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ON THE MYTH AND PRACTICE
OF THE BLACKSMITH IN AFRICA

for Pierre Vidal-Naquet

The present-day dossier of the blacksmith in black Africa and elsewhere is made up of a considerable bulk of literature. The various documents are not homogenous: some are confined to providing us with raw information—a sort of implicit phenomenology; others tend to be in support of, for the most part, particular theories, and, in fairly rare cases, general theories. Engendered by the ambiguous status of this artisan at once manipulator of fire and of chthonic powers, this literature attempts to put forward conclusive answers to situations which are, either in a real sense or in an apparent sense, contradictory. Thus it is that the blacksmith is at times the marginal citizen, something of an outcast who is despised above all else, and at others the equivalent of the figure holding the reins of power, if not this figure in person; in this way his image travels from one extreme of recognised social standing to the other. But in

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almost every instance he is recognised as possessing the technical knowledge which is the determining factor for the functioning of societies, whatever the category of social formation in which they may be included.

This dichotomy represents the point of departure of the study of the blacksmith which would more or less generally speaking, be partially excluded from the realm of practice so as to be focussed on the forces of magic and religion. Notwithstanding, any exclusive reference to the myth, or to the religious or magic practices, by way of explaining the blacksmith's status, would appear to be insufficient, for the very reason that it can only take into account one part of the praxis, which does not take into consideration the essential bases of social formations. Often enough, in fact, analyses of this type tend to neglect or completely overlook the specific production of the blacksmith, who is after all the manufacturer of all sorts of tools and implements; this is because they are incapable of defining the real intervention of this artisan in the social formation to which he belongs, and also because they are unable to perceive the technical and economic changes governed by the blacksmith, and hence those changes determined by any such modifications which have occurred in the actual practice of the metallurgy of iron.

Traditional studies of the blacksmith adhere to one of four standpoints:

The first consists in over-evaluating the position of the blacksmith in myth, in which his outward appearance, his role and his status are explained by nothing more than the arrangements of the myth sequences. The equilibrium of the myth assures the status of the blacksmith, in as much as he upholds the general organisation.¹

The second position is not disparaging about the myth. Indeed, the contrary is the case. But it does give insistence to the magical nature of the blacksmith's activities, which are closely associated with blood spilt and with the manipulation of fire. In his practice he would thus embrace black Africa and the Mediterranean of Hephaestus and Vulcan.²

¹ Germaine Dieterlen, "Contribution à l'étude des forgerons en Afrique occidentale," E.P.H.E. Yearbook, section V, no. 73, 1965-1966, 1965, pp. 5-28.

² Luc de Heusch, "Le symbolisme du forgeron en Afrique noire," *Reflets du Monde*, no. 10, July 1965, pp. 56-69.

The third standpoint reinforces the importance of spilt blood caused by the weapons produced, the implication being that this blood soils and defiles the blacksmith in the same way that menstrual blood soils the woman.³

The fourth and last standpoint involves the power of the blacksmith as explained by the manufacture of weapons and implements, taking the myth into account but already by introducing, by enticement, an integration in the praxis.⁴

Each one of these standpoints has at its command fairly comfortable and assured documentary bases. Each one, nevertheless, only involves a part of the reality, by trying to create a formal model which would be so designed as to exhaust the explanations and, above all, the practices.

For if the practice of the blacksmith can be incontestably explained by myth, then this recourse alone is not sufficient to embrace the different forms of the status of the blacksmith in black Africa. If it is to be pertinent, a study of this kind cannot afford to neglect an analysis of the two factors.

An examination of the part played by the blacksmith in the production of plastic objects (in the case of the Dogon, the Congo, the Luba and the Lunda tribes) has demonstrated the absence of data concerning the specific conditions of the production systems, as well as the systems of distribution and consumption of which the objects in question are part. There was, therefore, a hiatus between the system surrounding the objects and everything which preceded these objects (their invention, the ordering of them, and their realisation), which rendered them of practical use (distribution and consumption systems), and the various forms of obsolescence (physical age of the objects, their destruction and their abandonment). The conditions of this production—namely, that to which it was a response, and that to which it gave rise—were disguised by pieces of information which were too fragmentary, and which, above

³ This explanation has been proposed by numerous studies, but it has been considerably developed by Laura Makarius, "The Blacksmith's Taboos from the Man of Iron to the Man of Blood," *Diogenes*, No. 62, 1968, pp. 25-48.

⁴ Pierre Clement, "Le forgeron en Afrique noire; quelques attitudes du groupe à son égard," *Revue de Géographie humaine et d'ethnologie*, no. 2, April-June 1948, pp. 35-58, and also Luc de Heusch, *op. cit.*

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all by references to different magic and/or mythical diagrams, took the place of practice.⁵

The answer is thus clearly insufficient. For if myth always relates a story, which is the viewpoint of Franz Boas and C. Levi-Strauss, this story is to some degree a fixation, an explanation of the genesis of the world, or better still perhaps, an explanation of the process of transformation from chaos to an organised ordered world which makes it ultimately possible for there to be hierarchies, designations, as well as taxonomies and the different social formations with their various methods and manners of production. One can safely say that cosmology is one of the first concerns of myth, in as far as it supplies a fixed central point, thanks to which man can be integrated into nature and society, by defining, in this position, his role, his activity and his ultimate aim.⁶

But at the same time the world is organised not in accordance with the image of a nature which is absent, but by way of the social structures set up by men—and men are the product of myth, but above all they are the myth-makers. This demands that one rethink the idea of myth, not only with regard to its own structure, but also as compared with the conditions of its production, for it is indispensable to the manner of production, or to the manners of production, of any given social formation to which it gives rise and which it maintains, once it is accepted and upheld itself.

These notions had been rendered perceptible by studies carried out in other historical fields; Mme. Marie Delcourt, in her analysis of traditions with reference to Hephaestus, was quick to realise that the matter in question here was not the blacksmith of Greek praxis, but simply any blacksmith manufacturing a few defensive weapons (shields, helmets, leg-guards against

⁵ The essential nature of this research has given birth to two publications: Roger Brand, Jacqueline Delange, Philip Fry, Françoise Germaix-Wasserman, Alfredo Margarido and Henri Wasserman, "Pour décoloniser l'Art nègre: un essai d'analyse de l'imaginaire plastique," *Revue d'Esthétique*, no. 4, 1970, pp. 33-54, and A. Margarido and J. Delange, "Sociologie de l'art africain," *Annuaire de l'école des Hautes Etudes* (Section VI), 1969-1970, pp. 276-279.

⁶ It is in this sense that it seems appropriate to understand Fernando Pessoa's definition: "o myth é o nada que é tudo" (myth is the nothing which is everything). *Obras completas*, Rio de Janeiro, Companhia José Aguilar Editora, 1969, p. 72.

kicks, breast-plates). He never made offensive weapons, and "the episodes in his legend" are only explained and only form a coherent whole if "one sees in Hephaestus a magician who has paid for his knowledge with his corporal integrity." This would explain how the powerfulness of Hephaestus is "at once sacred and accursed,"⁷ but it in no way explains the blacksmith's participation in social formations in Greece.

