

Lilwaakoi¹—a Congo Secret Society.

IF any apology were needed for the inclusion of an article of this kind in the pages of the *Baptist Quarterly* it is surely that for the past century and a half, British Baptist history has been closely bound up with the growth of the Christian Church in "lands across the sea." More and more Christian workers in the Home Country are sharing the joys and sorrows, the problems and pains of the younger Churches in India, China and Africa. Members of a denomination which is recognised as being international rightly find interest in the doings of their brethren in lands other than their own.

Probably the biggest problem confronting the missionary in the Congo Field—as in other areas too—is the gulf which lies between the European's mode of thought and customs on the one hand and those of the African on the other. The Christian missionary, anxious to convey to African hearers the Good News of which he is the messenger, quickly recognises this difference between himself and those to whom he goes. It is not only a question of language (though that is difficult enough if the missionary would go further than merely knowing sufficient of the vernacular to make himself understood to a group of mission-trained boys who are constantly with him and who can interpret what he says to their friends). No, it is more a matter of African tradition and cultural heritage which are far removed from those in which the missionary has passed his early days and from which he has unconsciously derived his thought-patterns and his outlook upon Life. The better the missionary gets to know his way about these things, the more openings he can find for commending to African hearers the Way of Life which he has come to proclaim.

Some Africa missionaries, backing their views by reference to modern theological doctrines, would regard as worthless and even dangerous any enquiry into tribal tradition and the possible use of local culture in Christian preaching and Church organisation. Rightly filled with the sense of the adequacy of the Christian revelation and overwhelmed by its grandeur, they regard as too puny for consideration the accumulation of tribal wisdom and morality made before the coming of the white man. Others of

¹ o is pronounced as the o in pot. The accent above a vowel indicates that the syllable of which it forms a part is pronounced on a tone higher than unmarked syllables.

us, however, reading our New Testaments, learn of the missionary methods of one of the greatest of Christian evangelists—S. Paul himself—and note how he claims :

To all men I have become all things to save some by all and every means.—(1 Corinthians ix. 22, Moffatt.)

We see too the way in which he pressed Greek poetry into his Christian purpose as he sought to engage the attention of the Athenians to the Gospel he wished to proclaim. And we feel that we are in good missionary company when we try to find, in African ways and customs, means to introduce to African hearts and minds the message we have come here to preach.

The following account of a Congo secret society still flourishing today among the members of the baMbole tribe will, we hope, give some insight into the way in which African institutions are rooted in tradition, how they have proved in the past to be valuable elements of African tribal culture and how some parts of them may be useful for the Christian missionary in his work.

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Lilwáakoi is a society confined to males and found, so far as I know, only among the various groups calling themselves by the name of baMbole. The tribe is a large one with the remarkable gong-language name of :

enú alomo ásúli—you men of lice !

—a name referring probably to the habit indulged in by some sections of the tribe of wearing their hair very long at the crown and caked into tight ringlets with a mixture of camwood powder and oil, which is a fertile medium for the rapid growth of the arthropods referred to. (The name is by no means an insult to the baMbole themselves though it brings a laugh to the lips of members of surrounding tribes with cleaner habits). BaMbole folk occupy the area to the South of the Congo river, West of Yakusu and Stanleyville; they extend away up the Lomami river beyond the government post of Opala. Tribal elders say that the *Lilwáakoi* society spread from the area around Opala northwards—the route followed by many of the changes in baMbole culture.

The name *lilwáakoi* is compounded of :

lilwáa—a curse word used in this and in other secret societies of this part of Africa (e.g. in the *libéli* ceremonies of the Lokele which caused the Church so much trouble in 1910 and 1924)

and *koi*—the leopard.

There is a legend about the leopard which explains the origin of the society. It is known only to those who are members of the

society and was told to me in whispers by a young man (one of our B.M.S. teachers) who, before he recounted it to me, looked furtively out of the window and door of the mud hut I was occupying to make quite sure that no unauthorised person was listening. The story is this :

In the early days a certain man had four wives. Wishing to set out on a long journey he called his younger brother to him and gave instructions about the way his household was to be managed in his absence, especially emphasising what was to be done if his wives bore children after his departure. "If a woman bears a girl," he said, "look after the child and the mother. But if a woman bears a son, kill both the child and the mother immediately." Then he set out on his journey. In course of time the first wife bore a child—a daughter; the second gave birth—to a girl also and the third wife likewise. The younger brother was delighted to be able to keep so many additions to the family. But the fourth wife gave birth to a baby boy. The temporary master of the household remembered his instructions, but was unable to bring himself to the task of doing away with the mother and the baby so recently born. At last he decided to deceive his elder brother by driving away the mother and child into the forest and then making a grave as though he had killed and buried them.

