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Research into the cultural modes and myths of Kenya's tribes

Extensive study into the distinctive "modes of thought" of representative tribal groups of Kenya and how these are reflected in their social values, religious beliefs, artistic expressions, etc., is being undertaken by the Institute of African Studies.

The project, called the Kenya Belief Systems Project, seeks, in essence, to provide answers to two basic questions: what material phenomena tend to be significant for particular tribal societies of Kenya; and, how do these societies organise, categorise and classify these phenomena into coherent systems of beliefs?

The primary focus will be on the collection and analysis of a larger and more detailed body of "oral" texts relating to particular beliefs and practices than presently exists for most tribal groups of Kenya. And in focusing on the collection and analysis of such texts, it is hoped to employ some of the ideas currently exemplified in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Edmund Leach, Mary Douglas and others — namely, that a society's myths, cosmologies and distinctive beliefs are as fundamental to its total form and predictable behaviour as its language and its rules governing intelligible speech. That is, the cultural identity and ultimate aesthetic expression of a people or nation is rooted in the social meanings they derive from, or attach to, particular forms or symbols of expression or behaviour, and that these "forms" are best studied in their myths and ritual acts.

Relatively few detailed or systematic studies of characteristic belief systems of Kenya peoples have been made, nor have any socio-linguistic or "cognitive studies" of belief categories and classifications been undertaken. The fruitfulness of such studies conducted elsewhere in Africa and in other parts of the world in illuminating distinctive cultural forms, such as "African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African peoples, 1954", and "African Systems of Thought", 1965, suggests that a major effort to duplicate such research in Kenya would stimulate new interest in and provide useful information about the essential forms and symbols of local Kenya culture.

Thus, specific aims of this project are:

1. to explore and elucidate the forms and social meanings of local myths, ritual acts and abstract beliefs or distinct tribal groups in Kenya, with the objective of charting important similarities and differences in such forms as they relate to the notion of national culture and national identity.

2. to record, transcribe and compile a research library of oral texts and literature from all tribal areas of Kenya which would form the basis of a permanent collection for study and appreciation by scholars and the public of traditional Kenya belief systems.

3. to promote by publication, seminars and occasional public lectures, an appreciation and interest among students and the public in the significance of distinct "social meanings" embedded in various cultural forms, symbols and expressions.

It should be emphasised that the aim of this project is not simply to record individual customs per se, but rather to analyse how aggregates of beliefs and behaviour are interrelated and integrated as pervading systems of thought, both within individual tribal groups and between groups of different regions.

Indeed, a key assumption underlying this project is that in attempting to promote political unity and a sense of national identity, it is not simply the acceptance of a common sovereign power which unifies,

but rather the sharing of a common culture.

Specific aims of this project during the 1970-71 academic year are as follows:

1. to start to compile a research bibliography for the Institute of all published and unpublished work relating to the study of distinctive Kenya belief systems — to be organised by tribal groups and subject categories and including references of theoretical works on belief systems generally, and designed to provide a basic research tool for all future research in this area.

2. whenever possible, to purchase, reproduce or seek the gift of important studies of Kenya belief systems for deposit in a permanent Institute "research library" for this project.

3. to liaise with the Departments of Literature, History, African Languages and Linguistics, and Philosophy and Religious Studies for the purpose of:

a exploring areas of mutual and complementary interest in which specific co-operation and co-ordination could be achieved,

b discussing and hopefully deciding on a common policy or methodology for the collection, inventory and storage of oral textual materials.

4. to discuss and initiate, in collaboration with the Institute as a whole, a publication series (possibly "Occasional Papers") in which results of this project can appear, either in pamphlet, monograph or symposia format.

5. to encourage selected visiting research associates to co-operate in the collection and possible publication of distinctive belief systems.

In addition Dr Alan H. Jacobs proposes to complete the editing of the Lord Claude Hamilton (Maasai) Papers, Vol. II and then begin preparing for publication a short monograph on "Eunoto: A Maasai Rural Ceremony". Dr A. Molnos, Research Fellow, proposes to complete for publication an inventory and critical review of published studies on traditional attitudes and beliefs toward family planning in Kenya as a preliminary to her more detailed study of the same subject.

Mr George Mathu, Junior Research Fellow, has begun research on a study of Kiambu Kikuyu traditional beliefs relevant to understanding their response to the new Church Missionary Society.

Mrs Nancy Gray, newly assigned Research Associate to this project, is studying traditional beliefs relevant to economic development among the Taveta and/or Digo.

A number of researchers are currently, or have in the past, worked individually on isolated aspects of various Kenya beliefs systems, employing either social anthropological, historical or literary techniques. However, relatively little joint or co-ordinated assessment of such research has taken place.

Thus, the initial methodological thrust of this project will be to develop permanent archival research resources for the review of such research and to liaise with representatives of various university departments as to more specific research strategies and methods for co-ordinating such research in the future.

A special attempt will be made to identify and collect copies of unpublished manuscripts and oral texts currently in existence relating to specific belief systems for deposit in a permanent research library for this project, and to prepare guidelines for future researchers in the collection of oral texts.

During 1968-70, Mr Henry Anyumba, Research Fellow, worked full-time on this project, completing both a study of the classification of Luo Nyatiti songs and initiating a field survey of the forms of Kamba music and dance.

In 1969 Dr Jacobs published an account of "Maasai Marriage and Bridewealth" beliefs and practices while working mainly on the compilation and editing of typed copies of the Lord Claude Hamilton (Maasai) Papers for deposit in the National Archives and University library.

In addition, three visiting Research Associates (Messrs Glazier, Karp and Mahner) were encouraged during 1969-70 to deliver seminar papers on specific or important beliefs and practices of the peoples among whom they were working.