

THE BLACKSMITH'S TABOOS

FROM THE MAN OF IRON TO THE MAN OF BLOOD

The status of the blacksmith in tribal societies poses one of the most puzzling problems of anthropology. By a strange paradox, this noted craftsman, whose bold and meritorious services are indispensable to his community, has been relegated to a position outside the pale of society, almost as an "untouchable." Regarded as the possessor of great magical powers, held at the same time in veneration and contempt, entrusted with duties unrelated to his craft or to his inferior social status, that make of him performer of circumcision rites, healer, exorcist, peace-maker, arbiter, counsellor, or head of a cult, his figure in what may be called the "blacksmith complex," presents a mass of contradictions. These contradictions are to be met with wherever, as in the case of barbarian societies and archaic civilisations, iron ore is smelted and iron is worked, even though it is in black Africa that the enigmatic character of the blacksmith is most clearly delineated.

Translated by Simon Pleasance.

The Blacksmith's Taboos

These contradictions will enable us to interpret the phenomenon, for if they are dramatised by the exceptional position which this arch-craftsman occupies in society, they are not specifically peculiar to him. In fact the "blacksmith complex" is only one aspect of a much larger whole—made up by the facts that relate to the violation of the blood taboo.

In tribal societies, as we know, the blacksmith is surrounded by a network of prohibitions. He is isolated. The Masaï, for example, believe that the close proximity of his hut will bring down sickness, death and every kind of misfortune on his village. He must therefore live apart. Direct contact with him is avoided. The Masaï anoint their hands with fat before touching an object he has held or forged.¹ Others will hurry to wash the object,² or spit on their hands before touching it.³ Every personal belonging or piece of clothing which the blacksmith's skin has rubbed against is handed over to him.⁴ People will not eat of his food, or with him. Food separation sometimes takes on exacerbated forms. Among the Luba, for example, where the blacksmith is forbidden to participate in any operation having to do with food, he must not even take hold of a pot on the fire or touch the sticks used to stir the porridge.⁵ Sexual relations with the blacksmith and his kin are generally avoided.

All these segregation rules and prohibitions on food and sexual contacts which govern the behavior of the blacksmith and that of the rest of community towards him, are not unlike those which affect a far wider category of individuals, temporarily or permanently. This category includes, among others, bleeding people, such as women during their periods, and wounded persons, or people with open wounds, as after circumcision, people who have shed

¹ A.C. Hollis, *The Masaï, their Language and Folk-lore*, Oxford, 1905, p. 331.

² W. Cline, *Mining and Metallurgy in Negro Africa*, General Series in Anthropology, 5, Menassa, 1937, p. 114.

³ A.C. Hollis, *The Nandi, their Language and Folk-lore*, Oxford, 1909, pp. 36-37.

⁴ Tautain, "Notes sur les castes chez les Mandingues et en particulier chez les Banmanas," *Revue d'Ethnographie*, III (1884), p. 344; P. Soleillet, *Voyage au Ségou*, Paris 1887, p. 152.

⁵ W.F.P. Burton, *Luba Religion and Magic in Custom and Belief*, Tervuren, 1961, p. 119.

blood, such as executioners, warriors, murderers in general, and certain craftsmen whose occupation brings them into contact with blood, such as curriers, barbers and butchers. All these people have in common the particularity that they carry the danger of blood contagion.

As blood represents the greatest of all dangers—being the symbol of the dangers that threaten people and the evils that overtake them—it is made the object of rigorous taboos that forbid physical, and even visual contact with it.⁶ The taboo extends to those individuals who are the source of similar dangers, whether because they are themselves bleeding or because they have come into contact with blood by, voluntarily or otherwise, infringing the taboo. The blacksmith is subject to the same interdicts that affect them. Since he does not bleed himself and is not to be taken for being a murderer, it must be presumed that he falls under the blood taboo because he has violated it, in other words, because he has in some way or other come into contact with blood.

The conclusion towards which the prohibitions surrounding the blacksmith lead us, agrees with the thesis of an anthropologist who accounts for the contradictory attitudes of African peoples towards the blacksmith—attitudes of fear, contempt and approbation—by the fact that he must have violated a divine prohibition. This thesis rests on a single datum, namely the ingestion of human blood attributed to blacksmiths in Abyssinia, who are members of the hereditary caste of the *boudas*, regarded as malevolent sorcerers. The author, Pierre Clément, writes that: “Society reacts to the violation of *food taboos*, which is an imperative condition of technical success, by generally adopting this ambiguous attitude of consideration and contempt towards anyone bold enough to defy the established order by thus transgressing its most categorical injunctions.”⁷

The single example of the *boudas* gives us no reason for thinking that the violations of taboo, systematically committed by the blacksmiths as “an imperative condition of technical success” are

⁶ V.R. and L. Makarius, *L'Origine de l'Exogamie et du Totémisme*, Paris, 1961, p. 52.

⁷ P. Clément, “Le Forgeron en Afrique Noire,” *Revue de Géographie Humaine et d'Ethnographie*, No. 2, April-June 1948, pp. 35-38, p. 41, note (Underlined by us).

The Blacksmith's Taboos

a violation of food prohibitions. On the contrary, we have good reason to believe that the transgression of "one of the most categorical injunctions" of the established order is a violation of the most general prohibition, namely the blood taboo; in short, a violation consisting in the handling of blood by the blacksmith.

*

An examination of the ethnographical data concerning the blacksmith reveals in fact that he ritually violates the blood taboo, not by drinking blood or making others drink it, like the *boudas*, but by performing blood rites during smelting operations, for the precise purpose of achieving success. This, it is believed, gave rise to beliefs similar to those concerning the *boudas*.