The mother and the child set forth into the forest and marched and marched until night-fall. She looked around for somewhere to sleep and found a cave in the side of a hill. There she entered and lay down her child. It was such a convenient place that she decided to make it her home. But unknown to her, the cave had another opening and in that opening a leopard had just given birth to a cub. While the two mothers were away, the babies left behind in the cave began exploring their surroundings and one day they met one another in the middle of the cave. They made friends and began to play games together and to get to know one another well. But the young leopard warned the little boy: "Never let my mother see your mother or she will kill her." One day, however, the leopard caught sight of the woman near the cave entrance. Afraid that the woman was about to molest her cub the leopard sprang upon her and killed her. When the little boy heard the news he began to reproach his friend the leopard cub. "Who will find me food now that my mother is dead?" he asked. The leopard cub promised that he would share with the boy all the food which his own mother brought to him and so they lived together happily for a long time. One day, however, some men came through the forest and saw the cave with the mother leopard inside. They surrounded the animal and killed her with their spears. Then they found the little boy in the cave as well. They

recognised him as one of their own people and insisted that he should return with them to the village. He wanted to stay behind in the cave but the men carried him off back to their town and there the whole story about his birth and his exile came to the knowledge of his father. The latter was, however, so pleased to see his son that he readily forgave the younger brother his deceit and welcomed the boy into his home. But the little boy could not forget his leopard cub friend and he went into the forest to look for him. When he found him he said: "You helped me when my mother died and I had no food to eat. Now I shall help you because my family have killed your mother." And so every night the little boy would put aside some of his own food and take it into the forest for the leopard cub, his friend.

No African people are more pleased than the baMbole at the death of a leopard. The man who kills such an animal is indeed a village hero. But the story about the leopard cub explains that the leopard can also be a symbol of covenanted friendship instead of hatred and reconciliation instead of war.

In their present day form the *lilwáakoi* ceremonies take place when a group of boys have grown up in a village or group of villages which have not seen the ceremonies for some years. A big event in the life of the village—such as the killing of a leopard—may be a signal for the commencement of the rites, though this is not always true. The *ofinga* or Master of Ceremonies organises the proceedings, which consist in painting the lads up with white chalk, red camwood powder and black soot and taking them into the forest near to the village for dancing and instruction. Plenty of food must be made available by the women folk of the village. Unlike the Lokele ceremonies of *libéli* the boys do not stay in the forest for months at a time but usually spend only the hours of daylight in the forest, returning to the village for the evening. The instruction given to the boys in the forest is designed to make them useful members of the community and has a definite moral background. They are taught, among other things:

- do not commit adultery
- do not steal
- do not kill a person

For disobedience to these rules the penalty was death, though for crimes of the first and second kinds first offenders might be let off with a severe warning. Another interesting "law" is that concerning hospitality. "If you are preparing or eating food, invite any stranger passing by to share it with you."

Connected with the moral instruction and the dancing which is taught in the forest, is the learning of special words which are

really riddles. The novice buys this knowledge from the old men of the village by preparing food for them and then waiting upon their teaching when the food is eaten (we are reminded of the story of Isaac and his sons!)

“ he travels right into the forest ” . . . the name for the talking-gong;

“ the spirit which follows after ” . . . the leopard;

“ the elephant’s trunk ” . . . for the arm of a man;

“ father of the village ” . . . for fire, (without which man could not live);

“ the arrow ” . . . for the eye (which sees quickly all that it looks upon)

and so on.

In after life the power of *lilwáakoi* can be of great value in preventing strife and bloodshed in the village. As the missionary walks through these baMbole villages he notices that communal club-houses which extend down the middle of the street have long poles attached to the end-walls, rather like flag-poles. They are flag poles indeed, but the “ flag ” is a leopard-skin kept in the house of the *ofinga*. Should serious quarrelling break out in the village and the peace of the place be threatened, the *ofinga* will produce his leopard-skin and hoist it to the top of one of the poles. Quarrelling ceases at once and the elders who have been through the *lilwáakoi* ceremonies invite the disputants into the forest to settle the whole palaver by arbitration. No blood must be shed while the leopard skin hangs up in the village. The B.M.S. teacher who supplied me with a good deal of information about the ceremonies told us all in a sermon one evening how he owed his life to the power of *lilwáakoi*. His family had committed a grave error in the eyes of another group of baMbole people and the only way of expiating the crime was by allowing one of our own men to be killed. Our teacher, who was then only a child, was chosen as the one whose blood should be shed to settle the affair. The executioner was advancing towards him with his knife when an elder of the *lilwáakoi* society stepped up and placed his hand between the knife and the lad’s neck. “ This must be arranged in the forest ” he said, “ among those who have entered the *lilwáakoi* society.” And so it was arranged without the death of a young member of the troop which had done wrong.

