

THE SPIRITUAL AND SOCIAL
ROLE OF WOMEN
IN TRADITIONAL SUDANESE SOCIETY

"God the Creator, Amma," says a Dogon fable, "asked a hyena to bring him the best thing in the world. The hyena brought him a woman. Amma then asked him to go in search of the worst thing in the world. The hyena returned once again with a woman. When Amma wanted to know the reasons for this choice, the hyena replied 'All the good and all the evil in the world come from woman.'" Amma agreed.

Thus, popular wisdom expresses one of the most profound and fixed ideas of African mentality: the ambiguity of woman. Here we will study some manifestations and consequences of such a notion in Sudanese civilization.

"All good comes from woman": she incarnates fecundity under the most general form. She gives birth and her fertility becomes the symbol of the great femininity of nature, projected into the animal and plant world. This influence being reversible,

Translated by S. Alexander.

all the fertile forces of the material universe act in a beneficent fashion for the reproduction of humankind.

The importance attached to lineage by so-called "primitive" populations is well known, and easily explicable in economic and practical terms. Children provide the first source of manpower. Soon, they help their fathers in the cultivation of the family fields, accompany them in fishing or hunting; daughters help their mothers in the long, difficult household tasks; in warlike societies—at least, such as they once were—sons are the effective warriors: "A man's influence (among the Fang of Gabon) was based more upon the number of warriors connected with him (the wife providing him with male progeny who were actually allies) than by his combative power alone; ... a man without progeny is a diminished being, an inferior Fang because he is powerless".¹

Added to this economic and social importance of progeny, is the deeper ancestral feeling of the need to survive. One must take into consideration the tragic condition of the majority of African peoples, faced with the obligation of maintaining themselves in difficult climates, on poor soil, and with limited resources. The first concern of these peoples has been to study their environment carefully in order to derive all possible useful elements from it, or else to guard themselves against the harmfulness of other elements. Hence, there emerges the sometimes astonishing extent of their awareness of the natural world, and their complicated classification systems whereby they represent it in their manifestations. But it is not sufficient to live: one must survive, and, therefore, defend the race at any price, menaced by the dramatically high rate of infantile mortality.

This preoccupation is poetically illustrated in the etymological relationship which the Dogon establish between their own name and *dogo*, the wild herb which is a symbol of vitality inasmuch as no amount of destruction can prevent it from growing again. By affirming identification with it, the Dogon people symbolically guarantee their own survival. With the same purpose in mind, they will place in the foundations of a new dwelling, alongside the fireplace, "the breathing of the house," a bulb of *Urginea*

¹ G. Balandier, *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire*, P.U.F., 1955, p. 148.

altissima Baker² which, remaining always moist in the dry season, proclaims the victory of water over drought, and life over death.

Against the ineluctable inevitability of death, the "primitive" struggles by bringing numerous children into the world and reliving in them; he seeks guarantees of his survival in the vegetable world, whose perpetual rebirth he is aware of, and identifies himself with it. Just as from harvest to harvest the vital force of the grain is perpetuated, so the dead transmit their vitality, generation after generation, to the unborn children, insuring the perennial nature of this spark of life. All the nobility of the image of "woman-mother" derives from this.

The Sudanese feel an intimate relationship between woman's fecundity and that of the earth. According to them, the human being and the cosmos are constructed in each other's image.³ In the vegetable world, this identity is particularly affirmed between woman and plants. In both of these, the Sudanese observes physiological cycles and analogous states. Thus, the flowering which precedes the ripening of fruit is considered the equivalent of female menses. The Dogon call seven types of trees whose blossoming remains invisible, "trees of the *kuño*," that is to say, of the child who was born before its mother recommenced menstruation after a preceding birth. The same obscure and mysterious work in woman and in grain, end in the formation of a child or an ear of corn, and frequently the same words express ideas of childbirth and ripening.⁴

The close links between woman and the animal world are

² Cf. G. Dieterlen, "Classification des végétaux chez les Dogon," *Journal de la Société des africanistes*, vol. XXII, 1952, p. 153, and G. Calame-Griaule, "Notes sur l'habitation du plateau central nigérien," *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'Afrique noire*, vol. XVII B No. 3-4. July 1955, p. 478.

³ Cf. M. Griaule, "L'image du monde au Soudan," *Journal de la Société des africanistes*, vol. XIX, 1949, and G. Calame-Griaule, "Culture et humanisme chez les Dogon," in *Aspects de la culture noire, Recherches et débats du Centre catholique des intellectuels français*, issue No. 24, September 1958.