According to an observer of the Zulus, blacksmiths of the Cape and Natal in the last century had to do their smelting in prescribed places, far from their home and forge. For the ore to yield its precious metal, it was necessary to sprinkle it with human fat during the smelting operations, and the fat, to be procured, necessitated human killing. The fact was well known and accounted for numerous disappearances, attributed to supernatural beings (*Ntswelaboya*) believed to be in league with the blacksmith. Actually, suspicion centred on the blacksmith himself, and for this reason his *kraal* was usually relegated far into the bush.⁸ This clearly indicates that murders were committed to ensure the success of the smelting.

A similar indication is given by W. B. Hambly with regard to the Ovimbundu blacksmiths who have the custom of placing one or more wooden figures, considered essential for their work, near the anvil. "I have been told," he writes, "that the blacksmith owes his skill to the spirit of a person he has killed, which resides in the wooden figure ... This ritual murder is impossible now, but the wooden figures are still used in the way described."⁹

Among the Ader blacksmiths, in the Hausa country, "one can, to ensure success, ally oneself to a genie of the bush who takes possession of the life force of a member of the chief's

⁸ A.T. Bryant, *The Zulu People*, Pietermaritzburg 1949, p. 389.

⁹ W.B. Hambly, "Occupational Ritual in the Ovimbundu," *American Anthropologist* (AA), XXXVI (1934), pp. 164-5.

family—the chief being a master of the technique of smelting—and gradually exhausts it. Death occurs the day after the first night of smelting.”¹⁰ In this case, the violation of the blood taboo takes the form of the murder of a consanguine, which best characterises the violation of taboo.

When an Achewa (Nyasaland) blacksmith wants to construct an oven, he provokes the abortion of a woman in order to put the foetus into the hole over which the furnace will be built. The Atonga have the habit of putting part of the placenta in their furnaces in order to accelerate the smelting.¹¹ Foetal matter is likened to blood and covered by the same taboo.

The belief that it is necessary to add blood or matter issuing from the human body to the iron ore, in order to ensure the success of the smelting, is not limited to Africa. A Chinese myth relates how a blacksmith told his wife that his master, wishing to have a sword cast, killed a girl and married her to the genie of the furnace. The wife threw herself into the furnace and the casting was accomplished. In another myth, a blacksmith, commissioned to make two swords, had been unable to smelt the ore after three months' work. His wife reminded him that for the transformation of holy matter to take place a human sacrifice was required in principle. The blacksmith told her that his own master had achieved the smelting only by throwing himself and his wife into the furnace. They thereupon threw locks of their hair and parings of their nails into the furnace as parts of themselves.¹²

The Assyrians seem to have shared the beliefs of the ancient Chinese and the Africans. Assyrian texts, dating from the first millenary B.C., contain suggestions as to what the magic rites of the ancient miners and blacksmiths might have involved, namely, fetuses and virgins' blood.¹³

¹⁰ E. Echard, “Notes sur les forgerons de l’Ader,” *Journal de la Société des Africanistes (JSA)*, XXXV (1965), fasc. II, p. 362.

¹¹ A.G.O. Hodgson, “Notes on the Achewa and Angoni of the Dowa District of the Nyasaland Protectorate,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (JAI)*, LXIII (1933), p. 119.

¹² M. Granet, *Danses et Légendes de la Chine Ancienne*, Paris 1926, vol. II, pp. 500-502. See also M. Eliade, *Forgerons et Alchimistes*, Paris, 1956, pp. 68-70.

¹³ V. Gordon Childe, *What happened in History*, London, 1964, p. 78.

The Blacksmith's Taboos

Facts of a different order likewise indicate that a taboo is violated during smelting or in the forge. They refer to the incompatibility between work in iron and bleeding women, in particular, and, by extension, women in general and sexual relations. In many cases ordinary women, menstruating women or women who have just given birth, must not go near the forge or places where smelting is in progress. Sometimes men who have recently had sexual relations are forbidden access to the forge, as at Fouta Djallon, where a white flag planted near the furnaces warns travellers in a state of pollution, that they must avoid the place, under pain of contracting a fatal illness.¹⁴

These incompatibilities, which crop up constantly in connection with the violation of the blood taboo, suggest three types of explanation which are not exclusive of one another: 1) the presence of bleeding women or, by extension, of a pollution of feminine origin, being a violation of taboo, would nullify that perpetrated deliberately by the blacksmith, on the principle that two violations of taboo cancel each other; 2) the bloody character of the forge spells danger to a woman who, already bleeding, is considered all the more vulnerable to the danger of blood; 3) the bloody character of women represents a danger to the blacksmith, who is already exposed to the danger of blood by being a violator of taboo—all of which does not escape being in contradiction with a kind of immunity which his role as a violator of taboo gives him in other respects.

*

Why, one must ask, should the violation of the blood taboo ensure the success of siderurgical operations? The answer, indicating that the violation of the blood taboo confers magic powers ensuring success in one's undertakings, clearly involves another problem, namely that of the relation between the violation of taboo and magic powers. The problem is thus placed at a more general level. One must explain why blood, that most dangerous of all substances, with which contact is normally forbidden, is in certain cases regarded as powerfully beneficent, and why contact

¹⁴ B. Seikhou, "Les forgerons au Fouta Djallon," *L'Education Africaine*, 24^e année, No. 90-91, April-Sept. 1935, pp. 157-158.

with it is therefore sought. Among certain peoples, where the blood taboo and in particular the menstrual taboo are observed, the men sometimes rub their chests with menstrual blood, believing that this will make their enterprises successful. In certain societies, girls in puberty, while considered dangerous, are also supposed to bestow health, good fortune and longevity. How is one to interpret these facts which so flagrantly contradict the best-established customs?

