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WEST AFRICA AND THE COMPLEXITY OF PRIMITIVE CULTURES*

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SIMPLICITY is commonly cited as a characteristic of "primitive" cultures. Social, political and economic structures which are simple or at least not highly institutionalized, and simple technologies are found among "primitive" peoples, as well as cultures with a restricted number of forms of expression in folklore, music, dancing, or the graphic and plastic arts, a small number of ceremonies, and religious concepts which are indefinite or perhaps only difficult to define because they have a wide and general application. The generalization that such a description fits all non-literate societies, however, is false; and the definition of "primitive" as "simple" is sometimes qualified by a postscript that the cultures of the Maya, the Inca and of certain tribes on the West Coast of Africa are remarkably complex. The term "primitive" is valid in these cases only if it is used technically to distinguish literate societies from those whose history and culture are transmitted orally.

The publications of Rattray, Danquah, and Sarbah on the Ashanti and Fanti (Akan), Field on the Ga, Spieth and Westermann on the Ewe, Herskovits on Dahomey, Johnson on the Yoruba, Meek and Thomas on the Ibo, and Talbot on a number of tribes in Southern Nigeria, to mention only a few of the sources, indicate the complex and highly formalized political, social and economic institutions, the variety of artistic expression, and the intricacies of theology and religious ritual that are found in the Guinea Coast area.

Although the lack of large-scale political units is one of the distinctive characteristics of the eastern Ibo, they cannot be regarded as simple in religion, economics, art or other aspects of culture. And while the empires of the Sudan area to the north are perhaps more widely known, there is little to choose between them and the Benin, Yoruba, Dahomey, and Ashanti kingdoms in the way of complexity of structure. Of all the groups the Yoruba are the most highly urbanized. Nine of the ten largest cities in Nigeria, according to the last census, all of which are over forty-five thousand, are Yoruba, including Ibadan with 387,000,¹ the largest city in Negro Africa.

Kings of the Guinea Coast area held far-reaching authority. They ruled large populations through a series of subordinate chiefs responsible for districts, sub-districts, cities, and parts of cities within their empires. They were able to raise large armies to defend their kingdoms or to invade the territories of their neighbors, and occasionally to resist the penetration of the Colonial powers. Civil and criminal cases were tried before formally constituted courts of law, presided over by the chiefs.

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¹ Nigerian Secretariat, 1936, p. 23.

The kings and their large retinues of retainers were supported by levies at toll gates and on market trade and, at least in the case of Dahomey, where an annual census of population, livestock and granaries was made, by direct taxation based on individual wealth.² At Benin, Opobo, Whydah, and some other port towns, chiefs imposed harbor or pilotage fees on all trading ships, as well as export taxes (*comey*) on European trade.³ Control of trade extended to imported goods as well as local produce in many tribes, with some chiefs exercising trade monopolies, the maintenance of which gave rise to many of the early "punitive expeditions" by the British in Southern Nigeria.⁴

Commerce was based on the use of true money, and centers about the markets which in some areas are tremendous, involving thousands of individuals. Both wholesale and retail markets are found, and true middlemen carry on most of the trade. Depending on the arrangement between producer and middleman and whether the middleman trades for profit or on a commission basis, the Yoruba distinguish four different types of middlemen. There are separate names for each of the four types as well as a series of names based on the goods they sell. Traders dealing in the same goods are organized into guilds which have officers and regular meetings, and similar guilds are found for the various crafts. Craft specialization in West Africa is carried to a degree that in itself sets the Guinea Coast apart from most culture areas outside of Africa.

Woodcarving, which is famous for its excellence and elaboration, is only one of the many arts and crafts. Ivory, bone, and stone are also carved. Calabashes are carved and burned. Cire perdue casting, filigree work and hammering or forging are practiced, using a variety of metals including brass, bronze, silver, gold, copper, tin, lead, and iron. Weaving, tie dying, leather work, shell and bead work, and appliqued cloth and leather are found. Some of these art forms are so famous that the artistry and variety of West African basketry, matting, and pottery are often forgotten. Variety and complexity also characterize African folklore, music and dancing.

Kinship groups, like political units and the clubs, guilds, cooperative work groups and other associations, are highly institutionalized. Among the Yoruba status within the kinship units depends on relative age for descendants and relative seniority in terms of the date of marriage for in-laws. For each patrilineal clan, each compound, each extended family and each immediate family, the eldest male and the senior woman are officially heads of the group.⁵ The legal status of children (and of husband and wife) depends on how, when and by whom the bride wealth is paid, and in Dahomey thirteen forms of marriage, each with a separate name, are differentiated by these factors.⁶

² Herskovits, 1938, Vol. 1, pp. 113-128; Vol. 2, pp. 72-79.

³ Burns, 1942, pp. 81, 158-161; Herskovits, 1938; Vol. 1, pp. 109-110.

⁴ Burns, 1942, pp. 146-187, 217. ⁵ Bascom, 1944, pp. 10-16; 1942, pp. 37-46.

⁶ Herskovits, 1938, Vol. 1, pp. 301-333.

The complexity of West African religious beliefs and the elaborate detail of the rituals have also been described. In the Yoruba town of Ife the annual religious ceremonies for the deities last eight days, and, except for a period of a month in the Spring when none is held, at least one festival is being performed on every day of the year.