⁴ For example, in Dogon, one says *ĩ nanā* for "(the woman) has given birth" or "(the tree) has given forth fruit"; to indicate the swollen ear of millet, the expression *yu bere ay* is employed "the millet is growing fat," equivalent to "being pregnant"; *den* in Bambara, *bi* in Peul, signify "child" and "fruit," etc.

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illustrated most dramatically in the role which Sudanese metaphysics consider that fish play in the conception of a child. The foetus in its mother's womb is a silure-fish swimming in maternal waters. The first image of man, intermediary between the aquatic and terrestrial kingdoms, the silure-fish is also a symbol of triumphant fecundity. The Sudanese woman consumes silure-fish, offered by her husband, at her first menstrual period and her first pregnancy.⁵ The frequent sickness during the first period of pregnancy is attributed to the odor of fish. Among other symbolic objects, the Dogon woman wears, beginning with her first childbirth, a flat, iron bracelet engraved with the image of four silure-fish holding each other by the tails, two by two; they are represented by four lozenges crossed by a striated median line of little transverse dashes, which stand for, respectively, the dorsal spine of the fish and the articulations of the child.

While being a foetal image, these four fish, at the same time, represent the four mythical silurus-fish which God placed in "the egg of the world" at the moment of creation. Now, this egg, was, in reality, a placenta, and here we may see the link between femininity and cosmic life. Out of this original placenta, veritable primitive "mother" of the world, which was divided into several parts, according to the various myths, issued the earth and the sun, both considered as essentially female entities.⁶

But the first real origin of things, even before the cosmic placenta, was the grain of *Digitaria exilis*, symbol of the atom, "substitute of all grains and symbol of the origin of life and the expansion of the universe."⁷ Now, all Bambara marriage rites

⁵ With regard to the role of fish, cf. M. Griaule, "Rôle du silure *Olarias senegalensis* dans la procréation au Soudan français," *Afrikanistische Studien*, Berlin, 1955.

⁶ With regard to Sudanese myth, see especially M. Griaule, *Dieu d'eau*, Paris, 1948; G. Dieterlen, *Essai sur la religion Bambara*, P.U.F., 1951; "Parenté et mariage chez les Dogon", *Africa*, April 1956; "Mythe et organisation sociale au Soudan français," I, *Journal de la Société des africanistes*, vol XXV, 1955, and II, vol. XXIX, 1959. A complete account of Dogon myth may be found in M. Griaule and G. Dieterlen: *Le Renard pâle* (in preparation).

⁷ G. Dieterlen, "Les rites symboliques du mariage chez les Bambara", *Zaire*, October 1954, p. 816.

express the identity of the young bride and the *fonio* grain.⁸ We find woman compared with grain, this time in a cosmic sense.

Woman, therefore, is connected with the life of the world and charged with transmitting it. This transmission does not operate only in the realm of procreation. The woman also bestows life in the form of food which renews life every day. That is why her role as mother is completed by her functions as cook and water bearer. A woman who is expert in the culinary arts will easily find a husband, while beauty and finery will not compensate for the lack of these gifts in another, and a poor cook may find herself repudiated by her husband if she fails to improve. On the other hand, in case it is the wife who holds the grievance, the husband will have to fast because she will refuse to feed him, and he himself has no right to prepare food in the village, which is the woman's domain, inasmuch as it belongs to the inhabited and cultivated land and is, therefore, fertile and feminine. Man's domain lies in the male, barren brush, where he can cook while remaining there in the course of his agricultural labors.⁹

Woman is also the water bearer since she is herself moisture and life. At her funeral, those closest to her will thank her for having attended to these humble, but sublime, tasks all her life: "Thanks for the water," they will say to her. "Thanks for the boiled millet, thanks for yesterday..."

The basic sources of food are derived from the vegetable and animal worlds. In transforming them by various means of preparation which constitutes culinary art, woman reaffirms her connection with the natural world and her mastery over it. By apportioning exactly the male and female principles of each of these food elements, she contributes toward establishing sex harmony in the world.

Thus, the mother who gave life to her children, gives it to them again every day in the form of food. But in the same way,

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 828, 829, 830, 832, 836.

⁹ With regard to the cuisine, cf. G. Dieterlen and G. Calame-Griaule, "L'alimentation dogon," *Cahiers d'études africaines*, Ecole Pratique des Hautes-Études (6th section). As for the distinction between cultivated, pure lands, and untilled, impure lands, cf. M. Griaule, *Dieu d'eau*, loc. cit., p. 94.

she renews her husband's life, substituting herself alongside him for his own mother. That is why it is said that she is also the mother of her husband. The Dogon word *yana*, "wife-mother," thus expresses all its meaning, but at the same time lends us a clue to the ambiguity of woman.