The answer to this question was broached by Frazer, Durkheim, Briffault and, more recently, by Roger Caillois.¹⁵ The dangerous, maleficent power of blood produces useful and beneficent effects when directed against hostile beings and influences in order to imperil, repel and annihilate them. Thus, among European peasants, a menstruating woman is, even today, sometimes made to run through the fields to destroy harmful insects. A blood talisman, a weapon impregnated with the power of blood, a medicine based on blood or organic matter, all these have the power of paralysing or putting to flight an enemy army. In a Pueblo tale from Santo Domingo, magical bees, born from boiling menstrual blood, are directed in single file against enemy soldiers, whom they sting in the eyes, thus causing their defeat.¹⁶ The Tinné Indians attach rags impregnated with menstrual blood to the neck of a puny child to protect him from disease.¹⁷ Among the most diverse peoples, a petticoat stained with menstrual blood is supposed to keep marauders away from the plantations.

Now, it is difficult to distinguish between what protects from evil and what procures good: the elimination of illness is confused with health; the removal of accidents is not easily distinguished from good fortune, and the defeat of an enemy army represents victory. One passes from a negative conception of the power of blood ("*blood removes everything that is bad*"), to a positive conception of its power ("*blood gives everything that is good*"). The result is an *over-determination* of the power of blood, super-added to its capacity to remove evil, namely, that of producing

¹⁵ *L'Homme et le Sacré*, Paris, 1939, 3rd edition, pp. 38-39; p. 52 f; p. 130.

¹⁶ L.A. White, *The Pueblo of Santo Domingo*, New Mexico (Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association, No. 43, 1935, pp. 181-2).

¹⁷ J. Jetté, "On the Superstitions of the Ten'a Indians," *Anthropos*, VI (1911), p. 257.

The Blacksmith's Taboos

positive good, such as health, good luck and victory as well as success, wealth, prosperity and all that is desirable. As these extensions are abusive and not on a level with consciousness, the beneficent capacity of blood, which is not distinct from its dangerous and malignant character, remains mysterious. Blood will confer all its benefits *magically*: the power of blood is the power of magic in its fullest sense, *mana*. The ambivalent character of *mana* thus reveals its origin: it derives not so much from the fact that the maleficent force of blood can be usefully turned against an adversary, as from the *over-determination* of the power of blood, which converts a force, originally conceived only as negative, defensive and protective, into one that gives positive results.

To appropriate the power of blood and use it for a given purpose has the meaning of seeking, touching and handling it, and therefore violating the taboo which forbids contact with it. As blood is the basic substance of magic, violation of the blood taboo is a magical act, in the fullest sense of the word. But it is an extremely dangerous one, resorted to only to obtain important results. It is an act which, by definition, must remain exceptional and unique. Since the violation of taboo draws its strength from that of the taboo itself, the latter must be generally respected. The magic of transgression which is both antithetical and supplementary to imitative magic, develops as a ritual practice in those societies where the fear of blood is no longer omnipotent (because they have attained a stage of development raising them above dependence on blind observance of taboos), but where the taboo still has a compulsive and unchallenged influence, as in certain African societies on the threshold of barbarism and acquainted with work in iron.

*

Violation of the blood taboo thus gives the violator magic powers. The blacksmith is in fact often considered a magician. The Mongols have the same word for shaman and blacksmith.¹⁸ A well-known Siberian saying runs: "The blacksmith and the shaman are

¹⁸ R. Briffault, *The Mothers*, London, 1927, vol. II, p. 535 (quoting Czaplicka).

from the same nest."¹⁹ The Yakut, comparing smiths with black shamans regard smiths as more powerful.²⁰ In general it is his offensive, malignant force that is pointed out. The Dinka of the Sudan consider the blacksmith particularly suited to give the evil eye.²¹ The Abyssinian blacksmith is the object of the same belief. "Not long ago, writes Griaule, he would come, his feet in chains, and the person in need of his services would take all sorts of major precautions to ward off imaginary dangers."²²

The same dangerous force invests his tools, giving them the faculty of keeping thieves away. The Waschagga, for example, ask the blacksmith for pieces of old blast-pipes to put in their huts as a charm against robbery;²³ the Kikuyu do the same to protect their crops,²⁴ just as the Dogon place the clothes of a woman, who has died in childbirth, in the fields to keep marauders at bay.²⁵

The same power makes the blacksmith's curse something to be feared.²⁶ The Nandi regard it as "fatal," the Kikuyu as "particularly mordant and adhesive."²⁷ The Waschagga blacksmith pronounces solemn curses beating two hammers together, which is enough to inspire fear.²⁸ It is the same force which gives weight to their oaths pronounced over the anvil, for it will chastise perjurers. These oaths are found among the Khassombé, the Bambara, the Haussas, the Tiv, etc. At Fouta Djallon, the blacksmith is believed if he swears by his forge, his anvil or his ancestors.²⁹

¹⁹ W. Sieroszewski, "Du Chamanisme d'après les croyances des Yakoutes," *Revue d'histoire des religions*, XLVI (1902), p. 319.

²⁰ W. Jochelson, "The Yakut," (Anthrop. Pap. AMNH 33, 1931), p. 106.

²¹ S.L. Cummins, "Sub-tribes of the Bahr-el-Ghazal Dinkas," *JAI*, XXXIV (1904), p. 159.

²² M. Griaule, "Le travail en Abyssinie," *Revue Internationale du Travail*, vol. XXIII, Feb. 2nd, 1931, p. 11.

²³ B. Gutmann, "Der Schmied und seine Kunst im animistischen Denken," in *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 1912, pp. 81-93, p. 85.

²⁴ Cline, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

²⁵ Denise Paulme, *L'Organisation sociale des Dogon*, Paris, 1940, p. 158 & pp. 534-5.

²⁶ For the relation of curse with blood, V.R. & L. Makarius, *op. cit.*, p. 63 ff.