The complexity of West African cultures, however, cannot be brought out adequately by generalized statements of this sort. It becomes really clear in the field, when touching on almost any aspect of culture brings forth such a wealth of detail and distinctive concepts, statuses or forms in such numbers that they cannot be covered thoroughly without sacrificing all other aspects. Spieth has actually described 132 Ewe deities.⁷ The Yoruba say there are 401 deities,⁸ though some informants say 601. For each cult group in Ife there are sixteen priests; but one informant said that while they only bother to fill sixteen positions nowadays, there should really be 400 priests for his deity. Each deity also has a series of praise names. After recording and translating 25 of these for one deity (Orishanla), the informant said "If we worked at these all day we would not finish"; I decided to stop then. I also stopped after describing and recording the Yoruba names of 13 patterns for men's weaving, 40 cooking recipes, 14 forms of women's hairdress, and 48 individual Egungun masks.

This cultural complexity is a stimulating challenge to the field worker, but it also presents problems which are hopeless of solution during the usual year of field work. It is simply impossible in a year to do more than take samples and sketch the broad outlines of these cultures and, except for studies of very restricted aspects of culture, the end never even begins to come in sight. In working on Ifa, which is only one of the several types of divination employed by the Yoruba, I recorded and translated 186 of the verses recited in divination; but I had to leave, knowing that no diviner can even begin to practice professionally until he has memorized over 1,000 verses and the sacrifices and charms which usually accompany them, that some individual diviners know more than 2,000, and that there are said to be in all at least 4,000.⁹

An equally difficult problem is presented by the size and the regional variation within the tribes of both the Guinea Coast and Sudan areas. There are the Mendi, Kanuri, and Mossi with between one and two millions, the Akan and Mandingo with nearly three millions, the Yoruba and Ibo with nearly four millions, the Fulani with more than four millions scattered widely through West Africa, and the Hausa with six or seven millions of people.

Those of us who have worked in West Africa know the feeling of frustration that comes from trying to deal with groups of this size and to record the ap-

⁷ Spieth, 1911, pp. 46-171.

⁸ Talbot, 1926, Vol. 2, p. 87.

⁹ Bascom, 1943, p. 130.

parently endless detail of their cultures. We know full well the complexities of West African cultures, but we sometimes find it difficult to get laymen, students, and at times even fellow anthropologists to recognize the degree of complexity that exists among these people who are labeled "primitive."

Numbers, such as those of deities and their praise names, priests, Ifa verses, or even forms of hairdress often help to make the point; but the case is weakened by the fact that field work is so incomplete. The extent to which general monographs and even most of the more specialized studies on West Africa represent only samplings of various aspects of culture can be fully appreciated only by someone who has actually worked in West Africa.

In the field of folklore a large number of African folktales have been recorded, but collections numbering over 200 from a single tribe have yet to be published. For the Yoruba I would estimate 5,000 tales with, I think, more of a chance of being too low than of being too high. In addition there are myths, riddles, tongue twisters, songs, praise names, and proverbs.

The problem of proverbs is comparable to that of folktales. Except for the 1,022 Ibo proverbs recorded by Thomas,¹⁰ most West African collections by anthropologists do not exceed 500. Working in another part of Africa Doke has published 1,695 proverbs. His comments are pertinent: "Lamba proverbs seem to be without number. Since putting together the present collection I have gathered another two hundred without any efforts on my part; and a further number has been laid aside owing to lack of confirmation. Mulekelela, the Lamba story-teller supplied me in the first place with more than half of these aphorisms: he has a wonderful mine of this lore, and one day reeled off as many as 250 at a single sitting."¹¹

Collections of proverbs made by Africans come closer to indicating the total number within individual tribes. In 1879 such a collection was edited by Christaller, entitled: "A Collection of Three Thousand Six Hundred Tshi Proverbs in Use among the Negroes of the Gold Coast Speaking the Asante and Fante Languages." Four collections of proverbs have been written, edited and printed by Yoruba. One pamphlet by Lakęru lists 1,133 proverbs in Yoruba. Winfunke, who checked his collection against Lakęru's to make sure there was no duplication, has published an additional 1,313, giving a total of 2,446. Two other collections by Jacobs (1,063 proverbs) and Esuęla (1,659 proverbs), in which a number of duplications appear, bring the number of Yoruba proverbs which have been published to about 3,000.

These booklets, published in Twi and in Yoruba without translation and usually without comment, have been made, not as scientific studies, but as commercial ventures for sale to Africans in the Gold Coast and Nigeria. These and other similar African publications indicate better than most anthropolo-

¹⁰ Thomas, 1913-14, Vol. 6.

¹¹ Doke, 1927, p. xvi.

gical studies the complexity of West African cultures and some of the tremendous gaps in ethnographic literature, the size of some of which may come as a surprise even to Africanists. One of these pamphlets, for example, written in Yoruba by Şanusì, interprets the meanings of 652 dreams.

West African charms and magic are known to be numerous, but anthropological literature does not contain descriptions of more than fifty for any one tribe. Two booklets published in Yoruba by Okunade list a total of 849 remedies for diseases, and their ingredients. And a single book by Oduntan with practically no duplications contains 2,402. In other words, 3,000 Yoruba medicines and charms have been published without touching on the fields of wealth, good luck, safe journeys, success in court trials, marriage, hunting, farming, and the other activities for which charms are made.

These examples indicate the opportunities for further research, which could be emphasized by citing the long list of West African tribes for whom even reliable general studies are lacking, and suggest the possibilities of using the techniques of interviews, questionnaires, and public opinion polls in connection with controlled sampling, as well as research teams and the analysis of African written literature. Beginnings in some of these directions have already been made. The problems of field work and the gaps in the literature have been cited, however, simply to underline the complexity of African cultures, particularly in the Guinea Coast. They are otherwise aside from the purpose of this paper, which is to indicate the degree of cultural complexity, to provide a basis for evaluating these cultures in terms of the published literature, and to emphasize the importance of bearing this complexity in mind in generalizing about "primitive" peoples.

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