"All the evil in the world comes from her," for she is also the greatest Impurity. This is proved by the menses to which she is subject, and which is the evidence of her lack of fertility, which, though momentary, is periodic. We know the very severe interdicts to which the menstruating woman is subject in all African societies: she lives in a special house, cooks and bears water separately, she is not spoken to, and she is provisionally set apart from the group, as is evidenced by locating the house of retreat outside the built-in area. Before resuming her conjugal life, she must undergo a complete purification; among the Dogon she must anoint her entire body with vegetable oil, symbol of male semen and procreation, which will efface the traces of her provisional sterility.

This periodic impurity, however, is necessary. For the menstrual flux frees woman from evil forces, making procreation possible, just as the blood of a sacrifice is necessary to put everything back into order.¹⁰ But it is for this very reason, that even the non-menstruating woman, even one who is pregnant (which constitutes her time of maximum purity), is subject to interdictions separating her from many social manifestations, rites, or ritual objects. Besides the maskers, whom she must not look at under any pretext, because their red fibre skirts recall her impure condition, musical instruments are also forbidden her with the exception of the calabashes which are specifically feminine.¹¹ At the winter solstice, young Dogon men celebrate a virility festival in which the idea of fecundity is apparent, par-

¹⁰ Regarding the equivalents of menstrual and sacrificial blood, cf. M. Griaule, *Dieu d'eau*, loc cit., p. 182, and G. Calame-Griaule, "Note complémentaire sur le symbolisme du tambour *kunyu*", *Notes africaines*, October 1956, No. 72.

¹¹ For the reasons of this interdiction, cf. G. Calame-Griaule and B. Calame; "Introduction à l'étude de la musique africaine," *La Revue musicale*, *Carnet critique*, No. 238, Richard-Masse 1957, pp. 18-19.

ticularly in the songs.¹² Women are strictly excluded from this celebration. On this occasion they make little wooden hooks called *dommolo*, a perfectly common masculine tool, and a virility symbol as well, because of their shape.¹³ When these are made, the sticks are passed through the fire for they must be purified from any possible contact with a woman who might possibly have cut branches from the same trees.

Such details clearly reveal the notions regarding female impurity. The deep psychological explanation of it is to be sought in fear of incest, of which, myth furnishes the best example.

According to Sudanese myth,¹⁴ in fact, it was a case of incest which provoked disorder in creation and the appearance of the first menstrual flux. One of the first created beings rebelled against his father, God the Creator, and issued beforehand alone from "the egg of the world," bearing with him a bit of his placenta which became the earth; searching for his twin who had remained in the egg, he penetrated into the earth and planted there a seed of grain stolen from God. This double incestuous act (since the placenta is the equivalent of the mother) made the earth parched and sterile; she underwent her first menses which subsequently became the fate of all women.¹⁵ As for the one responsible for the incest, he was changed into an animal, condemned to divine malediction and the darkness of caves, another image of the maternal womb. Furthermore, he was forever deprived of his bride-twin, and this frustration was consecrated by circumcision, which deprived him of the help of his feminine soul.¹⁶

¹² Cf. M. Griaule, "Jeux dogon," *Travaux et mémoires de l'Institut d'ethnologie de l'Université de Paris*, (Vol. XXXII, 1938), pp. 265-269.

¹³ These bent sticks which men and boys wear suspended from their shoulders, serve in various ways: gathering fruit, light arms, etc...

¹⁴ Cf. p. 78, note 6.

¹⁵ Cf. M. Griaule, *Dieu d'eau*, loc cit., p. 29.

¹⁶ These details, only partly published thus far, will be more fully set forth in *Le Renard pâle*, by M. Griaule and G. Dieterlen.

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The double aspect of woman's personality would still seem to appear in this antithesis between shadow and light: opposite the incestuous and dark earth-mother,¹⁷ is the sun, mother-light, which God created out of the rest of the placenta taken away from the guilty one and which, after his circumcision, was reunited with the organ bearing his femininity.¹⁸

Despite her menacing shadow, it is the beneficent aspect which matters; woman constitutes the most valuable property which a social group can acquire. By increasing the number of its wives, and therefore, of its children, the group multiplies its chances of survival and prosperity. Whence, the complicated systems of payments and pre-nuptial rites, whose actual economic importance is very variable, according to the level of the population's wealth, and often reduces itself to symbolic significance. These systems extend over a large part of the individual's life, since they generally begin in childhood, marriage being arranged very early (sometimes even before birth) by the parents. "On the one hand, the marriage institution serves to guarantee the family's future, and, on the other, constitutes one of the foundations of Dogon social structure. The setting up of the family group on the land and the division of the soil is associated with the division of the women. Although the married woman remains a member of her father's *ginna*,¹⁹ and although she enjoys a certain amount of autonomy all her life, divorce being rather easily granted, Dogon marriage is, nevertheless, solidly established; from the time of her first pregnancy, the woman is introduced into her husband's *ginna* in order to guarantee the legitimacy of the child she is bearing."²⁰ And this fact, the

¹⁷ The earth, furthermore is equally ambivalent; *cf.* the contrast mentioned above between tilled and untilled lands.