²⁷ Cline, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

²⁸ Gutmann, *loc. cit.*

²⁹ Seikhou, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

The Blacksmith's Taboos

When this power is used against evil spirits, the blacksmith appears in the role of exorcist. B. Seikhou thus recounts how, at Fouta, people resort to these artisans to chase away evil spirits from cultivated ground. For the occasion they wear red robes and, on behalf of their venerable master, beg the *djinn*s to be gone. The noise of hammers and the presence of the forge brought over temporarily to a place are considered the most efficacious means of exorcism.³⁰

The blacksmith likewise has the faculty of warding off illness and thus of healing. The Yakut say that he is capable of healing by his natural means and not, as the shamans, through the assistance of spirits.³¹ For many African peoples, he is a doctor and healer, a maker of medicines, who cures through contact with iron objects.

In all the cases we have enumerated, the magic powers of the blacksmith have an offensive and defensive character. They ward off and exorcise evil. If they act favorably it is because they are directed against what is harmful, but in general they do not seem to bestow such positive benefits as good luck, success, prosperity and wealth. One could say that, in the case of the blacksmith, the development of the power of blood from the negative to the positive, which we have studied above, spends itself in the professional achievements it seeks, in the power to make the smelting successful, in perfecting the products of his work without difficulty, and in forging efficient weapons. Hubert and Mauss, who write that "all blacksmiths are at least virtual magicians,"³² are thus intuitively correct. The "virtuality" of a complete display of the magic powers of blood does, indeed, exist, but it clashes with the necessity of channeling the power obtained by the violation of taboo, in the direction intended by the violator, which is his own technical success. Once more, we see how *intention* moulds the plastic substance of magic conceptions.

*

The same dangerous force—of blood—which is emitted by the

³⁰ *Id.* p. 152.

³¹ Jochelson, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

³² In M. Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, Paris 1964, p. 21.

blacksmith, the places where he works, as well as his tools, invests the product of his work: iron. The contradictory characteristics of this metal, which have been a real head-ache for anthropologists, are thus explained. One can now understand why it was considered impure by the ancient Egyptians, who defined it by resorting to a paraphrase.³³ Likewise, for certain Siberian peoples "iron contained a mysterious and repellent force."³⁴ The fact is that it is as "impure" and "repellent" as the blood with which it is identified.

Not only is this mystery no longer one, but it follows quite naturally that the substance considered impure and repellent should serve as an antidote against ill-luck and misfortune as well. The Magahiya Doms in India have a horror of iron, but recognise its power to scare away demons;³⁵ the same belief can be found in other parts of India, in Ceylon and Scotland.³⁶ European peasants nail a horseshoe above their frontdoor or to their barn to keep evil away. In Siberia iron is "the greatest protection against hostile forces."³⁷ The habit we have of "touching iron" is doubtless a survival of these beliefs.

Like the blacksmith himself, his product, iron seems to have retained above all the offensive and defensive character of the magic power of blood. This is perhaps due to a particularity of the violation of the blood taboo which the blacksmith commits, namely, that this act not only has the general aim of ensuring the success of his operations, but also of rendering the weapons he forges more efficacious. Weapons have to keep the enemy at bay, they have to repel and destroy them. Through the violation of the blood taboo involved in their fabrication, the blacksmith endows them with their offensive and destructive force, the maleficent force inherent in blood. This fact, however, does not remove from either the blacksmith or the iron the ambivalence attributed

³³ Herodotus, *Tales*, book II.

³⁴ Evelyne Lot-Falck, "Les Chamanisme en Sibérie," *Revue Internationale*, Aug. 1946, p. 96.

³⁵ W. Crooke, *An Introduction to the Popular Religion of Northern India*, London 1896, Vol. II, p. 12.

³⁶ Crooke, *op. cit.* Vol. I, pp. 24-25; W.L. Hildburgh, "Notes on Sinhalese Magic," *JAI*, XXXVIII (1908), pp. 151-2.

³⁷ E. Lot-Falck, *Les Rites de chasse chez les peuples sibériens*, Paris 1953, p. 96.

The Blacksmith's Taboos

to blood. As Mircea Eliade says: "Like any sacred object, iron is at once dangerous and beneficent. The ambivalent attitude towards metals and blacksmiths is more or less generally attested."³⁸ But if iron is ambivalent (as any sacred object doubtlessly is) it is for a definite reason, namely that it shares the ambivalence of blood.

The equivalence between iron and blood makes it possible to explain a certain number of other facts concerning iron, and first of all the prohibitions relating to iron instruments and the use of this metal in general. It becomes easier to understand why the use of iron knives is sometimes prohibited in circumcisions and sacrifices, why hunters and fishermen are sometimes forbidden to use them, and why the Roman and Sabine priests were not supposed to shave with iron blades.³⁹ As iron is associated with blood, the use of iron involves the risk of shedding blood. Its use is proscribed when there is a danger of bloodshed, as in the first two cases, or where blood should not be spilled, as is probably the case in the last example.

Another class of prohibitions may also be explained similarly. In certain places, or during certain rites, iron objects are banned, and it is forbidden to carry iron instruments. In the Waschagga rites of blood fraternisation, for example, the participants were not supposed to carry iron objects; this would have neutralised the effect of the contract. The prohibition was therefore secretly violated by those who had no intention of respecting the oath taken.⁴⁰ On the principle that two violations of taboo cancel each other out, the presence of a blood equivalent annuls the power of blood sought after to strengthen the brotherhood bond.

The assimilation of iron to blood results, first, from the violative use of blood in siderurgical operations; but it is also enhanced by sensory associations between blood, iron and fire.

Blood and fire evoke each other. In a myth, a Dogon, passing in front of some fibres reddened by menstrual blood following an act of incest, exclaims: "Is it the sun? is it fire? What a strange

³⁸ M. Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

³⁹ For the taboos on the use of iron, V.J. Cazeneuve, *Les Rites et la condition humaine*, Paris 1958, p. 64.

