

# AFRICAN RELIGIONS & PHILOSOPHY

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in matters of sexual life, marriage, procreation and family responsibilities. They are henceforth allowed to shed their blood for their country, and to plant their biological seeds so that the next generation can begin to arrive.

Initiation rites have a great educational purpose. The occasion often marks the beginning of acquiring knowledge which is otherwise not accessible to those who have not been initiated. It is a period of awakening to many things, a period of dawn for the young. They learn to endure hardships, they learn to live with one another, they learn to obey, they learn the secrets and mysteries of the man-woman relationship; and in some areas, especially in West Africa, they join secret societies each of which has its own secrets, activities and language.

We shall now consider concrete examples of initiation rites. The details will obviously differ considerably, but the basic meaning and significance are generally similar. For most peoples the initiation rites take place during puberty, but there are places where they are performed either before or after puberty. For this reason it is incorrect to speak of them as 'puberty rites'.

[a] *Akamba initiation rites*

There are three parts to Akamba initiation rites, the first two being the most important. Formerly, everybody had to go through these first two, but only a small number of men went through the third which was performed when the men were over forty years old. Without being initiated, a person is not a full member of the Akamba people. Furthermore, no matter how old or big he is, so long as he is not initiated, he is despised and considered to be still a boy or girl.

Children go through the first stage of initiation rites when they are about four to seven years of age. The ceremony takes place in the months of August to October, when it is dry and relatively cool. Boys undergo circumcision, and girls undergo clitoridectomy. The date for the ceremony is announced in a given region, and when it arrives all the candidates are gathered together by their parents and relatives at the home where the ceremony is to take place. Specialist men circumcise the boys, and specialist women perform the operation on the girls; and a special knife is used in each case. The physical cutting takes place early in the morning. The foreskin of the boys' sexual organ is cut off; and a small portion of the girls' clitoris is similarly removed. Men gather round to watch the boys, and women to watch the girls. The operation is painful, but the children are encouraged to endure it without crying or shouting, and those who manage to go through it bravely are highly praised by the community. Afterwards there is public rejoicing, with dancing, singing, drinking beer and making libation and food offerings to the living-dead. In course of the following

few weeks, while the wound is healing, relatives come to visit the initiated boys and girls, bringing them presents of chickens, money, ornaments and even sheep and cattle by those who can afford them.

That is the first stage of the initiation: what does it signify and mean? The cutting of the skin from the sexual organs symbolizes and dramatizes separation from childhood: it is parallel to the cutting of the umbilical cord when the child is born. The sexual organ attaches the child to the state of ignorance, the state of inactivity and the state of potential impotence (asexuality). But once that link is severed, the young person is freed from that state of ignorance and inactivity. He is born into another state, which is the stage of knowledge, of activity, of reproduction. So long as a person is not initiated, he cannot get married and he is not supposed to reproduce or bear children. The shedding of his blood into the ground binds him mystically to the living-dead who are symbolically living in the ground, or are reached at least through the pouring of libation on to the ground. It is the blood of new birth. The physical pain which the children are encouraged to endure, is the beginning of training them for difficulties and sufferings of later life. Endurance of physical and emotional pain is a great virtue among Akamba people, as indeed it is among other Africans, since life in Africa is surrounded by much pain from one source or another. The presents given to the initiates by their relatives, are tokens of welcome into the full community. They also demonstrate and symbolize the fact that now the young people can begin to own and inherit property, they are entitled to new rights and can say, 'This is my property', even if they own it jointly with the corporate group. Owning property leads eventually to the next important stage, which is the period of marriage.

The dancing and rejoicing strengthen community solidarity, and emphasize the corporateness of the whole group. It is only after this first initiation rite that young people are allowed to join in public dances. Making of offerings and libation to the living-dead emphasizes and renews the link between human beings and the departed, between the visible and invisible worlds. It is to be noted here, however, that children whose parents die before they are initiated, are initiated at a much later age than usual. It is not quite clear why this must be so, perhaps it is in order to allow the children more time to grow since initiation thrusts upon them great responsibilities.