In other words, the Greek blacksmith magician limits his output to just a few defensive weapons, and no reference is ever made to any intervention by him in the production of offensive arms or of implements necessary to other activities (especially those concerning agriculture, cattle-raising, building and naval construction.) It is quite clear that, in Greece, the production of the blacksmith has these two sides to it; we shall make further reference to this point, although it is relevant to say that Hephaestus does no more than disguise the production of objects, and that, in Greek myths, he is put in the place of producer and his normal production. On another score, one should make one's reply in advance to all those who would like to be able to see a continuum of the practice of the blacksmith from Africa all the way to the Mediterranean. The African blacksmith, throughout that continent, is the manufacturer of those instruments and implements which are necessary to his group: there is little distinction in this respect between offensive and defensive weapons.

At the present time we are witnessing the revival of studies on the artisan in black Africa, and particularly studies relating to the blacksmith, the sculptor and the keeper of the oral tradition. It is necessary to reconsider the studies which have been made and the conditions imposed on the blacksmith within the context of each and every social formation. This approach had been attempted by Pierre Clément, but his economic model based on the systematic opposition of societies based on cattle-raising to agricultural societies does not appear to take into consideration the complex of existing economic structures.

As a result of this picture the way it is pieced together, the

⁷ Marie Delcourt, *Héphaïstos ou la légende du magicien*, Paris, published by "Les Belles Lettres," 1957, pp. 11-12, 49-50, 60, and 126.

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blacksmith would thus be respected in agricultural societies and despised in cattle-raising societies.

These groups, or societies, in which the attitude of consideration or respect would dominate, would be almost ideally localized in the two areas where technics are the more developed, that is, in western Africa and the Congo basin. The attitude despising the blacksmith would be seen especially in those areas where cattle-raising is considered to be the noble occupation, whereas agricultural or manual labour would be connected with inferior groupings.

In order to go beyond this analytical procedure and the usual theoretical conclusions, it is necessary to carry on along the line of these studies relating to societies which uphold these structures. This can only be done by focussing one's attention on the practice, or on the whole complex of practices. An analysis of the work of the blacksmith should enable us to eliminate the risk of being waylaid, even if only subconsciously, by the weight of these plans and structures which have, by the mere fact of their being repeated, become indisputable.

THE DOGON

The first standpoint, mentioned above, is perfectly illustrated by studies relating to the blacksmith in Dogon society. From the very outset, however, one should observe that Dogon myths and legends, which certainly allot a considerable space to the blacksmith (as well as to the keeper or specialist of the oral tradition and the cordwainer) are not homogenous. By the mere fact of their number, versions concerning the appearance of the blacksmith cannot be reduced down to *one single* coherent model. The divergences, which are sometimes glaring, have already been attributed to theological variants provided by Dogon "doctor-informers." This explanation might be acceptable if it did not depend on the absence of an inner diachronic quality in the myths, the existence of which we can only have an inkling of, but which we should look into closely in order to come to a better grasp of the category, role, and, in a nutshell, the historical weight of all myth, as we should in the case of legend too. Although we do not want to embark on the details at this

juncture, we must nevertheless bear in mind two groups of translations: those of Marcel Griaule in *Les Masques Dogon*,⁸ and those presented at a later stage by Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen.⁹

Each and every one of these myths comes into being by way of the state of organisation which emerges from the initial chaos. However—and this is another constant again—the blacksmith never takes part in this process of putting things in order. He makes his appearance in a capacity of cultural hero, at a time when the world is already organised in such a way that it can accommodate technical and cultural mutations. Marcel Griaule accordingly demonstrates how Amma (god the creator) bestowed on the blacksmith a sample of each of the main cultivable arable seeds: millet, sorghum, beans, sesame, sorrel.¹⁰ Until such time men would eat wild animals which they killed with stones and sticks. In the first instance they would eat the meat raw; later came the discovery of fire which enabled them to cook the meat. The myth highlights four stages: raw animal food, the discovery of fire, and the appearance of cooked food. The introduction of agriculture is the final mutation, conspicuous for the fact of cooked vegetable foods, and this was given its impetus by the blacksmith, the producer of the instruments of production vital to this technical mutation.¹¹

There are, however, other sequences of the myth which reinforce this liaison between the blacksmith and agriculture. As a result of a quarrel between the Earth and Amma, the latter returned to the sky and prevented any rain from falling. After many circuitous manoeuvres, Amma let it be known that, for the rain to return, it was necessary for the blacksmith to show with his hammer that Amma was stronger than the Earth. It was the signs beaten by the cordwainer (on his drum) and by the blacksmith (hammer-blows upon the anvil) which caused the rain to return. The mythical sequence refers to the fundamental crisis

⁸ Marcel Griaule, *Les Masques Dogon*, Paris, Institut d'Ethnologie de l'Université de Paris, 1938.

⁹ Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, *Le Renard Pâle*, volume I, *Le mythe cosmogonique*, fasc. I; *Travaux et Mémoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie*, volume LXXII, Paris, 1965.

¹⁰ Marcel Griaule, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-50.

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of the world of the Dogon: the seasonal crisis which puts their society in a see-saw position, as it were, in the dry period, which is marked by the absence of rain-water, the shrinking of springs and rivers, both of which persist until the rains return. The initial intervention of the cordwainer was clearly insufficient; what was needed was the appearance of the superior artisan (the blacksmith) in order for the plea for rain to be finally granted.¹²

The later versions of this are more complex, and tend towards a lessening of the role played by the blacksmith. Like the keeper or specialist of the oral tradition, the blacksmith did not find himself among those on the arch of Nommo (the eight twins who are the offspring of Amma). The first people to descend to earth were the eight ancestors of the totemic clans given over to agriculture; simultaneously, Ysigui came to earth, and he is the twin of the Fox. But if all artisans maintain relationships with the eight forbears, their manner of appearance is not identical: the blacksmith is made from the umbilical cord of Nommo, the sacrificial victim, whereas the keeper of the oral tradition is the issue of the blood of the throat of Nommo. The "birth" of the blacksmith seems to be similar to that of the cordwainer, who is likewise the issue of an umbilical cord, the Fox's, but this origin in fact relegates him to a lower rank.

This sequence needs to be made explicit: the blacksmith, who issues from the umbilical cord, is characterised by strong blood, whereas the blood of the throat, the origin of the keeper of the oral tradition, is a weak blood. The word of these two artisans is imbued with the power of the various bloods from which they issue: the blacksmith's word will be strong (and for this reason he will be able to talk to the dead), whereas the word of the keeper of the oral tradition, though still important, will be less vital.

This version does, however, diverge profoundly from the version of the *God of water*, in which the "future role of the ancestor constructor was to provide men with iron so as to enable them to till the land." He had gathered together the implements and equipment of a forge. This fundamental role is in addition made generally explicit because, in accordance with popular belief, "it is in his mighty hammer that the blacksmith

¹² Marcel Griaule, *op. cit.*, p. 51-52.

had brought men their seeds".¹³ Now, the same text¹⁴ resumes the two hypotheses of the origins of the blacksmith in this way: *a*) the eighth ancestor would have come down to earth at the same time as the blacksmith, in the form of the granary itself; *b*) when he arrived on earth, the blacksmith found the men of the eight families and set up his workshop in their vicinity.

