony, well-paid officials trained at 'home' and sent out to exploit the colony's resources with the aid of a local non-White intelligentsia, and investors who draw tribute from the colony in safety and genteel ignorance of such vulgar details as forced labour, land hunger, starvation wages, and repression.

That is an imaginary formula for a mythical future. The attempt to impose a caste system on the most highly industrialized and dynamic society in Africa calls for a different approach—a kind of *realpolitik* impatient of subtleties and subterfuges to hide the harshness of colonial rule. South African urgencies can be conveyed in the terms used by Senator Verwoerd, Minister of Native Affairs, to define the 'right' kind of leader for Africans: "he who can co-operate with the local authorities and the Government." The only Africans who can be relied on to fit the bill are the Chiefs.

These descendants of proud rulers of independent tribes are minor, ill-paid and insecurely-seated officials of the Native Affairs Department. But it finds them indispensable. They act as its eyes and ears in the reserves, a link between White magistrates and tribesmen, an agency of local government, an instrument for keeping order, enforcing law and getting the people to put up with unpopular policies. All this the chief can do as long as his office evokes respect, whether as a symbol of departed glory, or out of superstitious regard for its mystic qualities, or because he still has power to reward or punish.

An hereditary bureaucracy of this kind has all the disadvant-

ages of Georgian patronage or the American spoils system. As the British have found, a forward-looking, expanding society has little time for the illiterate, superstitious and conservative men who make up the majority of chiefs and headmen. They cannot free their people from the shackles of magical beliefs, a primitive husbandry and technological backwardness. They cannot even carry out efficiently the more positive functions assigned by the Bantu Authorities Act: to promote schools, hospitals and better farming methods.

Not all chiefs are uneducated. A few are high school or university graduates, who yet find co-operation with the administration possible and satisfying. But a modern, liberal education is apt to give a wide perspective and distaste for tribal, regional or caste restrictions. Chiefs like Luthuli, who choose to co-operate with their people in nationalistic movements, are definitely 'wrong' leaders and do not remain long in office or with their tribes.

Those others, who remain, have to compete with the new leaders, the trade unionists, political organizers, doctors, lawyers, ministers, teachers who are so liberally represented in the great Treason Trial. The administration has come to the aid of the chiefs, firstly by means of the Bantu Authorities Act, which reverses a century-old policy by restoring some of their powers in a pale imitation of indirect rule techniques.

The other and more important line of attack is to cripple the 'wrong' kind of leaders, who are being produced in countless ways: by schools and universities, churches and trade unions, by the fifty organizations named in the treason trial, by the pressures that force men to evade and break the network of laws circumscribing their freedom of action in every sphere.

Here is the key to the extraordinary powers taken by the administration to ban African opponents, exile them, dismiss them from trade union positions, exclude them from universities, censor publications, prohibit gatherings. The African must be isolated from leaders who teach ideas that are above his proper station. The Apartheid view is that slavery is abolished, never by the slaves themselves, but by the intervention of busy-bodies—communists, liberals, churchmen—who constitute the real menace to the social order. If only they could be eliminated, the African would again realize his destiny as Servant under a White Master.

The institutions contemplated under the Apartheid Universities

Bill have been aptly called 'tribal colleges'. Not only are they to divide students according to race and even tribe, but they are to indoctrinate students with the alleged virtues of their tribal past and the theory of 'development on their own lines'. Such colleges may be able to produce teachers and ministers for identical types of schools and churches; they cannot also turn out doctors, lawyers, engineers, surveyors, agronomists and scientists.

But education is not confined to schools and colleges. Political education is gained elsewhere. And men learn technique and organization by working, in factories, mines and shops. Apartheid cannot and dare not prevent Africans from acquiring industrial skills even while it seeks to push them back into tribalism.

The chances of success are the chances of combining an up-to-date technology with a tribal or feudal outlook. This seems unlikely. The impact of an industrial society unavoidably brings on a radical change in domestic and civil relations, as well as economic life. The effects are substantially the same, whether industrialization takes place within or without the reserves. To the extent that the chief becomes an instrument of State policy, either to develop resources or to preserve tribalism, he seems destined to lose his people's allegiance, and accordingly his value to the administration. Initiative and leadership are bound to pass to men and women who have mastered modern science and technology, and have acquired the ideas and habits appropriate to a progressive society.