⁴⁰ Gutmann, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

thing!”—“It is not the sun; it is not fire, it is a fresh thing!”⁴¹

Molten metal that flows is associated with flowing blood because of its color, heat and the danger that arises from it. The Luba roughly model their furnace in the shape of a woman, sometimes adding clay breasts; they extract the metal in such a way as to represent birth.⁴² When a young Nyakyusa girl reaches puberty, people say: “the molten metal is flowing, the blood to procreate children has come.”⁴³ The same author writes: “The working of iron and coition are considered the same thing, and the molten iron gushing from the forge is compared to menstrual blood.”⁴⁴ In the case of the Kotako in the North Cameroons, the Laguané word for iron means literally “blood of fire.”⁴⁵

*

There now remains to be examined another group of customs related to the blacksmith, namely, his functions of arbiter, intermediary and peace-maker. Anthropologists, like the tribesmen themselves, are inclined to trace these functions to the alliance that binds blacksmiths to the tribes who accept them. “Manding blacksmiths,” writes H. Labouret, “enjoy a privileged social position; because their services are often sought, they are the *sananku u* of every group, and for this reason are obliged to act as intermediaries in many a transaction and conflict.”⁴⁶

Actually, it is not as *sananku u* that the blacksmith carries out his functions, but by virtue of the *non-violence* taboos that apply to him. The connection is brought out in another of Labouret's texts: “Formerly,” he says, “the blacksmith was the messenger who declared war, because he could visit the enemy camp *without fear of violence*. He was also qualified to arrange peace talks and

⁴¹ M. Griaule, *Masques Dogon*, Paris 1938, p. 53.

⁴² Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

⁴³ Monica Wilson, *Rituals of Kinship among the Nyakyusa*, Oxford 1957, p. 104.

⁴⁴ M. Wilson, *Communal Rituals of the Nyakyusa*, London 1959, p. 153.

⁴⁵ Annie Masson-Detourbet, “Croyances relatives à l'organisation politique du royaume Laguané,” *JSA*, XXIII (1953), p. 25 note 4.

⁴⁶ H. Labouret, *Les Mandingues et leur langue*, Paris 1934, p. 106.

The Blacksmith's Taboos

solemnly conclude peace treaties, in symbolical ceremonies presided over by him."⁴⁷

But what are the *non-violence* taboos and why do they apply to the blacksmith?

We have introduced these terms to define various forms of behavior that have not hitherto been recognised as constituting a category apart, forms of behaviour which have in common that they preclude the possibility of using, undergoing or witnessing violence. Such behaviour refers to chiefs who may not go to war, carry or even look at weapons; to persons in whose presence nobody may raise a hand to strike, and who may not be made slaves or prisoners; to children who may not be hit and to whom nothing may be refused; to situations in which it is forbidden to fight or carry arms that have not been blunted or covered up; and lastly, to places where no act of violence is permitted, and no living being, human or animal, may be hunted or captured. The facts of ethnography show that these *non-violence* taboos are always connected with the danger of blood, or the presence of beings or objects carrying this danger. We know that when there is a danger of blood, bloodshed must be avoided because it is liable to provoke further and still more serious cases of bloodshed. Violence brings with it the risk of bloodshed and may not therefore be resorted to in these circumstances.

Other forms of behavior may be related to the one we have just mentioned. People who may not use violence are unable to defend their property, they may not oppose resistance, and so are liable to be plundered. On the other hand, those who are in their presence and who therefore may not use violence, can be plundered by them. The possibility of appropriating the goods of another with impunity, which is a consequence of the situation created by *non-violence*, is expressed by its corollary, "ritual pillage." In both cases it is a question of symbolic behavior, with the aim of pointing to the presence of a danger of blood.

We know that by violating the blood taboo, an individual is considered a bearer of the danger of blood, in the same way as those who are materially polluted by blood. People in this presence—and this is in itself enough to put them in danger—must

⁴⁷ H. Labouret, *Paysans d'Afrique Occidentale*, Paris 1941, p. 132 (underlined by us).

not allow blood to flow, for blood letting in this condition is dangerous. They will therefore avoid acts of violence. But by an extension of the fear that the person under taboo inspires, his blood will be regarded as the principal agent of the danger feared, and must not be shed at any cost. The individual under taboo must not therefore use violence or be subjected to it in any form whatsoever.

Blacksmiths do not fight. Those living among the Rwala bedouins never make war and never take part in a raid. Even when the camp where they live is attacked, they continue their work indifferent to the fighting and do nothing to defend themselves or their neighbors.⁴⁸ The Waschagga forbid the blacksmith to go to war with them.⁴⁹ Among the Teda of the Sahara it is a serious crime to strike or kill a blacksmith.⁵⁰ In the Kaarta blacksmiths are not liable to the death penalty.⁵¹ When Samory had all his prisoners shot, he was content to cut off the hands of the "griots" (musicians) and release the blacksmiths.⁵² Commenting on the case of a young blacksmith who was captured and then released, Labouret attributes this privilege to the fact that these craftsmen "designated to act as peace makers in time of war and reconcile adversaries in a brawl," "are regarded as benefactors by their community." They must therefore come to no harm.⁵³ But once again one must not hesitate to invert the proposition. The blacksmith is not subject to the taboo of "non-violence" because of the role he fulfils in society, but he fulfils the role of peace-maker because of the taboo. When the blacksmith is present and the danger of blood inherent in his person weighs on the audience, a brawl or a clash of arms or any act of violence involve greater danger of bloodshed. In his presence arms are dropped and fights and squabbles cease. He who, by his presence alone, thus renders any

⁴⁸ A. Musil, *The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins*, New York 1928, pp. 281-2.

⁴⁹ Gutmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-91.

⁵⁰ W.G. Sumner & A.G. Keller, *The Science of Society*, New Haven 1927, vol. IV, p. 41, quoting Rohlf's.

⁵¹ Tautain, *Notes sur les Castes*, p. 345.

