

QUO VADIS AFRICANE?

By G.F.A. BAER

HAVE you ever been really hungry and then found yourself surrounded by trained salesmen, all telling you that their particular brand of food is the best for you? If you have and if it left you bewildered, you will sympathize with the African, trying to find among the divers religions offered him, the one which is the best. It is most confusing to him. Indeed, I have never been able to understand how an African, introduced to, and earnestly seeking Christian truth, can possibly understand the real or apparent differences which rend asunder the various denominations. Instead of one universal Church a score of them confront him, each claiming to be the one and only interpreter of Christian beliefs. "The Episcopalian régime, which is perhaps so well suited to England, is to be saddled upon the poor native, who does not know who are Cranmer, Laud or Pusey. The Presbyterian system, which is said to have worked so great wonders in Scotland and elsewhere is imported wholesale. What do Kaffir and Basutos know about Knox and Chalmers? Why should they be obliged to accept a system, which, for all we know, may be unsuited to their own minds and ways of life, only because the course of history has made it prevalent in Edinburgh or Geneva? Because in the 16th century there has arisen in Germany a great man of God called Luther, and in France another great Christian called Calvin, who did not agree on some minor theological points and thought a little differently about the Lord's Supper, the Basutos and Kaffirs are to belong to different churches, and are to be kept for ever in ecclesiastical bodies, foreign and perhaps hostile to each other. Why force upon the simple-minded native the consequences of a historical past which weighs only too heavily upon the Christian."¹

Ours is a Christian civilisation and it is this civilisation which we know and which we can pass on to others and nothing else. Now much of what the Church has to teach in Africa today has become part and parcel of the life of the people in this country, and this may, to some extent, obscure the issue of today. Europeans are quite naturally inclined to neglect the historical approach to problems of this kind and to assume that African problems of acculturation are those of this century in this country. They forget that in Great Britain and throughout Europe a Christian civilisation has been evolved which may be

1. Sargent, *Report of Native Education in South Africa*, Part III, p. 53.

far from the ideal, but which yet rests on a solid foundation, whereas in Africa no more has so far been done than to apply the bulldozer to the age-old and thick jungle of African beliefs. In other words, from the very beginning of missionary activity in Africa the white man has fought against the indigenous African religion and has tried to replace it by a foreign one. This attack struck at the very roots of African life, for religion pervades all spheres of life, and even missionaries preaching with caution born of understanding, could not avoid its destructive action — and not all missionaries proceeded with caution and humility.

Of necessity much of our Christian teaching differs vastly from the African's way of thinking. The concept of the sanctity of marriage, for instance, differs fundamentally from his ideas. To begin with he recognizes the futility of enforcing a marriage contract which both parties wish to repudiate. Now I cannot forbear to quote here an example showing the curious effect of Christian marriage rites on the African: An African man and woman were married by a R.C. Priest and vowed to live together till death would part them. Some time later the husband deserted his wife. She sued in the Native court and obtained a divorce according to Native law on the grounds of desertion. The case was quashed by a European magistrate because the court in question was held to be acting *ultra vires*, sans jurisdiction in divorce suits relating to Christian marriages. The wife now went to the magistrate concerned who explained the position to her. She thereupon begged him to grant her a divorce. He informed her that the local ordinance governing these matters regarded desertion alone not as grounds for divorce and that she would also have to prove adultery. She now petitioned in his court. The husband duly appeared, admitted his adultery and added that he had married the woman concerned according to native law, the marriage subsequently being solemnized according to Moslem law. The wife was granted a decree nisi on the grounds of her husband's adultery coupled with desertion and the fact that he had changed his profession of Christianity for the profession of another religion, and he had married a second wife according to Moslem rites. With the exception of desertion, he had never heard of such grounds for divorce before. The Roman priest now told the woman that her decree was invalid according to *ius canonicus*, and that if she petitioned to make it absolute she would be committing yet another sin for which God would punish her. She now dropped her case, did not petition for a decree absolute, and subsequently remarried according to native