There is no set period between the first and the second initiations, but the latter can take place any time between a few weeks after the first initiation and the age of fifteen or so. The first is primarily physical, the second is mainly educational. The ceremony for the second (known as the 'great' or 'major' initiation) is sponsored by a household from where there are no

initiates at the time, and this is a great privilege which the people concerned consider to be granted them by their living-dead. The ceremony lasts from four to ten days, during part of which the candidates are secluded from the public and live in huts built away from the villages. They are accompanied by supervisors and teachers, to whom is delegated the responsibility of introducing the candidates to all matters of manhood and womanhood. The Akamba describe this duty as 'brooding over the initiates', the way that birds brood over their eggs before hatching. On the first day the candidates learn educational songs and encounter symbolic obstacles. On the second day they have to face a frightening monster known as '*mbusya*' (rhinoceros). In some parts of the country only the boys go through this experience, while in other parts both boys and girls do. This is a man-made structure of sticks and trees, from the inside of which someone makes fearful bellows like those of a big monster. The initiates do not know exactly what it is, for that is one of the secrets of the ceremony. Afterwards they are not allowed to divulge the matter to those who have not been initiated. They face this 'rhinoceros' bravely, shooting it with bows and arrows in order to destroy it the way they would destroy a similar enemy. That night, the man and woman who performed the operation at the first ceremony, have a ritual sexual intercourse; and the parents of the candidates have a ritual sexual intercourse on the third and seventh nights.

On the third day, the initiates rehearse adult life: boys go hunting with miniature bows and arrows, and girls cut small twigs (which symbolize firewood for the home). Later the same day the original operators at the first ceremony spit beer over the candidates to bless them, and the children return to their 'home' in the bush. Here they must overcome objects that are placed before them. Each boy is given a special stick, which he must retain; and that evening a dance for the initiates takes place. With their special sticks the boys perform symbolic sexual acts upon the girls; and on the following day, they are examined on the meaning of riddles and puzzles carved on the sticks or drawn on sand. Afterwards the boys fetch sugar-canes, this being a form of permitted 'stealing' acceptable and necessary for that particular purpose; and with the sugar-cane they make beer for their incumbents.

On the fifth day the initiates and their incumbents go to a sacred tree, usually the fig or sycamore tree on the banks of a river. The supervisors take a little amount of sap from the tree and give it to each candidate. The initiates pretend to eat it; and thereafter they may now eat all the foods which otherwise they had been forbidden to eat during the previous day. At this tree the operators make a small cut on the sexual organs of the initiates, and beer is poured on the organs.

The sixth day is spent peacefully. On the seventh day, the boys make a mock cattle raid, while the girls cry out that the enemies have come. The ceremony may end at that point, and the young people now return to their individual homes. The parents have a ritual sexual intercourse that night.<sup>1</sup>

This long description is intended to illustrate at some detail, the significance of the initiation rite. Certain meanings clearly emerge from this ceremony: Corporate living is instilled into the thinking of the young people by making them live together in the special huts in the woods. This experience is like a miniature community. The incumbents play the role of the elders; and it is extremely important that the young respect and obey the older people whether they are their immediate parents or not. Seclusion serves to make the candidates concentrate on what they are experiencing and doing, and becomes like a re-enactment of death. It is a new rhythm for the young people as well as for their wider community. When seclusion is over they emerge as qualified and legally recognized men and women who may establish families, become mothers and fathers and defend their country—hence the mock raid attack and the symbolic sexual act that are part of the ceremony. The frightening ordeal of the 'rhinoceros' is a psychological device partly to emphasize the seriousness of the occasion, and partly to drive out fear from the candidates so that in time of danger they do not flee away but take courage to defend themselves and their families. The riddles carved on the special sticks or drawn on sand are symbols of knowledge, to which the candidates now have full access. The initiates are now entitled to know every secret of tribal life and knowledge, apart from what is known to exclusive groups. The rite at the sacred tree is a reminder of the religious life, and a symbolic visit to the living-dead and the spirits who are thought to live there. The occasion is a renewal of the link with the Zamani period, the link with the spiritual realities and a reminder that the living-dead are 'present' with them. Permission to eat the foods which the initiates were previously forbidden to eat is a symbolic and dramatic way of opening up for them the full participation in all the affairs of the nation. The slight cut on the sex organs at the sacred tree indicates the sacredness of sex, in the sight of God, the spirits, the living-dead and the human community. The return home is like an experience of resurrection: death is over, their seclusion is ended, and now they rejoin their community as new men and women, fully accepted and respected as such. Their parents have a ritual sexual intercourse as the final seal of the ceremony, the symbolic gesture that their own children are fertile, that their children are now initiated and authorized to carry on the

<sup>1</sup> D. N. Kimilu *Mukamba Waw'o* (Nairobi 1962), p. 30 f.; Middleton, I, p. 88 f.

burning flame of life, and that a new generation is now socially and educationally born.