¹⁸ Among the Dogon, the prepus is supposed to become symbolically transformed after the operation, into a lizard called *nay* (*Hemithéconyx caudicinctus*): *cf.* M. Griaule, "Réflexions sur les symboles soudanais," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, vol. XIII, 1952, p. 10; now, *nay* is precisely the name of the sun, and also designates the number four, a female symbol.

¹⁹ The "big house" of a joint family.

²⁰ G. Dieterlen, "Parenté et mariage chez les Dogon," *loc cit.*, p. 157.

entrance of the young bride into the joint family of her husband, so important from a social point of view, indicates clearly how basic is the concept of woman as mother and foster mother at the same time, since it coincides not only with her first pregnancy, but with her first conjugal dinner, and since her first act is to draw water from the family pond, in order to bring into the house souls of children about to be born.²¹ Even aside from particular marriage rites, all the activities of society are more or less clearly intended to promote fecundity in all of its aspects; human, animal, vegetable. For example, one will constantly find this preoccupation at funeral ceremonies which offer an occasion for much music-making. For the Sudanese, in fact, music arises out of the symbolic marriage of two principles, male and female, and is favorable to procreation; its role at funerals is symbolically to assure the birth of children who will come to replace the dead. On a social level, the ceremonies attract a large female attendance and hence promote marriages.²²

Obtaining women, therefore, is part of the machinery of social life. But what is the actual social role of the woman herself? Her withdrawal is often spoken about, her "slavery" in certain African societies; her separation from ceremonials is mentioned; her solitude in comparison with man's society which is always well organized and powerful. Without wishing to make too broad generalizations, we may affirm that in Sudanese society, at least, the withdrawal of women from public life leads to the strengthening of her domestic activity and authority, whose importance, as we have emphasized, is not only materialistic but is considered to have cosmic significance. Woman's humble role at the hearth is made sublime by the symbols of woman-sun, woman-water, woman-grain. During her life she is honored as the incarnation of these symbols; at her death, her familiar possessions, among which are the cooking gourds, receive public homage; her cotton spinning basket, after having been sprinkled with sacrificial blood, is borne by her kinsfolk about the village

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

²² With regard to this cf. G. Calame-Griaule and B. Calame, "Introduction à l'étude de la musique africaine," *loc. cit.*

square, where each of them perform a dance, holding the basket up above their heads; this final honor rendered to the deceased, exalts the mysterious work which she carried on in the house all her life,²³ a work of equal importance with the blessed labors of the farmers, symbolized by the hoe.²⁴

Woman also plays a hidden but important role in the education of children, especially girls. The mother and old women give them secret instruction, very little known by the men, on everything concerning marriage, birth of children, familial and social relationships. And it is the women who pass along, together with the secrets of their culinary art, the oral literature which serves as a vehicle for traditional knowledge, the deep symbolic meaning of which will later be revealed to the young. Besides, a feminine initiation exists which, although much less well-known than that of the men, is no less important. Certain feminine dignitaries carry out very important functions in Sudanese religious practices. Thus, there is the *yasigine*, also known among the Dogon as the "sister of the maskers," who is the only woman having the right to appear at the festivals with the men, to approach the maskers, follow them, participate in their activities, and be honored by them at her funeral.²⁵ And there is the *ammayana*, priestess of God the Creator, Amma.²⁶ Among the Bozo, a feminine dignitary is the one who "is the living witness of the *dya*, female of Faro... (and) participates in most of the Bozo rituals, notably at the time of the collective fishing and annual forging of harpoons."²⁷ At Mandé, at the time of the sep-

²³ Regarding the cosmic significance of spinning, cf. M. Griaule, *Dieu d'eau*, loc. cit., pp. 87-88.

²⁴ Here we are not dealing with the division of work between the sexes. On this question, see, among others; for the Dogon, D. Pauline, *Organisation sociale des Dogon* (Paris, Domat-Montchrestien, 1940) pp. 173-180; for the Bambara, V. Pâques, *Les Bambara* (P.U.F. 1954), pp. 64-68, etc.

