

Looking for a rain-god

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a story of Botswana

IT IS LONELY AT THE LANDS where the people go to plough and sow crops. These lands are vast clearings in the wild bush and the wild bush is lonely too. All these seven years gone by only a teaspoonful of rain has fallen. People live off crops but for two years now they have all returned from the lands just with their rolled-up skin blankets and cooking utensils.

Oh, this is exquisite, beautiful country. In some parts the underground water is very near the surface: there you find parallel strips lush tangled trees and delicate pale-gold and purple wild flowers. There is moss under the stones and wild fig-trees. The leaves of the Mopani are like butterfly wings, split down the centre and joined at the base to a short stem. But even here, by mid-summer, the leaves curl up and wither, the moss is dry and hard and under the tangled shade of the trees the ground is black and white because there is no rain.

There are many gods of this earth and there should be a rain-god somewhere too. Only people have forgotten how to evoke a response from the gods. Their memory is always with us deep and hidden. In times of great stress we think of them and call to them with a blind despairing wail. That is why charlatans and incanters and witch-doctors make a pile of money in years of drought. They are always giving people little talismans and herbs to rub on the plough for the crops to grow. But somehow the incanters haven't the right memory to evoke the sympathy of the rain-god. And the god of Christianity is uninterested in making rain. So many prayers have been made to him already.

LAST YEAR THERE WAS an awful tragedy at one of these lonely places in the bush. Two children were killed and two men were hanged this year for the death of the children. The people at this place had only been looking for a rain-god but now two children, little girls, and two men are dead.

They were a big family and with the relatives and old people they totalled fourteen. They left early in November for the lands, to plough. There was a promise of good rain and the men and women cleared the land of thorn bush and then hedged the vast area with this same thorn bush to protect the future crop from the goats. The earth was soft with the good rain of November and there was a rich growth of devil-thorn on which the goats grazed. There was milk too from the goats to eat with the porridge. They had a well dug too and hedged about with thorn bush so that the children and goats should not fall inside and be drowned. The well is just a hole in the earth and the water is always muddy but at the lands that is the only kind of water you can get and you have to drink it.

THERE HAD BEEN SO MUCH HOPE that the rain would fall. The land was ready and ploughed, waiting for the crops. At night the earth was alive with insect noises. Then suddenly the rain fled away, the rain-clouds fled away and left the sky bare. The sun danced dizzily in the sky with a strange cruelty. Each day the land was covered in a haze of mist as the sun sucked up the last drop of moisture out of the earth. The family sat down in despair waiting and waiting. It was impossible to plant the corn-seeds, the maize, the pumpkin, the water-melon in the dry earth. They sat and even stopped thinking, for rain had fled away.

It was the women of the family who finally broke down under the strain of waiting for the rain. It was really the women of the family who were responsible for the death of the children. Each night they started a weird, high-pitched wailing song, calling to the rain-god. A strange song that began on a low mournful note and whipped up to a frenzy. They would stamp their feet and shout as though they had lost their heads. The men couldn't stand it. Men are just reasonable creatures and try to maintain their self-control at all times. The wailing of the women and their terrible, weird song became a torture to the men, became an unbearable torture.

They did not know that the women were only seeking release. Women see thousands of years ahead and the women of the family were haunted by the starvation and suffering of the coming year.

Finally, one of the very, very old men of the family was stirred by a faint memory. And slowly, because of the wailing of the women at night, this memory became a strong conviction. He called all the men of the family together and consulted with them and because his memory had become a strong conviction he spoke to them with unshakeable authority. There was, he said, a certain rain-god who accepted sacrifice of the bodies of children. There were two little girls in the family, pretty and innocent and very shy. They could run like the wind and fetch water from the well. But the men were beyond caring and agreed with the old man that the two little girls should be sacrificed to this terrible rain-god. Then the crops would grow. The old man said the crops would grow and the rain would fall. Since the women were half demented by this time and the intense heat was even destroying the wild devil-thorn on which the goats grazed, they too agreed to the sacrifice of the children.

AFTER IT WAS ALL OVER and the bodies of the two little girls had been spread across the land, the rain did not fall. Instead, there was a deathly silence at night and the devouring heat of the sun by day. A terror, extreme and deep overwhelmed the whole family. They packed, rolling up their skin blankets and pots and fled back to the village. But the deaths of the two little girls had made them outcasts. People in the village noted their ashen, terror-stricken faces and a murmur arose. Where were the children? What had happened to the children? Soon the police came round. The family tried to confuse the police inventing conflicting stories to protect each other. But the mother of the children eventually broke down and told everything. Two men, the father of the little girls and the brother who had cut up the bodies of the children were arrested and hanged this year.

Who is the rain-god? People are looking for a rain-god. Every man and woman in Africa is a farmer because people have lived off crops for as long as they can remember. But life has always been a desolation of suffering and deprivation and sorrow. People have always gone to the lands to plough but they are minute specks in the vastness of the land. They have no tools, no knowledge, only a depth of courage that makes them leave each year for the terror and loneliness of the wild, unconquered bush. In years of long drought, even this courage fails them and they have nothing. Is the new rain-god knowledge, progress and machines, and if so, how and when is this to be communicated to people who have courage but little education?

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