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THE THINGS THAT MATTER TO THE WEST AFRICAN

Summary of an Open Public Lecture by the late Emil Torday, 11th March, 1931.

TORDAY, Emil

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In the old days of the slave traffic, and even after it had been superseded by more legitimate trade, the West Coast of Africa was known as the White Man's Grave. It was visited on business only. The few books of this period were not written by scholars, as a rule, but their authors had experience and were keen-sighted and, on the whole, truthful to an astonishing degree.

To Ross and Manson's discoveries, not less than to the motor-car, we owe the advent of the tripper and a constant output of literature more amusing than instructive. The casual visitors represent the West African as a lovable or vicious child, according to the disposition of the writer; they scarcely ever touch on the serious side of his life, and insist on that which, in their ignorance, they find funny and grotesque. No greater insult could be offered to the African than to hold him up to ridicule. He is so sensitive on this point that ridicule is not only a recognized form of legal punishment for malefactors, but is also used to curb the rich and powerful.

The delightful folk-tales, best known in an Americanized form through Uncle Remus, are satires, *pasquínades*, in which misdeeds of kings and chiefs are lashed with pitiless irony, the privileged position of the story-teller sheltering him against reprisals. History and actual observation prove that the West African takes himself very seriously, and that the apparent aimlessness of his outlook, his exuberance and cheerfulness, veil a deep love for his traditional institutions, in whose defence he is capable of dogged and combined systematic efforts which never flag till innovations contrary to his political ideals have been reformed to his liking.

He is a democrat to the core, and has shown that he will, and can, make the will of the people prevail over autocracy. At first sight this seems to be scarcely compatible with the conditions in which early travellers found the country: it was honeycombed with small and large monarchies, ruled by apparently absolute tyrants. A closer study of these states reveals that the West African king or kinglet is more restricted in the exercise of his functions than the most constitutional monarch in Europe.

Before his advent all government in West Africa was shaped on the family system based on the extended household consisting of a patriarch and his dependents. Even such a patriarch was, however, strictly controlled by the senior members of the community over which he presided, and traditional law regulated all his political, judicial, economic and religious activities. Gradually such a household would increase so as to become unwieldy; it split into new similar units, which, however, were still held together by the ties of blood and the recognition of a common leader in the person of the patriarch of the group from which they sprang.

Under him they formed a clan, independent from all other social ties. Even before the advent of Europeans most of these clans had been welded into states. The formation of West African kingdoms was never due, as it is so widely believed, to the subjugation of one people by another, though at a later stage their extension might be due to conquests. Kingdoms were founded by foreign adventurers of striking personality, great ability and unscrupulous ambition, coming generally from the east.

A successful war in which he took the leadership, his wisdom in settling disputes, his claim to magical powers, intrigue and bribery would gain such a man adherents with whose help he would impose his domination over the clans which had given him hospitality. Wishing to found a dynasty of his own blood, he would introduce the patrilineal system of succession while his subjects continued to observe the laws in inheritance in the female line. He might even claim immortality; his courtiers would keep his death secret for a time, and when his successor asserted his claim to the throne it was not as his son, but as the dead king himself recovered from an illness.

Some kings were beheaded before burial and their heads preserved by their successor to advise him; when this successor died he was buried with his predecessor's head and his own assumed its role with the

next king. Other kings had to eat the heart of their predecessor before they were allowed to rule. It was with the same idea that many kings were not allowed to die a natural death, but were ceremonially slain, so that their successor should receive their power and virtues before they had been affected by senile decay. Such was the price kings had to pay for attributing to themselves divine qualities.

Claiming to be the fountain of all authority, the law was supposed to emanate from them alone; consequently, during an interregnum the country lapsed into anarchy and order was not restored until a new king was acknowledged. All this meant the suppression of traditional democratic government; to all appearances the clans had been absorbed in the kingdoms. In face of such a catastrophe the West African gave proof of his political genius. He bent before the storm, but did not break. While on the surface the king carried all before him, underground the clans still prevailed. Clansmen went to the clan chief to obtain justice, clansmen saw to it that his judgment was carried out without hindrance.

Clan chiefs continued to act as intermediaries between the living and the ancestors, regulated the economic life of their people and safeguarded the continuity of clan life by periodical initiation of the rising generation. The initiates formed themselves into a close phalanx under their chief, and such a body was called Poro. Poro is generally referred to as a secret society, but it is secret only in so far as its meetings and rites are kept secret from the uninitiated and from women. Unostentatiously the Poro functioned everywhere as the intrinsic, constructive, and regulative element of tribal life and all the worldly and religious possessions of the clan centred in and emanated from it; it dominated all social activities. It recognized no frontiers of kingdoms, and pretended to acknowledge the supremacy of king, only to be able to undermine it without hindrance.