It would be easy to see, in the two aspects of this version, the explanation of the origin of castes, because artisans all have their caste. But it is a question of knowing if the agriculture in this case is due to the blacksmith, or to the ancestors. In the first case, the blacksmith would be the fundamental figure in Dogon society, whereas, in the second case, he would be no more than an adjuvant—the mutation being assured by the eight ancestors. The tendency of studies relating to Dogon myths is to obliterate this ambiguity, which might very well be able to translate a diachronic quality of the myths in the sense already suggested; it would be possible in this case to disclose the existence of two stages of Dogon ideology, by making reference to two phases in their organisation of production, and thus of power.

It seems evident that, in their different versions, the legends and myths are at pains to render coherent and explicit the stages of the establishment of the social hierarchy, the blacksmith being directly associated with the dominant method of production, agriculture, in his capacity as the *only* purveyor of agrarian implements and tools. The social importance of the blacksmith is reinforced by the solidarity of the professional group; for example, if one blacksmith is annoyed or vexed with someone and refuses to repair his tools, the other blacksmiths will also refuse to do so; the effect of this is to condemn the tool-less farmer to poverty.¹⁵ But it is clear that a rupture of this nature can be no worse than provisional, because the blacksmith is

¹³ *Ibid*, *Dieu d'eau. Entretiens avec Ogotemméli*. Paris, Editions du Chêne, 1948. The position of the blacksmith in this mythical version brings to mind in no uncertain way that of the Kotoko, where it can be seen in the structure of the royal palace, which takes on the shape of an anvil. See Annie Masson Datourbet Lebeuf, "Boum Massenia, capitale de l'ancien royaume du Baguirmi," *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 37 (2), 1957, pp. 215-244.

¹⁴ Marcel Griaule, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

¹⁵ Geneviève Calame-Griaule, *Ethnologie et Langage*, Paris, Gallimard, 1965, p. 108.

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dependent on the farmer for his sustenance, and cannot therefore run the risk of being angry with any great number of farmers.

In other respects the central position of the blacksmith in the production chain links him directly with the eight ancestors, with whom no other artisan has any link. His rank is higher than that of the keeper of the oral tradition and the cordwainer. The “prodigious effort” at intellectual synthesis undertaken by the Dogon “doctors” reaffirms the existence of two closely associated hierarchies: the artisans with caste (blacksmith, keeper of the oral tradition and cordwainer) and the power (exogamic, having the control of the gods, the ancestors, and the chiefs).

THE BLACKSMITH'S PRACTICE.

a) *The traditional conception*

This first approach to the different versions of the myths enables one to confirm that they do illustrate a social practice which already has a hierarchic structure. The whole of the Dogon cosmogony can nevertheless be explained by the prevalent method of production, within which the blacksmith occupies a special position, because, though excluded (in the view of certain authors he could not take part in working the fields), he represents the determining factor in agriculture, being, as he is, the only manufacturer of agrarian implements: hoe, hachet, etc. On the other hand the blacksmith is entirely dependent on the work in the fields, because a part of his remuneration, which assures his survival, is constituted by agricultural products.

The distribution of blacksmiths in the social set-up of the Dogon illustrates their separation from agricultural work. They appear either in groups, living in separate villages or in separate areas within villages, or they are completely isolated figures, working for one village alone, and have their premises established, in this case, to the north of the general unit.¹⁶

¹⁶ The plans of Dogon villages show that the village is normally laid out in a north-south direction, with the central area of the village to the north, which includes the men's lodging—the most important of all the buildings in the village—and the forge immediately to the north of it; then come the large family dwellings, then all the other dwellings strung out along the length of the village. P. Brasseur, *Les établissements humains du Mali*, Dakar, I.F.A.N., 1968, p. 394.

Only the former (the group) were competent enough to smelt or cast the iron ore, a fact which can be explained by the large investment of work required, needing a whole team to carry it out. The isolated blacksmiths would buy their iron from the founders, and although we do not know what the forms of payment were, or what scale of prices was in use, there is no doubt that the village blacksmiths had to pay a part of the gifts they received to the blacksmiths who mined the ore and to the founders, because these were the source of their basic working material. The blacksmiths in the villages worked with iron and wood alike, and generally to order.¹⁷

Their manufacture included "hatchets, knives, hoes, weapons, hand-bells and ornaments",¹⁸ but the essence of their production was constituted by agricultural tools, and the method of production was based on this activity. The Dogon certainly waged war among themselves, just as they certainly organised themselves to resist attack from the Peul; but these activities are only complementary to agriculture, as they are likewise to hunting, though there has been a falling-off in this respect due to the fact of game becoming rare.

The blacksmith's forms of retribution can be considered as a control or censure exercised by the producers, but these forms also contain a counter-control which is exercised by the blacksmiths. In fact, when the blacksmith was not paid for his work at the time of the actual execution of it, he would grow troubled and uneasy about the development of the land cultivated: "he is acquainted with all the fields which owe him tribute; there is nothing he does not know about their growth; he can smell their ripeness."¹⁹ The forms of payment of debts are presented differently by the various authors: in the view of Denise Paulme, after the harvest the blacksmith had to do a tour of the village with a bag made of goat's skin; the head of each family was obliged to pour millet into this bag.²⁰ Marcel Griaule, however, describes the blacksmith as leaving his fire at the time of the harvest to walk the fields; he appropriates

¹⁷ Denise Paulme, *Organisation sociale des Dogon*, Les Editions Domat-Montchrestien, 1940, p. 183.

¹⁸ Marcel Griaule, *Les Masques Dogon*, p. 22, and *Le Renard Pâle*, p. 23.

¹⁹ M. Griaule, *Dieu d'eau*, new edition, p. 82.

²⁰ P. Paulme, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

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seeds and grain "on those portions of the land which are staved in by his iron." His appearance is that of the pitiless tax-collector sitting at the edge of the field, goat skin agape, silently watching the farmer bathed in sweat.²¹ The difference is relatively important: in the first instance, the blacksmith's position is one of real dependence on the producer, over whom he exercises only a very mitigated control, whereas, in the second case, he openly affirms his right of payment in the form of a part of the harvest. In both these cases, however, the bond between the farmer and the blacksmith is clearly stated, and they are put in a binary relationship, the axis of which is represented by the Hogon—this is an example of politics and religion.

This, however, does not give the full picture of the practice of the blacksmith, nor are these his only resources. The fact that he is the issue of strong blood assures him a strong word, and confers upon him a special quality of authority in other areas. The ethnographic documents present him as the holder of technical secrets, and often as a healer. Above all he has the privilege of putting a stop to brawls and disputes, in exchange for some sort of payment; when his judgment about a conflict is passed, the victor must give the blacksmith a measure of millet; in a conflict between husband and wife, and in the event of a reconciliation, the man will give the blacksmith some millet, and the woman will give him cowrie-shells. Lastly, "death presents no obstacle to the blacksmith's power: he will invoke the deceased, he will force them to hear him and to accept the mediation he offers".²²

It is this reminder of a certain "magic" power which would justify the comparison with Hephaestus. We shall confine ourselves simply to the mention of the technical knowledge of the blacksmith. This knowledge intervenes both in the domain of the production of tools and objects as well as the domain of inter-individual relations, where his power to invoke the dead is capable of resolving conflicts. In this light one can understand the better why Denise Paulme opposes the status of scorn which ethnologists generally attach to the blacksmith, and why she writes that if, as is certainly so, the blacksmith is despised, then he is that much more an object of fear and dread.