⁵² M.L. Archinard, "La Fabrication du Fer au Soudan," *Revue d'Ethnographie*, III (1884), p. 255.

⁵³ H. Labouret, "Sacrifices humains en Afrique Occidentale," *JSA*, 11, 1941, p. 196.

The Blacksmith's Taboos

violence impossible, becomes perforce a peace-maker, and assumes the functions of arbiter and intermediary.

Among the Dogon a fight will stop when the blacksmith approaches. He listens to both parties and places his small hammer beside the one who is in the right. His decision is irrevocable ... Likewise he settles conflicts between husband and wife and will beg a father (who cannot refuse him) to pardon his son ...⁵⁴

Among the Bobo ... “ ... they alone have the power to intervene in a village brawl; they beat on little iron rods and invite the combatants to calm down; whoever does not listen to them is tied up. The blacksmiths have the right to take everything from the house of the recalcitrant.”⁵⁵

This ritual “right to take” is also illustrated by the following example. Among the Ewe of Western Africa, the blacksmiths had the right to take and eat all the chickens belonging to the inhabitants. The owners would not resist for fear of displeasing them and preventing them from continuing their work.⁵⁶ The Masai, on the other hand, may seize the meagre booty which the blacksmiths bring back from their raids.⁵⁷ The fact that among the Rwala bedouins the blacksmith has a “brother” in every tribe, with the duty of recuperating all the goods stolen from him,⁵⁸ seems to show that, since he may not use violence, the blacksmith is liable to be plundered. He therefore enters into blood brotherhood with a member of each tribe, who may use violence in his stead.

It is noteworthy that in other cases the operation of the same ideas produces opposite results. The blacksmith's property is inviolable. No one would dare to steal anything from inside his forge. The result is that other people's goods are stored there. Among the Waschagga⁵⁹ and the Akamba,⁶⁰ the blacksmith may leave his belongings and tools unprotected without risk.

⁵⁴ D. Paulme, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

⁵⁵ P. Guebard, *Notes contributives à l'étude de la religion, des mœurs et des coutumes des Bobo du cercle de Koyru*, Paris 1925, p. 134; and J. Cremer, *Matériaux d'ethnographie et de linguistique soudanaise*, III, Paris 1924, p. 128, quoted by Paulme in *Id.*

⁵⁶ R. Thurnwald, *L'Economie primitive*, Paris 1937, p. 182.

⁵⁷ Cline, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-115.

⁵⁸ Musil, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-2.

⁵⁹ Gutmann, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

⁶⁰ G. Lindblom, *The Akamba*, Uppsala 1919-20, p. 529.

The inviolability of the forge seems moreover to be well established. For the Lango “the forge is an unviolable place; no one may enter it by force and rob it.”⁶¹ At Fouta Djallon “the forge is a sacred place, not only for those who work it but for the people as well. There, one may make *salaam* and village affairs are treated.”⁶² In Liberia it is a place of refuge: “A person forced into a palaver or even implicated in a murder can run to the forge and take refuge there. At Mano, once a person seeking refuge is inside, the palaver is ‘dead.’ It is forbidden to fight there, under penalty of having to pay a sheep ... In the South East one may not hold a palaver in the forge. The contending parties have to go to another part of the town and come to a peaceful agreement.”⁶³ “Blood must not be shed in the forge.” If this happens, whoever has shed it must bring a fowl, whose blood will be spilled to free the forge from the evil spell.⁶⁴ In other words, bloodshed in the forge constitutes a danger, against which one immunises oneself by an act of “blood redemption”: the blood of the fowl is spilled as a substitute forestalling the more serious shedding of blood that is feared. At Mano, during the initiation of an apprentice, the blacksmith sacrifices a chicken with the words: “Whatever blood ‘runs’ in the forge, the blood of the fowl is for it.”⁶⁵

Why is it feared that blood should “run” in the forge? Because the forge is considered a place where the danger of blood is immanent on account of the blacksmith’s violations of the blood taboo, and thus a place where bloodshed can assume fearful proportions and bring forth disastrous results. Here we come back to the other prescriptions we have already noted—keeping women at a distance, forbidding sexual relations—which arise from identical fears.

Let us note in passing that these facts seem to throw light on the origin and nature of the so-called places of “refuge” or sanctuaries apart from the forge. As blood must not be shed in these places, violence may not be used, and those who have access to

⁶¹ Cline, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁶² B. Seikhou, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

⁶³ G. Schwab, *Tribes of the Liberian Hinterland*, Anthr. Pap. of the Peabody Museum, vol. XXXI, 1947, p. 142.

⁶⁴ *Id.*, pp. 141-2.

⁶⁵ *Id.*, p. 144.

The Blacksmith's Taboos

them are protected from pursuit: they are *intangible*. The immunity they enjoy is equivalent to impunity. It is noteworthy that these "refuges," asylums, places of mercy, where weapons fall to the ground, and peace prevails, these sacred sites, destined later to contain shrines, owe their characteristics not to divine blessing but to some bloody pollution that evokes fear and paralyzes all violent action. These places, which become blessed, were originally charged with extreme impurity.⁶⁶

*

Fear of seeing the blacksmith's blood being shed is certainly important. Among the Waschagga no one marries the blacksmith's daughter because she could cause her husband to die prematurely, "*because the blacksmith's blood is harmful.*"⁶⁷ In other words, the blood of the blacksmith's daughter which flows during defloration, menstruation and childbirth, is feared even more than that of other women. And the text continues: "There is the fear that in a moment of anger the husband might strike his wife causing her to bleed and that this will endanger him and force him to make expiatory sacrifices if he wants to stay alive."⁶⁸ The danger of blood reappears *linked to an act of violence*, as well as the necessity of an act of redemption. It is evidently the female blacksmith's blood that is feared, because any marriage involves the risk of the husband losing his temper and coming to blows with his wife. It is said: "*If you make a blacksmith bleed, you shall die.*" "The blacksmith's blood," it is added, "is as dangerous as that of the clan of chiefs, and as the blood of an uncle for his nephew, whatever the clan."⁶⁹

We already know why the blacksmith's blood is feared to the extent where one fears for one's own life if one makes him bleed. But why do the Waschagga compare the danger represented by the blacksmith's blood to that of the uncle's blood for his nephew? Because it happens sometimes that the fear felt in the presence

⁶⁶ Cfr. Caillois, *op. cit.*, p. 41-2.

