

AFRICAN RELIGIONS

Bessie Head

Something repels the heart deeply in most organised forms of religion. There was a geography book of my school days with most of Asia blanked out as barbaric because Asians were so difficult to convert to Christianity. And there was a picture of a group of Untouchables standing by the sea-side and praying to the God, Shiva, the only God they were allowed to have because he never wanted much from mankind except a little water and Bel flowers. The caption under the picture said that the Untouchables were afraid to enter the temples, even though Indian law now allows them to do so.

Because we could not enter a place where gold ornaments were kept and incense burned in intricate rituals, we were discounted as a people having anything of value, as though our lives were a blanket of darkness or nothingness. You feel the agony of it in this age when we are supposed to borrow development and borrow everything either from Russia or America. Professor Mbiti, in his quiet and detached interpretations of African religions,* side-steps the snobs and explains the way of life of a mass of people who were for so long discounted in the scheme of things. Although he speaks of African people, the appeal his ideas have for me is that they are wide and generous enough to take in all the humble who shall, one day, unexpectedly, inherit the earth. It is hard to imagine a heaven where the Pope officiates, because so many people would have to be excluded, but it is easy to imagine a universe and a people instantly immersed in a religious way of life. There are trees in this universe and they might tell a man in his own secret heart that they like to dwell near his hut. Also chickens and birds and rivers and sunsets and everything that flows and lives. A man in such a world takes his own time and goes about his affairs peacefully, nor does he have to shout and contort his features about the tree which indicated that it liked living near him. His whole world, says Professor Mbiti, is his religion and he is a religious man. This unity and feeling of at-oneness with all living things is the base of African traditional life and one has only to have lived through all kinds of clap-trap and then be plunged into a traditional society to fully support his view. It is indeed as though God, and a very original God, is quietly managing affairs, "behind the scenes," and people can afford to get on with the task of living. You can't imagine a God here who is only greeted on Sunday or Friday, but Someone who is absorbed and accommodated into a whole social structure and can be greeted at any moment.... "Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to..."

*African religions and philosophy' by John S Mbiti (Heinemann Educational Books)

attend a funeral ceremony ..."

I take this view a little further. To me, this is the religion and attitude of mind of any people who have never been wanted by the rest of mankind, nor had the means or education to find God in a posh place. We had to make do with just what was at hand and if God is a subconscious process in our minds, he is perhaps that much more dignified and respected. He is not exclusive either, but shares in every aspect of communal life; that is, the word religion in the traditional sense simply means the way a particular tribe is living from day to day and season to season and year to year.... "A great number of beliefs and practices are to be found in any African society. These are not, however, formulated in to any systematic set of dogmas which a person is expected to accept. People simply assimilate whatever religious ideas and practices are held or observed by their families and communities...and each generation takes them up with modifications suitable to its own historical situation and needs..."

One would pause and ponder a little more deeply on his proposition that a communal goodness is the root and foundation of African religion and that the individual within this community derives all his spiritual needs from participating in the entire life of the community. This idea is totally opposed to the great streams of Asian religious ideas where the accent is totally that of individual effort of individual souls. There are superhuman goals set, far above the capabilities of a single man and on examination of those disciplines prescribed, one becomes a little hesitant about the spiritual superman. There are indications of co-operation and assistance from unseen sources, even from that small circle of exclusive disciples, but it is not stressed. The co-operation which is necessary to achieve the highest standards takes a second place to the personalities involved in the propagation of new religious ideas. Thus, the ideas, which are of major importance, fail to become a part of the whole society because not everyone is attracted to a personality.

A great feeling of humility is generated by mutual co-operations: not the individual alone, to the exclusion of everyone else who helped him to become what he is. If this idea was also transported to the realm of the spirit there might be no more caste and class wars in the name of God. Indeed, God in Africa might, at last, be unashamed to say that he is unable to manage the enormous job of being God all by himself. That old man So-and-So with no teeth, but a good heart, gave him a helping hand, so that it is just anybody's heaven, where each person can feel that he matters infinitely and is loved, infinitely. Working his conclusions on the base of the African traditional structure, Professor Mbiti proposes a type of transfused religion. He says: "Transfused religion is the type which promises the greatest amount of influence on African peoples. Here, religion becomes more and more a social uniformity, without theological depth, personal commitment or martyrs. It is just "there," somewhere in the corpus of one's beliefs, whether one is conscious of being religious or not. It is not institutionalised.... It is equally tolerant as it is indifferent. But this is the form of religious life on which Africa must count to make an impress on morals, ethics, standards, and social conditions of its peoples. It is a religion

behind the scenes."