²¹ M. Griaule, *Ibid.*

²² D. Paulme, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-188.

This leads us to consider the relationships between the blacksmith, political power and “wealthy men,” whose economic power forcibly affects the field of politics. The Dogon are presented as having no political unity, and thus no power with any hierarchic structure. The authority would belong to the village council, with a chief named the Hogon at its head (the Hogon is at once a chief and a priest). However, this absence of higher power, which is currently being affirmed, is contradicted by the practice: the Hogon has access to contributions from the farmers, and he receives homage from the blacksmiths, all of which is confirmation that he has a higher status.

These figures, or rather these offices, are somewhat outside the general system, for if the blacksmith, with his caste, does not take part in working the fields,²³ nor does the Hogon, from his position as head of the village council, and as the figure in control of the whole village. The same is true of the wealthy man, who has at his disposal a considerable workforce—which is usually made up of women—which in turn puts him in the same realm as the Hogon and the blacksmith. The relationship between the blacksmith and the two other figures does, however, clearly indicate his position of dependence, because if he does not pay his contribution to the Hogon, he must offer him (and the wealthy man) objects which he has sculpted or carved and granary doors. The Hogon and the men of means, for their part, had to give agricultural products, silver, clothing or livestock to the blacksmith, and the value of these things, in a commercial sense, way exceeded that of the objects received in homage.²⁴ The blacksmith thus became the exclusive *obligé* (or debtor) of the Hogon and of the wealthy men, because the commercial value of the counter-offering prohibited any other Dogon member from competing with it.

In this way Dogon society availed itself of a fairly complex machinery of re-distribution, which is divided into two sections. The first, which remains within the technical context of the

²³ M. Griaule, *ibid.*: “the blacksmith never drives his iron into the soil with his own hand.” This represents a confirmation of the role of agriculture, and is a yardstick of all types of behaviour.

²⁴ Geneviève Calame-Griaule, investigation of 1967. At this juncture we must extend our heartfelt thanks to Mme. Calame-Griaule, who has not only allowed us to make use of her on-the-spot notebooks, but also been kind enough to make certain extremely valid observations with regard to the manuscript.

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obtainment of the iron, forces the blacksmith to give to the blacksmith-miners and to the founders a portion of the surplus which he receives, be it from the farmers in exchange for implements supplied, or from the Hogon and the wealthy men in exchange for offerings. Although we do not know with what frequency the gifts are given, it does appear that the Hogon and the wealthy men did part with some of their surplus. This is to say that the Hogon, who was authorised to receive if not establish the agricultural surplus which accrued to him, was not able to keep it entirely for himself—and this is a scheme which goes for the wealthy men too. A part of the agricultural surplus, therefore—in its natural form, or else transformed into money, cloth or livestock—was to be earmarked for the craftsmen who did not take part in working the fields, but whose activities were indispensable to the social and economic organisation.

In order to come to a clear understanding of the subtle quality of the Dogon machinery, it must be said that if the Hogon and the wealthy men had been allowed free rein to use the surplus, it would have been invested in the matrimonial circuit, for the acquisition of new wives, that is, in order to increase the number of women working directly and exclusively for them. In addition, they would have been able to favour the marriage of one of their kindred or relatives by marriage, thus increasing the network of dependents or alliances in order to strengthen their power. Now, a part of this surplus must be paid, not to someone who might be able to circulate it in the matrimonial circuit of unattached men (families either noble or commoner), but to endogamous artisans with their respective caste. It is thus withdrawn from the circuit in which it might be able to reproduce itself and where it would assure an increase of the economic power either of the Hogon, or of the wealthy men, and thus end up being paid into a negative circuit, which will preclude all possibility of intervention in the political practice of the Dogon. It is admittedly impossible to quantify the part thus amputated, which must be of no little importance nonetheless, if one is to judge from the number of doors and locks in existence. But if it is as well to be prudent in one's calculations, the system, in all its complexity, appears to be finely and clearly designed.

Once introduced into the economic circuit of the inferior

group, the goods and chattels received by the blacksmith (or more accurately, by the craftsmen) lose their most important qualities, because they can no longer be invested in the higher matrimonial circuit. Because of this, and in this way, the society which produces such a surplus clearly confirms the authority of the political headman, and the large importance of the men of means, but it also separates them from the surplus which would otherwise be capable of creating situations of inequality which would in turn be capable of threatening the balance of the social formation. At the same time the artisans find their own particular status given strength by the collection of this surplus, which assures them of their subsistence as well as their ability to pay for the raw materials which they need. This system of the transfer of surplus from the higher groups to the lower groups constitutes, by its very irreversibility, a political operation which reveals the dynamic equilibrium of the Dogon structure.

The logic quality of the situation is thus laid bare, once the myth in no way justifies it, even if it is possible to find among the special relationship between the Hogon and the blacksmith certain suggestions which confirm the initial situation relating to the ordering and organisation of the world. Everything comes about as if the myth had simply stopped short at a certain moment in Dogon history, incapable of finding any answer to the new changes imposed by the very progress of production and the control involved by this. The time-lag between myth and practice resides in the absence of any consideration of political, or religious, power, although this is vital to Dogon society in order to guarantee the reproduction of the myth as well as the reproduction of individuals and of social relationships.

b) *The actual situation.*

If the myths remain more or less unvaried despite a certain loss, the economic situation has changed enormously. The interest of any study relating to the blacksmith also lies in the fact of unravelling how the evolution comes about from autarchic economies to market economies, the point of reference for which is no longer the mythical organisation, but far more the method of production in a capitalist sense.

The relationship between political power (the Hogon) and the

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blacksmith is no longer the same as it was. The blacksmith has stopped making granary doors, the dimension and wealth of detailed carving of which demanded many long hours of work, thus completely time-consuming for the craftsman, who was forced to devote to the manufacture of such "homages" that time which was left over to him after the completion of production instruments. He was therefore unable to produce work for any other village (each village had to have an appointed blacksmith) or for the market.

It is not possible to put a date to the abandonment of this production, but it would seem to lie somewhere around the 1930s, because since this period one can notice the more or less total disappearance of these granary doors. This disappearance is due to three closely dovetailed causes: the termination of such manufacture; the rounding-up of them by administrators, businessmen and museum officials and custodians, a development against which the Dogon made efforts to resist (this is the third cause), by hiding away the last doors, which are evidence of an autonomous organisation which is today refused by the market.

The disappearance of the granary doors confirms a lessening of the political power of the Dogon. By establishing their own power more rigorously, the French authorities have been led to buffet it, if not refuse it altogether, and at the same time, on the economic plane, the markets are multiplying and, more important, becoming the commercial hubs where the whole complex of economic life is carried on. The Dogon are integrated into the Mali nation and above all into the capitalist market, for which the State is the preferential agent.