²⁵ M. Griaule, "Masque dogon," *Travaux et mémoires de l'Institut d'ethnologie de l'Université de Paris*, vol. XXXIII, 1938, p. 267.

²⁶ Cf. G. Dieterlen, "Les Ames des Dogon", *Travaux et mémoires de l'Institut d'ethnologie de l'Université de Paris*, vol. XL, 1941, p. 241 ff.

²⁷ G. Dieterlen, "Mythe et organisation sociale en Afrique occidentale", II, loc. cit., p. 126.

ennial repairs of the Kangaba sanctuary, "the carrying of the soil, the plastering and painting of the sanctuary are handled by the women. Those officiating must be virgin girls of pure *Keita* race ... Two older women officiate with them... The first is a *Keita* of pure race "representing the sister (*balema muso*) of the *Keita* at the foot of the sanctuary"; she is dressed in white. The second represents the "sister" of sixteen related families, the so-called "noble captives", she is dressed in indigo. On a mythical level, one of them represents Faro's twin; the other, Mouso Koroni Koundyé, Pemba's twin. Both of them wear a white band, the sign of science and wisdom, around their foreheads."²⁸

These examples, which might be multiplied, suffice to show that woman holds an essential place in Sudanese religious rites. But the concept of woman, as we have just described it, is integrated in male-female dualism, which seems to us one of the fundamental aspects of Sudanese thought. This dualism, expressing itself in a series of antitheses such as day-night, drought-rain, disorder-order, uncultivated lands-cultivated lands, death-life, etc., is, at the same time, in opposition and complementary, and yet necessary to the equilibrium of the world. It similarly manifests itself in the classification of beings and things; most utensils and objects of daily use exist in pairs, the male and female forms being differentiated by morphological details: a pointed or rounded shape,²⁹ a characteristic more or less revealed in the "belly",³⁰ the way in which the iron head of a utensil is fastened to the handle, etc....³¹

The human being himself is not exempt from this ambi-

²⁸ G. Dieterlen, "Mythe et organisation sociale au Soudan Français," *loc. cit.*, p. 68.

²⁹ This symbolism is very general; thus, among the Dogon, the bridge of the "male" harp-lute is cut to a point, while that of the "female" is rounded. (Cf. G. Calame-Griaule and B. Calame, "Introduction à l'étude de la musique africaine," photo No. 4).

³⁰ The musical instrument referred to in our preceding note also has a rounded "womblike" female-shaped soundbox." (*Ibid.* p. 13).

³¹ Sudanese hoes, as well as axes and other digging tools, are characteristic in this respect: the "male" type has an iron head which is pushed into the wooden

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valence, since he is endowed with four pairs of souls of opposite sex, recalling the twin-like condition of man at the creation of the world; this ambivalence is socially controlled by the institutions of circumcision and excision, but during the individual's life the ambivalence is made manifest by the physical contrast between right (male) and left (female). "A certain predominance of the right hand may be observed in male acts, and of the left hand in those acts which have reference to the feminine side of the individual."³²

Inasmuch as she incarnates the hope of survival, woman has a certain advantage in the duality of the world. This notion is expressed in myth: the Monitor, son of God, who was sacrificed and resuscitated in order to repair the disorders caused by his brother's incest, possesses a privileged female side, although it shows itself in the form of mixed twins (or an androgyne).³³

On the social level, woman's superiority isn't always obviously manifested, which explains her seeming effacement. Africans are always extremely reserved in expressing their feelings, especially regarding emotional connections with women. These relationships are very restrained, as much between mother and son, father and daughter, as between husband and wife. A husband will never show his attachment for his wife by an open avowal, nor by caresses which are not engaged in by married couples, and circumscribed among young people. Affection or love is indicated by gentle speech, especially joking, an effacious assistance in work, attentiveness: a husband who accompanies his wife on her visits to other villages would be considered very much smitten with her. Often a simple gesture will clearly reveal woman's influence: among the Bambara, when a too lively dispute breaks out in a group of men, in order to re-establish harmony, it is sufficient for a woman to come silently

handle, while in the "female" type the wood is inserted into a section rounded like a vice.

³² G. Dieterlen, *Norme et latéralité chez les populations soudanaises*. Institut d'études des Relations humaines, Flammarion.

³³ For reference to the myth, *cf.* p. 78, note 6.

and place in their midst a fermentation stand, a symbol of the placenta which gave birth to all beings.³⁴

It is precisely within the discretion of such acts, within the modesty of relationships between the sexes that one must search for the immense respect which the Sudanese feels for the great principle of femininity, incarnated for him by his mother or his wife.

³⁴ Letter from Madame Dieterlen.