It is this "behind the scenes" which I like so much, if it could take away the exclusive temples and churches and let God be. After all, God is only there in the first place because people want something to trust, to feel some organising ability somewhere, to feel the need for restraint, and perhaps to be loved. Maybe God does these things anyway, whether mankind cares or not, but there was something wrong with the other social structures. One

after another they are condemned or doomed as God and caste in India is doomed. The outline Professor Mbiti gives of the African social structures is an invitation to the Gods to try out a new climate: "In traditional religions there are no creeds to be recited; instead, the creeds are written in the heart of the individual, and each one is himself a living creed of his own religion. Where the individual is, there is his religion, for he is a religious being. It is this that makes Africans so religious: religion is in their whole system of being..."

(Heinemann Educational Books)

SEASON OF MIGRATION TO THE NORTH

Tayeb Salih

MUKTARR MUSTAPHA

Tayeb Salih's new book is like an unusually well polished floor, shining and glimmering not only on the surface but within the pores of the wood. The writer today in Africa should attempt to reflect the sum total of his situation in order that his readers be made to feel as if they were part of it. Tayeb has displayed tremendous technical mastery as far as the dramatic situation of his book is concerned. The book is about an obvious clever chap called Mustafa Sa'eed whose way of life was given to wild excitement, women, intellectual brilliance and killing. Mustafa Sa'eed had travelled from his native Sudan to Cairo and then to London, during which time his whole mental situation went through a complete re-orientation: Mustafa's secret love for Mrs. Robinson, his guardian's wife, his involvement and later killing of Jean Morris, his intriguing meeting with Isabella Seymour and the short-lived false romance.

What Tayeb Salih has done in the first half of his book is to juxtapose comic relief with serious drama. To illustrate the writer's strong sense of drama: "The man shook me by the hand and said, 'How are you, Mr. Sa'eed?' 'Very well thank you, Mr. Robinson,' I told him. Then the man introduced me to his wife, and all of a sudden I felt the woman's arms embracing me and her lips on my cheek. At that moment, as I stood on the station platform amidst a welter of sounds and sensations, with the woman's arms round my neck, her mouth on my cheek, the smell of her body -- a strange European smell -- tickling my nose, her breast touching my chest, I felt -- I, a boy of twelve -- a vague sexual yearning I had never previously experienced." One could imagine twelve-year-old Mustafa Sa'eed standing beside Mrs. Robinson with his head swirling in fantasies; there are no limitations to Mustafa Sa'eed, his shrewdness and patience always win.

The writer has brought about by his description of village life in the Sudan nostalgia and vivid sensual scenes in the minds of those who have visited or read about Africa. One need not live in Mustafa Sa'eed's village to enjoy the daily happenings or laugh at the comic misfortunes. He never makes his characters totally mean or unkind. This gives vitality and spirit to them. One sees the strange devotion of Mustafa Sa'eed's widow to the memory of a loving husband: "if they force me to marry, I'll kill him and kill myself." For Mustafa Sa'eed's widow was not going to be made common by re-marrying. For her, only her dead husband mattered: he alone provided her with comfort and plenty. She was not going to succumb to the notion that 'women belong to men, and a man's a man even if he's decrepit.' Hosna Bint Mahmoud, Mustafa Sa'eed's widow, is a strong personality, surviving against the tide of her society: her tastes were founded in her dead husband. She would not change sides, nor pledge her loyalty to any other living person. And the inevitable occurs: Mustafa Sa'eed's widow kills Mad Rayyes, the undesirable suitor:

"Bint Mahmoud look to your honour. What scandals are these? A virgin bride doesn't behave like this -- as though you had no experience of men." Then Mad Rayyes screaming at the top of his voice, "Bakri! Hajj Ahmed! Bint Majzoub! Help! Bint Mahmoud has killed me! She accepted the stranger: why didn't she accept Mad Rayyes?"

Tayeb Salih has brought and given considerable expression to writings in Africa. He has painted fantastic subjects which kindle his imagination and offer him an issue for his 'madness.' His closest attention has been to the people he created, to the laughter, to the old lorries and to the barren towns. All of these things he has fed with life and movement and involvement. Like a skilful painter, Tayeb Salih carves out and pieces together scraps of beauty. He sometimes forces his plot and works in a highly exaggerated fashion. Reality is not enough for him. Sometimes he employs abstraction and sometimes fact which takes him near to the true position of a passionate observer. My only criticism of Tayeb Salih is the way he injects colonial literary structures that had nothing to do with the writer's situation in Africa. Yet his new novel is a very witty and entertaining book -- a must!