In other words, the time which the blacksmith formerly devoted to the production of objects destined for the Hogon is today given over to the manufacture of objects which are to be sold on the market. Admittedly one should here make one reservation, concerning the rhythm of his homages, but there is no doubt at all that a powerful element of control over the activities of the blacksmith has been removed, as from the time when he was no longer under any obligation to devote time to the production of objects of prestige. Wheresoever production only took into account the utility value, the market value appears as the normal point of reference. The blacksmith still does carry out the orders of the village in which his forge is set up,

but he also uses his free time—this means in other words that he changes the meaning of his activity by producing more for the market.

If, to all appearances, it seems that the blacksmith has not cut himself off completely from the traditional structures, an analysis of his situation will reveal that his status has been fairly radically transformed. Technical conditions have changed, because the Dogon no longer smelt the iron ore and use scrap-iron or old iron exclusively.²⁵ This in turn involves a subtle and acute change in the relationship with the person making the order to the blacksmith; he must now provide the blacksmith with the raw materials necessary for the execution of the tools or objects ordered.

The blacksmith also receives the millet necessary to feed him during the manufacture, which renders him independent from the avatars of the harvest, and consequently from the agricultural activity on which he was hitherto dependent. He is therefore no longer bound up with the village in the way he used to be, and only produces work when he is paid for it at the time of the order.

There is no information on the whole gamut of the blacksmith's production, but the data concerning the production of locks do make explicit the break-up of the traditional circuits, just as the Dogon market shows a certain tendency to go beyond the local framework, so as to be an open market for the whole complex of Mali groupings, as this table illustrates: ²⁶

²⁵ This modification has resulted in a change in the technical vocabulary of the blacksmith. Previously, in fact, the blacksmith would make a distinction between the ore and any iron which was old, whereas today all iron is called *inu*, whether it has already been used or not. Notes from Geneviève Calame-Griaule, March 1969.

²⁶ This table does not claim to present a total view of this question, because the information obtained by Mme. G. Calame-Griaule is partial and subject to revision. One can however observe that this lock market does retain elements which refer to a situation within the Dogon, which is almost exempt from contamination from without. The organisation still takes into account data which are exclusively Dogon, as is shown by the market at Ibi, which only admits local blacksmiths who are reckoned to be specialists in the size of these locks, and whose virtuosity makes it impossible to sell locks which originate elsewhere. Quite the opposite to this is the market at Sanga, which shows a certain tendency towards a commercialisation of locks which are made all over the place. It would be possible to say that while they accept the values of the market, the Dogon endeavour to preserve their own values by isolating a market

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Markets	Place of origin of blacksmiths selling goods at markets	Place where locks are manufactured
Sanga	Ibi Amani Kunnu Yenduman	Sanga Kunnu Ibi Tireli Mendeli
Ibi	Ibi	Korikori Kolum
Tireli		Ogol Da Yaye

The market therefore intervenes on two levels: the technological level, indicated by a certain falling-off in the techniques, and the economic level, due to an assumption of the orientation of the relations between producers. The appearance of the blacksmith at the market involves his departure from the village, and his establishment in urban areas where the concentration of the technicians is to be found. Here it is a question of a movement, which is likewise irreversible, which confirms the dissolution of any autarchy, even if this is resisted by a certain few who carry on the illusion. The separation between the blacksmith, producer of production instruments, and the farmers, agents of the dominant method of production, puts a fullstop to a long period of Dogon history. The myth is incapable of following this mutation, which, though not annulling it completely, puts it in the very outskirts of the social practice. This is a revolution in which the ins are identifiable but in which the outs are less so. The attempt to render explicit the practice of the blacksmith by resorting simply to the myth is, today, absolutely invalid, particularly if it has never traced the whole range of this practice.

which is reckoned to be more specialised than others, and by putting the accent on the technical quality of the implement. This behaviour, however, which can be seen in other respects, in no way implies a refusal of the market, because the commercial regulations are imposed there as everywhere else.

THE MASAI

If we declined to make use of the concept proposed by Pierre Clément, which makes an opposition between agricultural societies and cattle-raising societies, it was still necessary for us to analyse the practices of these societies in order to disclose the fault which enables one to reject a dichotomy of this sort. If the Dogon are given as a model of the bond between the myth and the blacksmith, on another score the Masai blacksmith is quoted in every study as the typical example of the blacksmith who is the object of the most complete loathing. One should admittedly add here that he has an equally ill-met companion among certain Chagga blacksmiths, but it is evident that the position of the Masai blacksmith is a very special and peculiar one among the blacksmiths of any society or any continent you would care to mention. He is declared as being "impure and inauspicious," because the weapons which he makes serve to "shed blood." Now God, it would appear, "abhors and forbids any shedding of blood".²⁷ Luc de Heusch takes up this formulation and includes the Masai blacksmiths among those who are acquainted with "negative evaluations," probably due to the fact of the "mystical liaison of fire and iron with destructive violence".²⁸

The presentation of the question in this light might lead one to think that Masai society is comprised of only two groups, the Masai warriors, and the blacksmiths, who would not be thoroughly-bred Masai. The ethnographic facts present things differently, and we are faced with three groups: the Masai warriors, the Masai blacksmiths and the Dorobo, who would be the hunters and joiners—they are not part of the Masai group, but are made especially responsible for manufacturing shields for the Masai.

The organisation of the Masai is even more complex, however, for the introduction of a third group unveils a state of opposition between the makers of offensive weapons and those who manufacture defensive weapons. It would not be impossible in a technical sense for just one group to undertake both these

²⁷ P. Clément, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

²⁸ L. de Heusch, *op. cit.*

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tasks, which leads us to think that this sort of partitioning of duties is the result of a strategy of the Masai warriors, who control their society, and accordingly impose their rules on the caste groups: Masai blacksmiths and Dorobo.

Nevertheless, by resorting to the mythical data, we can find an explanation for the relations between the groups which make up Masai society. Just as it is for the Dogon, so the myth for the Masai constitutes the fixed point around which the movements of this society *would appear* to be regulated. If we pursue its explanations, the first inhabitants to appear on earth would have been the Dorobo, accompanied by the snake and the cow-elephant—heavy with young. Shortly after their establishment on earth, the Dorobo acquired a cow. But as the result of a quarrel the snake was killed by the Dorobo,²⁹ which set off a sequence of mutual mistrust between the elephant and the Dorobo, which only disappeared from the scene when the latter had killed the former. In the meantime an elephant calf was born, and this calf took flight when its mother fell dead and encountered the first Masai, to whom he recounted all that had come to pass. The Masai promised to settle the matter and set off in search of the Dorobo. When he learnt that the creator was reserving cattle for the Dorobo, to be added to the first cow, the Masai took possession of them by means of a ruse.³⁰

The sequences of the myth underline the dichotomy which exists around the Masai system: cattle-owners, or not cattle-owners. It should however be said that this opposition refers one back to the first myth sequences, which make an opposition between the Dorobo, slayer of beasts (either wild or domestic), and the Masai, who receives, shelters or defends living creatures and animals, which he refuses to put to death, with the exception

²⁹ The meaning of this event is revealed by the fact that the spirits of the doctors and the men of high standing pass on into the snake. Sidney Langford Hinde and Hildegarde Hinde, *The Last of the Masai*, London, William Heinemann, 1901, p. 101; C. Eliot, preface to A. C. Hollis, *The Masai*, 1905, p. XX.