⁶⁷ B. Gutmann, *op. cit.*, p. 90. Cf. with the thesis of R. & L. Makarius, deriving the motivation of the prohibition of incest from the fear of feminine blood. *Op. cit.*, p. 64 ff.

⁶⁸ Gutmann, *id.*

⁶⁹ Gutmann, *id.*

of someone carrying the danger of blood gives rise to the same fear that is felt in the presence of individuals to whom one is bound by a tie of organic interdependence, since everyone considers himself affected by the ills and dangers that overtake his blood relatives.

Between the blacksmith and other people there is no real bond of interdependence because the blacksmith is not a blood relative; but the danger resides in the fact that he is an individual who carries the danger of blood, having violated a taboo. Between uncle and nephew, this particularly dangerous quality does not exist, since neither, in principle, carries the danger of blood. The danger springs from the bond of organic interdependence that binds them, through their consanguinity, which, carried symbolically to its highest pitch, makes each afraid of the other's blood being shed. The impossibility of using violence between a uterine uncle and nephew gives rise to the appropriation of the property of the one by the other—a form of "ritual pillage" which is well known but has not been explained.⁷⁰

These two situations—that existing between the blacksmith and the rest of his community and that between uncle and nephew—have different causes but are apt to be confused owing to the similar fears they engender. In a certain way, like effects suggest like causes. This is all the more understandable as all the taboos on physical contact, contiguity, and alimentary and sexual relations, which those under the blood taboo must observe, aim at preventing the setting up of bonds of interdependence between them and others. Thus, just as an infectious disease raises body temperature, so does the imminence of the danger of blood give rise not only to a fear similar to that caused by organic interdependence, but also gives rise to the impression of being in organic interdependence with the person who is the source of danger.

This fear does not however stop members of the group from contracting artificial brotherhood with the blacksmith, thus entering deliberately into organic interdependence with him. For the blacksmith makes arms and tools for the farmers, hunters and breeders who surround him, and they must give him the food he needs. A Basongué (Congo) legend relates how the First Black-

⁷⁰ Cf. Makarius, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.

The Blacksmith's Taboos

smith approached some Batwa hunters who gathered around him, attracted by the desire to obtain knives, arrows and hatchets in exchange for game. The fact that he had set up his forge on a rock in the river is perhaps a reminder of his relative isolation.⁷¹

These exchanges, which establish economic interdependence in addition to the participation in common food by the blacksmith's consumption of the nourishment given him by members of the group, creates a situation which is subjectively felt as one of organic interdependence. This situation is often consecrated by the establishment of artificial bonds of brotherhood by a blood pact.

"The blacksmiths," writes D. Paulme, quoting Labouret, "are the *sananku u* of every group." The *sananku-ya* is an alliance which at the same time unites and opposes the representatives of given groups.⁷²

The contradiction between the fear which interdependence with the blacksmiths inspires and effective alliance with them is apparent in the case of the Rwala. Among these bedouins a blacksmith and his family may not be adopted by the clan even if they have camped with it from time immemorial, because the *sunna'* are always outsiders. But it is also said that the blacksmiths have a brother in each tribe.⁷³ This is clearly a form of artificial brotherhood.

A document that demonstrates both the fear which an alliance with the blacksmith inspires, and the necessity of such an alliance gives the following myth: one day a Fulani saw a "monkey who was forging;" he took care of the monkey's cow which gave birth to a whole herd, and the Fulani's family and the monkey-blacksmith's family fed off the same milk. In exchange, the blacksmith gave the Fulani tools. They were therefore already economically interdependent before they formed a blood alliance which, according to the myth, was non-intentional. Their blood mixed as the Fulani shaved the blacksmith, and the latter in turn circumcised him. They swore by the mixture that under no cir-

⁷¹ A. Moeller, *Les grandes lignes des migrations des Bantous*, Bruxelles 1936, p. 451.

⁷² D. Paulme, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

⁷³ Musil, *op. cit.*, p. 281-2.

cumstances would they harm one another or their descendants. Never again would a Fulani shed a drop of a blacksmith's blood, or vice versa. Henceforth the Fulani and the blacksmith must live in *seninkou* (a blood alliance) and get along without doing each other harm. Later, a double rite of exchange of blood and food community sanctioned this state of affairs.⁷⁴

This leads us to the heart of one of those contradictions in which primitive thought is held fast by virtue of its magic conceptions. The blacksmith, as carrier of the danger of blood, is feared and so also, in consequence, is the bond of interdependence with him. But as some kind of interdependence is established as soon as exchanges take place between the blacksmith and those round him, it is felt that a blood alliance, in its most complete and compulsive form, offers refuge and protection after all against the danger which is feared, since those who are interdependent must not shed one another's blood. The myth thus underlines the irrevocability of the obligations resting with both parties, namely that bloodshed must be avoided at all costs and under any circumstances. The danger that threatens the transgressor is the unceasing danger of blood, the danger of bleeding to death. Paradoxically, the alliance which artificially creates the bond of interdependence appears as the safeguard against the danger that makes this interdependence a thing to be feared.