Akamba men have still a third initiation rite, when they are over forty years of age. Only a few of them actually undergo this ceremony, and it is so secret that little is known about it by those who have not participated in it. It is like a ritual mystical experience, and there are grades through which the candidates go after they have finished with the actual rite. Among other things the rite involves very severe tests of endurance and going through great torment. During that stage the men perform acts which are not regarded as their own, since candidates are in a state of having 'lost' themselves. The ceremony is performed in secret, away from the villages, and the initiated men are under such strong oath of secrecy that even those who later become Christians are unwilling to divulge what actually happens.

[b] *Maasai initiation rites*

Among the Maasai, circumcision rites take place every four to five years, for young people aged between twelve and sixteen. All those who are circumcised together form a life-long age-group, and take on a new special name. As preparation for the ceremony, all the candidates first assemble together, covered with white clay and carrying no weapons. Then they spend about two months moving about the country-side. On the day before the ceremony the boys wash themselves in cold water. When their foreskin is cut off, the blood is collected in an ox hide and put on each boy's head. For four days the boys are kept in seclusion, after which they emerge dressed like women and having their faces painted with white clay and heads adorned with ostrich feathers. A few weeks later, when their sex organs have healed, the heads are shaved and the boys now grow new hair and can become warriors. Girls have their ceremony in which a portion of their sex organ is cut or pierced. They adorn their heads with grass or leaves of a special tree (doom palm). When their wounds have healed, the girls can get married; and in some parts of the country they also have their heads shaved.<sup>1</sup>

In this example we see the same type of meaning as among the Akamba. The underlying emphasis is separation from childhood and incorporation into adulthood. Cutting or piercing the sex organ, and the shaving of the head, symbolize the break from one status and entry into another. The smearing of the face with white clay is the symbol of a new birth, a new person, a new social status. When the ceremony is over, the men begin their career as warriors: they may now defend their country or raid other peoples. The women are ready to get married and often do so immediately.

<sup>1</sup> A. van Gennep *The rites of passage* (E.T. 1960), p. 85 f.

So the rhythm of a new generation is dramatized and played. The young people who have been initiated together become mystically and ritually bound to each other for the rest of their life: they are in effect one body, one group, one community, one people. They help one another in all kinds of ways. The wife of one man is equally the wife of other men in the same age-group; and if one member visits another he is entitled to sleep with the latter's wife, whether or not the husband is at home. This is a deep level of asserting the group solidarity, and one at which the individual really feels that 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'. This solidarity creates or provides a sense of security, a feeling of oneness and the opportunities of participating in corporate existence.

[c] *Nandi female initiation rites*<sup>1</sup>

[For an account of female initiation we shall take the example of the Nandi who have some of the most sophisticated and detailed initiation rites. Nandi female initiation is 'a preparation for adulthood and housewifery', and no woman can get married without it. Long before the initiation, and beginning when the girls are about ten years old, they have to sleep with the boys in places known as *sikiroino*.<sup>2</sup> This is obligatory, and if the girls refuse it, the boys may beat them without the intervention of the parents.] It is meant to teach the girls how to behave towards men and how to control their sexual desires. No sexual intercourse is permitted when the boys and girls sleep together in this way. At a later stage the girls would be examined for virginity, and it is great shame and anger to the girls and their parents if any are found to have lost their virginity. In some cases such girls would be speared to death; while virgin ones would receive gifts of cows or sheep.

When the time arrives for the initiation ceremony, several families bring their daughters together to be initiated together. By then the girls are aged about fourteen. The boyfriends make sure that the girls are properly and beautifully dressed for the occasion, and supply each of them with 'a hat of beads and thigh and ankle bells'. Wearing this heavy attire, the girl goes round informing her relatives of the date for the ceremony. The thigh bells, of which there are four on each thigh, are the recognized indicators that a girl's initiation ceremony is about to start. The night before the appointed day, girls sleep with their boyfriends in the *sikiroino*. The girls

<sup>1</sup> S. Cherotich 'The Nandi female initiation and marriage and Christian impact upon it', in *Dini na Mila*, Kampala, Vol. 2 No. 2/3, December 1967, pp. 62-77, for a full and very interesting description, from which the substance and quotations of this subsection are derived, with the author's permission.

<sup>2</sup> A *sikiroino* is a house where girls and young men of a given village or group of villages may go and sleep at night.