³⁰ The myth projects into practice, for the Masai take the livestock owned by those peoples speaking Bantu, who are supposed to have stolen or found them, because God had formerly given the Masai *all* the cattle in existence on earth. A. C. Hollis, *op. cit.*, pp. 266-269.

of the buffalo (which is not considered to be a game animal), the eland and the kudu.³¹

These opposed positions explain how, after the death of the snake and the elephant, the Dorobo turned into hunters, in other words, into people who put wild and domestic animals to death without any ritual and without being solicited to do so by any religious requirement. They feed themselves with the meat of wild animals, which is impure because of its very origin and also because it is flesh that has been slain. This makes them radically different from the Masai as a whole—the Masai have a horror of hunting (in fact the exceptions pointed out prove that the myth suffers from considerable twists, even if the Masai are averse to hunting only those animals which can be closely identified with their own cattle, by virtue of their shape and their dimensions), just as they consider any death of an animal which has no ritual motivation as a sign of barbarism.

An analysis of the myth shows that if it makes an opposition between shepherds and hunters, it makes no reference at all to any curse whatsoever which might weigh heavily on the blacksmith. The Masai myth therefore excludes the blacksmith from being placed in any of those groups which formed the origins of Masai society, in as far as, from the outset, they cannot be made distinctly different from the warriors. By way of contrast one could nevertheless say that the blacksmiths are considered as strangers, to judge from certain ethnographic documents,³² but what emerges from oral documentation is that the fundamental opposition only arises between Masai and Dorobo. The organisation of the social structure is thus confirmed by the myth, because the blacksmiths are excluded from the Masai village (or kraal), because the proximity of the blacksmith's kraal brings disease and death to the livestock.³³ Their houses are nonetheless of the same type as those belonging to Masai warriors, which is not the case where the Dorobo are concerned; the Dorobo are also excluded from the main kraal, and are made to build houses or tents which are unlike Masai dwellings, out in the brush.

³¹ S. L. Hinde and H. Hinde, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

³² These are called either Il-Kunono, C. Eliot, preface to A. C. Hollis, *op. cit.*, or *Elgononu*. S. L. and H. Hinde, *op. cit.*, p. 11, or lastly *ol kononi*, M. Merker, *Die Masai*, Berlin 1910, p. 110.

³³ M. Merker, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

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The third window on the characteristic oppositions of the Masai system concerns war. Masai warriors are the only members allowed to carry weapons of war as a matter of course; they alone may organise raids against any given group whatsoever, even if the group in question is another section of the Masai. The Masai blacksmiths are permitted to go with them on any expedition, but they are not authorised to do battle with other Masai, and their raids can only be carried out against non-Masai groups. Under these conditions the raids carried out by the Masai blacksmiths were not very profitable because, as they were only able to reckon on their own numbers, the meagre display of men they could muster only gave them the power to engage in booty of little importance. The Dorobo were not entitled to carry weapons, and were not allowed to participate in or launch any combat.

In this way only the Masai—only Masai warriors and blacksmiths—could acquire livestock and increase their herds by bellicose operations. Now, in any cattle-raising society, the livestock is at once the basis and justification of power, just as it is likewise the only outward sign of wealth, transferred through the circuits of matrimony or alliance. The Masai warriors were owners, first and foremost, and their livestock could increase with no bounds, whereas the herds of the blacksmiths could not exceed forty head. In order to maintain this limit, the warriors dispossessed them of any head of cattle in excess and in addition the blacksmiths were obliged to give over to the warriors a certain head of cattle when their raids were clearly too profitable.³⁴

By exercising a permanent control over the livestock because of this bias, the Masai warriors could maintain their power with regard to the blacksmiths, particularly as cattle-raising was forbidden to the Dorobo since the time of the first (mythical) herd of cattle. This is in fact indicative of the realisation of the possibility that the blacksmith can increase his livestock numbers,

³⁴ For M. Merker, *op. cit.*, p. 110, they were simply "stolen" by the warriors. This method of control is fairly identical, if not homologous, to the method of the Ankole, where the commoner or roturier can only own a very small herd, which is essentially composed of non-reproductive males and females. K. Oberg, "Le Royaume des Ankole d'Ouganda" in *Systèmes Politiques Africains*, edited by M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Paris, P.U.F. 1964, pp. 107-140.

and thus be in a position to compete with the Masai warriors. This control over the livestock is the affirmation of a rationalised political power, even if it appears to depend on a system of fatality which is beyond the power of men: the blacksmiths are not blessed by God, and for this reason they can never reach a position of well-being, and comfort. If they do succeed in amassing some sort of wealth, they die before they have the opportunity to enjoy it fully.³⁵

In other words, when, despite these controls, a blacksmith went beyond a certain limit where wealth was concerned, he was eliminated by the warriors. The apparent scorn of the Masai warriors is the ideological vector by means of which the economic and political reality of the Masai is put behind a mask. The "mystical liaison of fire and iron" seems, however, to be overtaken by a practice which simply wants to conceal the brutal tension of the power structure and relations.

The mutual relations between cattle-raising and war explain the activity and position of the blacksmith, maker of the offensive weapons which are the sole factor enabling the expeditions which assure the increase or replacement of the livestock. It is on this plane of weapons that the most vehement signs of aversion in respect of the blacksmiths intervenes, because "their products are considered as impure," as are the blacksmiths themselves, because "God has forbidden men to shed blood." The manufacture of weapons gives rise to bloodshed and "the transgression of God's command." The Masai therefore cover their hands in fat before they hold any object which has been made or handled by a blacksmith;³⁶ this ritual should be seen as the manifestation of the superiority of cattle over weapons, when thus modified and separated from the producer. In other respects, the result is that only the Dorobo will be deprived of weapons, because they are completely unprovided with this fat obtained from domestic animals—this is a double sign of power and also of the possibility of being able to buy, carry and use weapons.

The weapons are nevertheless ordered and paid for. Merker supplies the terms of exchange: a spear is worth two goats or

³⁵ M. Merker, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, A. C. Hollis, *op. cit.*, pp. 330-331.

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an ox; a sword is worth a large cow-bell; a hatchet or an arrow-head are each worth one goat. For ordinary objects the blacksmith is paid with milk. When the buyer provided the iron, the price was reduced by half. The blacksmiths also wire-drew brass and copper wire, used by their wives to make jewellery: spiral-formed brass necklaces, double-spiralled ear-rings made of heavy brass, both used by women and old men, then bracelets and wire leggings, as well as ear pendants made of tin.³⁷ What emerges from these payments is that the Masai only give the blacksmith small livestock, or if not oxen, so as to prohibit any multiplication of their herd.