custom. But the wife had petitioned for the custody of her three children on grounds which the court decided were valid. She thought that was exceedingly smart, for according to native law the children should have gone to her husband. But the cheated husband retaliated by refusing to accept the return of the pretium puellae until the children were restored to him. As long as that was outstanding no native would recognise the divorce and therefore the second marriage would be bigamous in native law. The woman now saw her folly and she and her relatives all went off to the native court to settle the matter with the divorced husband. But the chief, who had quashed his previous judgment, fought shy of this case. To approach the mission was equally useless because they would not even recognise the decree nisi. The woman, her relatives and her late husband thereupon decided to settle this matter out of court. So they met under a tree over a large pot of beer, and after much indaba they reached an agreement whereby the husband should be given the custody of the children on condition that he accepted the return of the portion of the pretium puellae owing to him thereby giving the woman her release and making her second marriage legal according to native law. I make no excuse for citing this case in some detail since it reveals some of the conflict and confusion resulting from the impact of diverse concepts of marriage and divorce on the African.

I think that we should not cease to show that the important thing for the Christian is not the observance of certain rites imported from Europe. Wherever Christianity has become a living force, it shapes its own moulds, and African Christians have shown that they can do this quite well. Tribal ritual in its colourful variety contrasts strangely with the European rites of the Christian Church, many of which are meaningless to the African. That is why I hold that African customs, such as are practised in connection with marriage, birth, illness and death should be recast into Christian forms in order to ease the burden of transition. Similarly, it seems to me wrong and futile to suppress all forms of dancing as un-Christian. Surely, folks-dances, as a form of recreation, should be permissible.

Quite often Christianized Africans are very prone to indulge that religious iconoclasm so characteristic of the apostate. Hence it becomes at times necessary to curb their over-zealousness in destroying African customs. For "there are not infrequently substantial reasons underneath customs that appear to us absurd", as Charlotte Brontë has it. "Lobola" is a case in point. This custom, fortunately, persists even in the presence of

unfavourable urban conditions. Most Africans still regard it as an indispensable condition even when it is practised surreptitiously, as it is in most Christian or civil marriages.² "It has proved its ability to adapt itself to changed conditions and to withstand the active hostility of the missionaries", says such an authority on the Bantu as Mrs. A. Winifred Hoernle.³

Africans rightly resent the assertion of superficial white observers that they buy their wives. If it were so, they argue, a wife would be her husband's slave, but this she most certainly is not, either in law or in fact. The husband's rights are far less than the patria potestas conferred upon the Roman pater familias. Once the African has married he cannot sell her.

The wife herself will estimate her value and the regard which she will enjoy from her husband and his family according to the lobola he paid. If the payments were inadequate or still outstanding, the position of the husband to both his wife and her family is at once ambiguous, and the wife may on the occasion of a difference of opinion reproach him for his slackness in fulfilling his contractual agreement. She may also add insult to injury by refusing to fulfill her wifely duties.⁴ In some tribes the family of the bride prefer to have the payment of the bride-price postponed because this is a means of retaining their influence on their son-in-law.⁵ For the tribal African a marriage arranged without lobola means a humiliation and dishonour to the wife and even the rural and/or christianized African holds this view. Marriage in a Registry Office or in Church is welcomed as an addendum, but not as a substitute for lobola, the latter giving a better guarantee for an orderly married life than the rules and regulations imported by foreigners from Europe. This attitude is by no means confined to the 'Mpondo and most tribes adhere to it with variations upon the same theme.⁶

Formerly the bond between two clans was strengthened by a marriage. The prospective bridegroom had to visit his bride-to-be and her family regularly. He also had to labour in the field of his father-in-law, just as Jacob, and he had to surrender part of his hunting. In short, it was incumbent upon him to make himself pleasant to his in-laws and to retain their favour. But

2. cf. for example, Mbani vs. Mbani (Cape Appellate Division, 40) where McLoughlin, J. P. held that in the absence of a clear agreement to do so, the husband can be compelled to pay Lobola. This is tantamount to making lobola an essential element in the marriages contracted by African Christians under Common Law.

3. "Positive Values in the African Social Organisation", N.E.F. Report, p. 406.

4. "Positive Values in the African Social Organisation", N.E.F. Report, p. 406.