One can thus unravel the curious dialectic of the relationship between the blacksmith and the members of the group of which he is guest. The fear he inspires creates an impression of interdependence with him. This supposed interdependence exists within a real economic interdependence, because the blacksmith lives of necessity in symbiosis with the farmer and cattle-breeder. Economic interdependence is built up in the shape of a blood alliance, despite the resistance of magical thought to the establishment of such a tie. We may therefore say that the necessities of life "sort out" different magical motivations, retaining as a basis for durable customs only those which "satisfy their needs," while the other motivations (in this case the fear of interdependence) do not disappear, but survive in contradiction with them.

⁷⁴ P.E.N. Doumbia, "Etude du clan des Forgerons," *Bulletin du Comité d'Etudes Historiques et Scientifiques de l'A.O.F.*, 1936, pp. 362-375. For the interdependence created by the alimentary community, v. Makarius, *op. cit.*, p. 91 f.

The Blacksmith's Taboos

*

The foregoing analysis bears on the disguise in which the economic, social role of the blacksmith manifests itself. The tribal group views the blacksmith's activities and its relation to him through the prism constituted by imaginary ideas.

We have seen how magical thought, directed to meet social needs, works in favor of the blacksmith, carving for him a social position to the measure of his economic importance. As the ally of certain groups, his forge is an inviolable place; he is not exposed to the dangers of war; he has acquired the status of peace-maker, intermediary and arbiter; he performs important ritual duties, he is recognised as possessing magic powers which inspire fear and respect. He often gives counsel to chiefs (in myths and ritual he even appears as their superior). The magical motivations we have examined serve therefore to justify, on both the magical and social levels, the prestige he comes to enjoy, in reality, on account of his productive value. Furthermore, as is shown by the examples quoted, the mechanism of non-violence ensures the physical protection of an individual whose functions are valuable and sometimes irreplaceable.

The blacksmith is nevertheless not integrated to the group. The taboos attached to the violator of taboos isolate him from the rest of the community, who respect their taboos as the basis of their social order. He is outside society, an asocial and antisocial figure who does not respect its basic laws. In myths, he appears as a cultural hero, but also as a subversive character, a fomenter of disorder and trouble.

Some authors consider that, on the level of human relations, the difficulties encountered by the blacksmith reflect the difficulty of introducing a new technique in the face of traditional ones. Those difficulties seem to us to be rather those accompanying the appearance of the first specialised forms of work in societies where the division of labour was—until the appearance of craftsmen, best represented by the blacksmith—established solely on the basis of sex and age. But these difficulties are themselves the expression of a deeper contradiction, of which the new forms of the division of labour are but one aspect, namely, the emergence, out of tribal society, of class society.

Progressing from primitive egalitarianism, based on hunting,

to production based on agriculture and breeding, providing surplus wealth, tribal society witnesses within itself processes of social differentiation and concentration of property and power, which (concomitantly with increasing division of labour) lead to the establishment of new relations of production and appropriation of wealth. Breaking with the homogeneous character of the old society, individuals make their appearance, whose singularity is emphasised by all the prescriptions and prohibitions that surround them. Their work will speed up and at the same time symbolize the evolution under way, which is basically the work of the whole group. The blacksmiths, who provide arms for military conquests and tools for more advanced agriculture and other activities, represent, on the level of production, important and highly individualized figures.

Objectively, these individuals represent the negation of the social order, because they are the bearers of a new economic order.⁷⁵ However, like those surrounding them, they are actuated only by their subjective magic representations. On the magical level, the individual asserts himself as against society, and is individualized through the violation of taboo. At this stage in evolution, the violation of taboo is the essential factor and junction marking the necessary dialectical passage from objective reality, that escapes consciousness, to the magical representations that motivate behavior in response to the demands of reality.

In the old society, based on hunting and gathering, the violation of the blood taboo was in most cases private, sporadic and clandestine; its social consequences did not go beyond the magical effect. As soon as it invests the activities of the forebearers of a new order, the violation of taboo becomes systematic, public and even official, it covers the whole field of social relations and ends up as an instrument for the organisation of labour and real power.

*

Those who are only slightly familiar with anthropology are aware of the many explanations that have been proposed to account for

⁷⁵ Cf. A. Illuminati, "Mamurius Veturius," *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* (SMSR), 32, fasc. 1, Rome, pp. 73-74.

The Blacksmith's Taboos

the “blacksmith complex”. He is impure because he is in contact with iron (a loathsome and repulsive element), or with fire (from which demons are born), or because he forges murderous weapons; or because he is endogamous, or is not independent, or because blacksmiths are the dregs of conquered peoples, do not produce their own food, do not go to war, and break some unknown divine interdict. They are respected because they have dared to break a divine interdict, because they make useful instruments, because they are rich, because they are initiators, educators, religious chiefs, peace-makers, sacrificers, civilising heroes, and even, according to the embryological theory of M. Eliade, because they help the Earth to give birth to minerals and in so doing are a substitute for Time⁷⁶ etc. Their powers issue from their tools, from spirits hidden in the bellows of their smithies, from fire, from the “numinous” force of iron, from the ornaments they forge for shamans; or from the celestial origins of their techniques, from their novelty, from the fact that these secret techniques are hereditary, or simply because they are in their possession; or again from the “ambivalent magic of weapons made of stone,” which, by emitting sparks when struck, are likened to lightning, a magic that is transmitted into the metal;⁷⁷ or from the fact that they forge flashes of lightning for the gods, etc...

One can see that, even when they contain elements of truth, all these explanations are one-sided and often in need to be explained themselves. The only valid explanation is one that can show the inner reason for the different manifestations of the “blacksmith complex” and their coexistence, and attain to the structure that determines their interconnection and renders them interdependent.

An interpretation that coordinates the various elements of the problem, on the basis of the blacksmith’s violation of taboo, should satisfy these conditions. It would form part of a wider interpretation of magical violations of taboo in general, based on an analysis of the nature and function of taboos.

⁷⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁷⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 29. For the various interpretations of the powers of iron, V. J. Cazeneuve, *op. cit.*, pp. 64 and 199.