There is thus some complementarity between the proclaimed impurity and the importance of weapons because, if the livestock can be kept and even increased by reproduction alone, any quick increase and any reconstitution in the case of epizooty would be impossible without raids. It is therefore these operations of war which assure the regular increase of Masai cattle: the weapons, then, are fundamental. The Masai blacksmiths do not manufacture them all: they also have to resort to outsiders, the Chagga.³⁸ But here again, the unity of the system is made clear, because if the blacksmiths held the exclusive right to manufacture offensive weapons, they could then block the system and turn it to their own benefit, whereas, if their production is limited, by keeping it below the demand, the Masai warriors have their cattle as the only preferential currency, and they alone can dispose of this in any considerable quantity.

The essential control therefore lies with the livestock, and the key class of the Masai is accordingly not the warrior-class, the warriors being separated from their families, and indulging in the joys of physical love the whole of the time they are not doing battle, but the class of married men, on whom rests the control of all reproduction—men and cattle alike. The organisation of the classes by age affords the possibility of controlling each one of the major periods in the life of a man, for if the

³⁷ M. Merker, *op. cit.*, p. 113; one can certainly find room for conjecture on the nature and origin of these bells, whose value was for bartering.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 111; the spears of the Masai are not all made by the Masai blacksmiths; they are also made by other blacks who have settled with the Masai, above all the "Madchagga" from Kilimanjaro, from whom the Masai buy spears.

young warrior is engaged in cattle-raising, he must pay it all to his hierarchical superiors: the head of the clan and the head of the family. The re-distribution thus remains in the hands of the chiefs, thus preventing the concentration of two powers: the power resulting from war and the power of the possession of cattle, in the same age class. The Masai blacksmiths obey the same rules as the Masai warriors, whereas the Dorobo have a natural position outside the system.

The Dorobo, nonetheless, are also integrated in this organisation of the economy and the power, because the Masai warriors consolidate their power by dividing up the production of weapons. The blacksmiths, in fact, as producers of offensive weapons, are not authorised to make shields for themselves—shields being vital defensive weapons in combat conditions against the cutting power of the double-edged Masai spear. What in effect happens is that the armies confront each other on two long lines, and the battle is broken up into multiple duels. The blacksmiths are thus obliged to purchase their shields from the Dorobo, to whom they must give a part of the goods received from the warriors. In other words this technical sharing reduces the possibility of seeing another group attack the power of the warriors, with some kind of probability of success, whereas it does assure the redistribution and thus the circulation of consumer goods. It sends them down along the hierarchical chain of the group, until they are sterile, and thus rendered unusable in the higher matrimonial circuits. A fraction, furthermore, is transferred to other social formations, for if a part of the iron is extracted from the river Matapo, the other part is purchased from the Swahili.³⁹

Thus divorced from both the cattle and from defensive weapons, the blacksmiths, if they are able to amass a certain wealth which can sometimes be relatively large, are subject to both direct and indirect controls which forbid them their most decisive actions. In addition, their endogamy prevents them from putting themselves on the same matrimonial plane as the warriors, just as they reject any liaison with the Dorobo.

³⁹ The ethnographic works which are at our disposal do not specify the goods used to remunerate the Dorobo. This lack of information is also the case with regard to the Chagga blacksmiths and the Swahili, who are purveyors of some of the ore.

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It is therefore possible to make a synthesis of the situation in the following table:

Masai-warriors	Masai blacksmiths	Dorobo
Cattle-raisers	Cattle-raisers (herd may not be more than 40 head)	Hunters and farmers
Warriors	Warriors (forbidden to wage war on other Masai sections)	Non-warriors
Non-makers of weapons	Makers of offensive weapons	Makers of defensive weapons
Non-death of wild beasts and cattle	Non-death of wild beasts and cattle	Death of domestic animals; hunting of wild animals
Food based on meat, milk and blood	Food based on meat, milk and blood	Food based on game and agricultural products
Dwelling within the kraal in Masai style houses	Dwelling outside the kraal, nowhere near the cattle, but in Masai style houses	Dwelling in the bush, in houses not in the Masai style.

In neglecting the scorn, which is no more than a given fact venerated on social practice, we are in a position to understand the Masai model, where the power depends entirely on the live-stock, which likewise depends on war. The relations between

cattle and weapons thus reveal the relatively determining role of the blacksmith, because the cattle can multiply without his intervention, thanks to the simple fact of biological reproduction. Nevertheless, he has been given the possibility of being able to infringe upon the domination of the warriors, because he is a warmonger too, as well as being a cattle-owner, and for this very reason he is in a position to claim power. The myth is thus responsible for putting these relations outside the bounds of human time, in order to render the established system immune to attack, by obliterating the blacksmith, who is a member of the dominant group, but placed in a marginal situation from the moment it was necessary to distinguish this group in a social sense.

THE CONGO

The myths of the origins of the kingdom of the Congo hold the blacksmith as the sole party responsible for technical mutation, marked by the introduction of agriculture. This makes the Congo system comparable to the Dogon, but leaves it at some remove from the Masai system.

The written documents of the XVIIIth century, based on contemporary oral documents, describe the arrival of the Congolese people in the territory where it still lives today, under the sway of a blacksmith king.⁴⁰

This statement is in part contradicted in the XXth century by J. Vansina, who makes a distinction between the political character of royal power and the technical character, or even power, of the blacksmith. The king would never be the blacksmith (in fact there has never been a king practising metallurgy since the arrival of the Portuguese in the Congo), but his identification with the artisan would be due to the superior character of metallurgic technics which are at the origin of technological mutations, and thus at the origin of political power.⁴¹ Political power has been able to establish itself thanks to metallurgy, which explains the support given by the power to this artisan.

⁴⁰ Francesco Maria Gioia, *La Meravigliosa Conversione alla Santa fede di Cristo della Regina Singa* (sic) etc., Naples, 1669, p. 136.

⁴¹ J. Vansina, "Anthropologists and the third dimension," *Africa*, London, vol. XXXIX, no. 1, January 1969, pp. 62-67.

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Political power in the Congo was strongly hierarchised; the ruling monarch was assisted by a state council. The functions of this council are discussed by various historians: David Birmingham defines the royal power as "despotic,"⁴² and is backed up in this by W. G. L. Randles,⁴³ against the evidence of the texts which affirm that the decisions of the king had to be ratified by the state council.⁴⁴ The despotic, though very limited, character probably only appeared as a result of the invasion of the "Jaga" in 1568, when the Portuguese took over the direction of the political affairs, coming out in favour of military intervention to put the invaders to flight.

Congolese economy is based on agriculture, hunting and war. Agriculture and hunting, assure the subsistence of the society. These two activities were of such importance that towards the end of the XVIth century, or during the early years of the XVIIth century, the Portuguese were already organising expeditions to purchase agricultural products (maize for the most part) or hunting spoils and products (such as ivory, and elephant hair). Thus it is that the English mariner, A. Battel, set off towards the northern part of the Congo charged by the governor of Luanda to proceed with the purchase of these products.⁴⁵

It should be observed, however, that hunting, in which the same weapons are used as those for waging war, is already a preparation for this. The whole system of production thus finds itself transformed, with war allowing the acquisition and increased numbers of slaves.⁴⁶ The work of these slaves dissembarrasses

⁴² D. Birmingham, "Speculations on the kingdom of Kongo," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, vol. III, 1965, pp. 1-10.