5. D. Westermann, "The African Today and Tomorrow", p. 53.

6. Joseph Declercq, La signification de la dot dans le mariage Congolais, Rev. Aucam, 23, 140, 50-6, Jan. 1948: "La dot (Kusonga) chez les Raluba est la condition sine qua non du mariage. En réalité elle est un signe extérieur du contrat entre deux familles. Elle garantit aussi la stabilité du mariage. La dot est calculée selon la richesse de la contrée, la situation social de la fille, du fiancée etc. . . . Les coutumes évoluent sous l'influence du mariage chrétien. La dot perd de son importance mais s'avère encore indispensable." (Emphasis mine).

the introduction of the European conception of money has changed all this. The educated (or should I say "sophisticated") African pays lobola in cash, cheque, or postal order. The bride comes c.o.d., and the whole arrangement smacks of a commercial transaction. In areas where polygamy is the rule rather than the exception, and where girls are therefore in short supply, the marriageable age is often lowered in order to secure lobola as soon as possible. While it is true that sexual maturity may precede full bodily maturity, the tendency seems nevertheless harmful.

The relationship between husband and wife has also changed considerably. In the olden days, the maintenance of the family was equally shared by both. Today, the man is, to an ever increasing degree, the breadwinner. In urban areas miners, domestic servants and others in the pay of Europeans, give part of their wages to their wives. Even in rural districts, agriculture is no longer the woman's main duty. On the contrary, where the plough has replaced the hoe, the man alone uses it, and thus reduces the woman's share in the work on the land to a minimum. She now can be at home longer and more often. This would be a good thing were she to occupy her time by improving the home and rearing her children. But this does not happen. The wife has not yet been trained for this. Where the family has drifted from the country into the town, the wife expects her husband to provide her with the means for buying clothing befitting her station. When he cannot do so, she herself may start a trade, or she may even make evil, if lucrative, use of her leisure and emancipation.⁷

Between the culture and the thought life of the tribal African and that of the twentieth century there is still a dark and bottomless canyon. This does not mean that we shall not eventually succeed in bridging this gap, nor that the primitive mind works along lines unmoulded by logic and incapable of being influenced by reason or scientific evidence.⁸ But the tribal African grows up in a culture so absolutely different from ours that it is difficult for a stranger to conceive of it. In his world there is no cause and effect explicable by scientific laws. In his world ghosts are more real and influential than men, and the dead control the living. The anger of the spirits causes drought and death

7. L'émancipation brusque de la femme a ébranlé sa conduite moral et physique. Elle abuse de sa liberté acquise et s'adonne librement a la prostitution. Wassa, F. Liberté de la femme noire et prostitution: "Voix du Congolais", 4, 23. 71-2 Febr. 1948., cf. also E. Possoz, La Polygynie au Congo 1948, pp. 288-99 "L'émancipation de la femme au Congo est cause de maints désordres moraux et sociaux. Les Européens n'ont pas compris la signification de la dot, ni de tout le système matrimonial. Ils ont substitué l'argent aux anciennes valeurs dotales et ont institué le commerce de la dot. Le fond si complexe de la polygynie a échappé a la législation européenne."

8. as Lévy-Bruhl expounded in "Les Fonctions Mentales dans les Sociétés Inférieures, Paris, 1932, passim.

and famine and, indeed, all the hazards inherent in life. Therefore, it seems to him quite as absurd to state that phenomena, such as anthrax, are caused by minute organisms introduced into the blood, as it appears to us to expect a gypsy to forecast our future for \$1.

The African's world, then, is a world full of dreadful forces with spirits lurking everywhere and a world in which it is best not to anger the gods by examining what they graciously conceal from us. Christianity, education and economic enterprise have made inroads into this philosophy of fear, but we are as yet a far cry from the time when, for instance, the average African dispenser will understand that it is necessary to weigh and measure a medicine because its efficacy is proportional to the cause and not due to some magical power or other which, of course, bears no relationship whatsoever to either weight or volume. If we bear this in mind, it at once becomes evident that the education of the younger generation will do little to change this. To teach young girls food values or the need for a varied and well-balanced diet or new methods of growing additional foodstuffs will be futile, as long as we do not take into account the social significance of food in tribal life, its close link with taboos, its magical properties and, last but not least, its use in administering medicines, poisons and love potions. As long as we leave the present-day mothers in ignorance we shall find them a very serious obstacle to the progress of Christianity in the next generation, "since the influence of the older women is so powerful and so conservative and their control over the younger married women so strong."⁹

9. cf. Janet Welch, *The Goal of Women's Education in Africa* p. 4. (unpublished Typescript, London Institute of Education, Colonial Department Library).