There is one thing about this society, however, which the Christian missionary deprecates. That is the deceitfulness practised by the members of the Society towards all who have not joined up (in practice that means all young children and women and girls). In the olden days, if a man seriously flouted the authority of the *lilwáakoi* elders and contravened the rules laid

down, he would be executed. His body, so it is said, was then dried over a fire and the wizened corpse was dressed up in finery and paraded round the village as the "spirit" of the society. All non-members had to run away if it appeared. Nowadays, Government action prevents any such sanctions being applied to offenders against the elders and so an image is made instead by a competent woodcarver, the image being blackened over a fire to represent the dried-up corpse. But at the time of preparation of the wooden image, news is given out in the village to the non-initiated people, that a corpse has been obtained from a recent grave and has been dried over a fire in the men's communal house. Decaying vegetable matter is put into this hut from which smoke is seen to be coming in order to help with the hoax. The blackened figure, called "*ifésé*" is then decked out in native finery and paraded through the village during the *liwáakoi* ceremonies as the "spirit" of the society. A B.M.S. teacher just across the river from Yakusu had to complain to me one day a short time ago that the ceremonies were being held in his village and that the "spirit" was paraded at the inconvenient hour of four o'clock in the afternoon, just as he was beating the school gong to call his children together. At the sight of the "spirit" all the children fled into the forest so that he could not hold school properly!

Should the Christian missionary have any dealings with such traditions as those of the *liwáakoi*? Some would give an emphatically negative answer and would regard the time taken in collecting the kind of information I have noted above as a waste of opportunity and a squandering of missionary effort. Let it be said quite clearly that some customs of Central Africa are so degraded morally and so dangerous physically that the Christian Church is quite unable to use them in any way. Such was the case with the initiation ceremonies practised among the Lokele and called by them *libéli*. The young Christian Church at Yakusu supported and guided by such stalwart pioneers as Mokili, Lilemo, Bandombele² and others, rightly decided that no Christians could participate in the superstition, deception and cruelty inherent in the *libéli* rites. But this is not necessarily true of all rites and ceremonies of Central Africa and the missionary should be ready to apply to African tribal traditions of this kind the rule proposed by a Christian worker of an earlier century for dealing with "the spirits" (cf. I John IV: 1).

We have perhaps been too afraid of *liwáakoi* in our area because of the possible relation between its ceremonies and the *libéli* rites of the Lokele folk—a relationship which is suggested by the common usage of the curse-word: *liwáa*. But, apart from that word, there are a few things common to the two sets of rites

² W. Millman, C. E. Pugh and A. G. Mill respectively.

and I am convinced that a sympathetic knowledge of *lilwáakoi* ways might prove of considerable value to the missionary at work in our area today. Here, for instance, are some of the ways in which the tradition has been or could be used :

- (i) The fundamental idea of the ceremonies is that of reconciliation of estranged parties through the blood of the leopard—this blood which has already been shed taking the place of human blood. It seems to be a ready made simile for expounding texts such as Colossians I: 21 which are fundamental to the Christian message—and our baMbole teachers have been quick to talk of the *lilwáakoi* rites in such a context.
- (ii) The leopard-skin hoisted on the pole is the sign of a new covenant which takes away the old tribal law of vengeance and retribution. The teacher may have gone a little too far who claimed that the hoisted-skin " is our baMbole equivalent of the Cross of Jesus Christ "—but the one symbol can be a very useful pointer to the other. I am going to try to obtain a leopard-skin with which to cover my New Testament for use on our next baMbole itineration . Then, as I claim a place in the village club-house and begin to talk about the Christian Good News, I shall try to approach the Christian Message via the symbol of the *lilwáakoi*—from the leopard-skin on the cover of the Book to the words enshrined within its pages. I believe that the step from one to the other will be a natural one and easily understood for those who will listen to me.
- (iii) And what a wealth of illustration, replete with African lore, in the *lilwáakoi* riddles! Sermon-preparers in the Home Country might be interested in a possible development of I Peter II: 21-25 using two *lilwáakoi* riddles as headings for the sections of the discourse :

atendélinjásó = he puts up with things.

*iliki jáokéngé*³ = he binds the village together as with a cord.

Both are used for the domestic fowl. When a palaver is dealt with in the village, fowls are killed and eaten by the elders before proceedings begin. The fowl does not fly off into the forest when the owner seeks it—it " puts up with things, even death " (cf. Isaiah 53 for the expression of a similar idea, using a sheep instead of a fowl as the simile). But because the fowl is willing to put up with things, even death, it makes possible the arrangement of the palaver—it

³ j should be pronounced as the *sh* of *ship*.

is, indeed, the "binder-up of the village." So, too, the Christ who

"when he was reviled, reviled not again"—(1 Peter ii. 23),
but . . . "was wounded for our transgressions . . ."—(Isaiah liii. 5).

This same Christ, because of his suffering, is able to lead us into the fellowship of his Father; through Him we "return unto the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls." (1 Peter ii : 25)

- (iv) Finally we must remember the moral basis of *ilwáakoi* instruction which can be a useful step towards the inculcation of Christian ideals of personal honesty and purity and of service for others. baMbole enquirers when introduced to the Ten Commandments have said to me : " But we had these laws before the White Man came here ! "

In the solution of the problems presented to the Christian workers in Africa by the difference in mental outlook between black and white, the study of African customs and traditions is assuredly of vital importance—is indeed a practical necessity.

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