The ancient clan initiations were performed in Poro schools held periodically and lasting four years. Here boys were educated and taught everything that a good clansman ought to know by instruction in the traditional rules which govern religious, intellectual, social, economic and sexual life. Above all, the youngsters were impregnated with the duty of blind obedience to the Poro hierarchy. The Poro enforced by all possible means, including abduction, the attendance of all boys of a suitable age, and thus impressed not only the children of clansmen, but also those of the usurper's family and henchmen whom

it broke by merciless discipline and systematic instruction to submission to its ideals.

They had to take the terrible oaths of secrecy and obedience to the Poro chief, and they left the school as his disciples and willing tools. Such a boy, should he in the course of time become king, was bound to remain subservient to the Poro, and when the White Man arrived on the West Coast this revolution was an accomplished fact, and in the kingdoms he found, Poro, or other bodies differing in name, but identical in character and purpose, had all political power in their hands. The king had become the executive officer of the Poro chiefs, who surrounded him as royal councillors or placed into such position their own confidential men. Kingship had become a shadow without substance. At this stage, though there was still a pretence of succession in order of primogeniture, in practice this was disregarded, and the Poro hierarchy "elected" the king who would serve them best.

The original democratic form of government was thus re-established under a king with strictly limited powers. In religion, the ancestor of the king became the object of national worship, while the clan ancestors lost nothing of their importance in the eyes of their own descendants. For the oligarchy a figure-head was provided. As no distinction had ever been made between the executive and judicial powers, another instance was added to the tribunals in the king as supreme judge; but, as before, differences between individuals continued to be tried by the head of the smallest social unit to which both litigants belonged.

Members of the same family resorted to the father, as of old; those of the same extended household to the patriarch, and those of the same clan to the clan chief. The king came into action as a highest court of appeal or in those cases when the contending parties belonged to distinct clans; in the latter case he served the useful purpose of arranging judicially such differences which, previous to his advent, could only be adjusted by a clash of arms. Land tenure, which had been always communal, suffered no alteration. Land was vested in the ancestors and administered in gradation by the clan chief, the head of the household, the *pater familias*, reaching, finally, the usufructuary cultivator. Now the king was interposed between the clan chiefs and ancestors in whose name he assumed the superior trusteeship. As a trustee the king could never alienate the land, and as the crown land comprised every inch within his kingdom, such a thing as unowned or vacant land

could never exist on the West Coast. Part-ownership in the heritage of ancestral land was a *sine qua non* of citizenship; a person who had no share in it had no civic status—lie was a slave.

Though woman has not been mentioned in that which precedes, it must not be assumed that her position in West African society is not very important indeed. She matters in every way. She figures less openly in public affairs than man, but her influence on tribal life is at least equal to his. Her traditional power is perpetuated mainly by her strong feeling of sympathy and community with members of her own sex, and a collective, though not individual, antagonism against the other. Neither her husband, nor his family and clan, ever acquire any authority over her. By marriage her husband acquires the usufruct of her sexual qualities, and nothing more. Spiritually, politically and economically she remains a member of her own clan. She resents, and effectively resists, all interference by men with matters affecting women. Litigations between women are settled in the first instance by female dignitaries; even the execution of a criminal woman used to be performed by a female executioner.

The African woman's most effective weapon is the general strike; let one be offended by a man, and the whole womanhood of the community will side with her and maintain a separation a *toro et mensa* and a suspension of all household duties, including cooking, till the offender is severely punished. Not only were there women councilors; every kingdom had its queen-mother who, in the olden days, was the real head of the clan, delegating part of her powers to her male kinsman, the chief. In the newly-formed kingdoms her voice was weighty in the selection of a new king; she might proclaim him, crown him, or withhold the royal treasure from him till he had proved his worth.

When a tribunal retired for deliberation it was said that the chiefs went to consult "the old woman," and it was in her name that judgment was pronounced. There were even, in the eighteenth century, queens in their own right and, though it would be incorrect to call them virgin queens, they never married nor did they allow their Leicesters and Potemkins to interfere in matters of state.

Wherever there was a *Poro* there was also a *Sende* or *Bundu*, i. e. an association of female initiates which embraced the whole adult womanhood of the clan and had identical methods and aims as *Poro*. In the *Sende* school-girls were initiated just like the boys in the *Poro*.

The leopard and similar societies, arising in consequence of the slave trade, are naturally relatively modern. They were formed to defend the population against the greed of kings and chiefs who attempted to sell their own subjects to the slavers. Cloaked in the skins of leopards and provided with iron imitation claws, their members executed such breakers of tribal law.

The slave trade gave rise to many similar societies in various parts of Africa; one of these, aiming at the expulsion of the White Man from Africa, has ramifications from the Nile to Mozambique, from the East Coast to the mouth of the River Congo. It is still spreading. His past shows the native of West Africa capable of concerted and persevering action when he aims at social ideals.

Under the present impact with European influences Africa is pregnant with a new world and, if all goes well, will give birth to a new culture, truly African, but different from that of the past. It will borrow from Europe with discrimination that which is best and most appropriate to the African's natural environment and throw overboard many of the institutions he cherished in the past. If we want to collaborate in the shaping of the future we must, above all, study carefully and sympathetically his time-honoured customs, beliefs and institutions.

E. TORDAY