⁴³ W. G. L. Randles, *L'ancien royaume de Congo*, Paris, Mouton & Cie., 1968, pp. 54-55.

⁴⁴ "The king of the Congo, like all the other chiefs in the country, only makes his government on the advice of a council which is composed of ten or twelve blacks." F. Cappelle, in L. Jadin, "Rivalités luso-néerlandaises au Soho, Congo, 1600-1675," in *Bull. de l'Inst. Hist. Belge de Rome*, fasc. XXXVII, (1966), p. 228.

⁴⁵ Andrew Battel, *The Strange Adventures of Andrew Battel of Leigh in Angola and the Adjoining Regions* (1613), edited by E. G. Ravenstein, Hakluyt Society, London, 1901.

⁴⁶ The appearance of the slave constitutes a revolution, the importance of which is often ignored, as if societies had maintained slavery for all time. Marx, however, notes that "it is in the very person of the slave that one ravishes the instrument of production. But it is necessary that the productive

the surplus necessary for the creation of a ruling minority which is completely detached from manual labour. This aristocracy assumes political power and the direction of war. The blacksmith is thus affirmed as the producer of agricultural implements and of weapons, made expressly for hunting and war.⁴⁷

Although it has a strong agricultural basis, this society is not identical to Dogon society, in which the blacksmith makes essentially agricultural tools and carved or sculpted objects. Congo society practices intensive agriculture (strengthened in the XVIIth century by the introduction of American plants, notably manioc) but it is also dependent on hunting, which brings a complement to the diet, and provides the skins which are used to increase the prestige possessions of the political and religious chiefs. In addition to this, the blacksmith also permits war, as a source of supplementary work. War, which produces slaves, is in the event accelerated by the Europeans, and allows the integration of the Congolese in the traffic of men and women, who soon become the preferential merchandise in the relations between Europeans and Africans.

The position of preeminence of the implements and weapons made by the blacksmith is thus affirmed. Royal power, or the power of the nobility, is closely allied to the blacksmith. One can easily understand how this production is not entrusted to artisans with castes, who are placed at some remove from society because, by the production of weapons, any caste could form a core of resistance capable of confronting, contesting and even replacing the dominant group. A XVIIth century document has already described this situation, and affirms that the blacksmiths are normally "fidalghi" (an Italianisation of the Portuguese word: fidalgo), that is, nobles, because the art of the blacksmith is carried out by the nobility.⁴⁸ To this is added the Italian missionary's description of the practices of the blacksmith as a healer, for all those who are suffering from an illness will seek

structure of the country which profits from the rape admits slave labour, or, (as in South America etc.) a method of production must be created which is appropriate to slavery," *Fondements de la critique de l'économie politique*, Paris, Editions Anthropos, 1967, p. 27 (vol. I).

⁴⁷ R. L. Wannyn, *L'Art ancien du métal au Bas Congo*, Champles par Wavre (Belgium) 1961, p. 59.

⁴⁸ Laurent de Lucques, *Relations sur le Congo du Père Laurent de Lucques (1700-1717)*, edited by J. Cuvelier, A.C.R.S.C., Brussels, 1953, pp. 139-140.

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him out and give him a gift in exchange for “blowing on his face three times with the bellows of the forge.”⁴⁹

The blacksmith, producer of implements and objects, also handles the bellows which activate the fire, as well as restoring to man those qualities which have been corrupted by sickness. This instrument, the forge bellows, thus acts on the fire and on living man, by activating the “fire.” But man and fire alike are put in a position of real and symbolic dependence on the bellows.

The documents relating to the Congolese blacksmith are spread throughout a long diachronistic period. Towards the end of the XIXth century, an English missionary recounts that the “forge is considered to be sacred among the people, who would never steal anything from it, because whoever did so would be afflicted by a grave form of hernia (mpiki).”⁵⁰

The external features of hernias do not exclude an evocation of *swelling*,⁵¹ which refers us back to the intervention of the bellows’ puff, controlled by the blacksmith. At the same time this fact enables one to re-establish, within a practice which is close enough to our times, the confirmation of the observations made by the missionaries of the XVIIth century.

The introduction of European products has nevertheless provoked a falling-off of metallurgical techniques,⁵² together with the diminishing, if not the disappearance of the historical tradition relating to the function of the blacksmith. Starting from the present reality, the Congolese are re-establishing the historical chain: “those persons of note with the greatest authority are in agreement among themselves in their admission that the working of iron was never reserved for the king or any other dignitary. Every free man in the clan could engage in such work, by means of certain reservations with regard to initiation.”⁵³

This deformation inflicted upon the historical reality certainly

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ John W. Weeks, *Among the Primitive Bakongo*, London, 1914, p. 249.

⁵¹ Hernia may be defined as a “tumefaction formed by (an) organ beneath the skin” (Petit Larousse), which identifies it with the effect of the puff of the bellows.

⁵² Every historian agrees in his recognition of the decline of the technical knowledge of the Congolese, both in metallurgy and in weaving, since the introduction of European competition. Manuel Alfredo de Moraes Martins, *Contactos de cultura no Congo português*, Lisbon, Junta de Investigações do Ultramar, 1958, p. 92; and W. G. L. Randles, *op. cit.*

⁵³ R. L. Wannyn, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

finds some support in the reduction of the central power as a result of the dismemberment of the kingdom consequent to the invasion of the "Jaga" (1568) and the battle of Mbwila (Ambuila) (1665), in which the Congolese army, having reunited all those persons of note in the Congo, was severely beaten by the Portuguese. This rending of political power has been reinforced by the courtier-kingdoms created by the Portuguese, in order to establish the traffic in men and women and control commerce from a distance, this commerce being vital to this traffic, moreover, once the demography of the courtier states could no longer satisfy the growing needs of Brazil, as a result of the growth in scope of the production of sugarcane. The blacksmith, who is certainly a fundamental figure in a great number of Congolese groups, loses some of his importance, due to the pressure of objects imported to satisfy the demands of this human traffic. He remains a technician of esteem, at times indispensable, but of secondary significance, because the tools he makes can be found elsewhere, although the quality of these tools from outside is often arguable, if not frankly bad.

The situation is basically different from that of the Dogon, who are in a position to judge the transformations which have arisen both on the technical level and on the level concerning the political institutions. One may wonder if this difference in the treatment of the historical data is not due to the greater complexity of Congolese history, the point of reference of which is no longer the myth,⁵⁴ which finds itself relegated to some marginal stature, compared with the increased importance of the economic structure resulting from the precocious and brutal (as always) penetration of capitalism. This integration of the

⁵⁴ This should not lead one to think that the various populations of the Congo have eliminated their religious systems by replacing them systematically by syncretic forms, as may emerge from many analyses. Quite the opposite is the case. These populations have maintained their religious systems almost intact, as would seem to be proven by the document written in the XVIIth century, of which the data crop up again in the ethnographic studies carried out in the XXth century. A "long period of time" is concerned here, during which the virtual absence of changes supplies the historian and ethnologist alike with information of paramount importance for any study and understanding of the Congo society. V. A. Margarido, Review of the work of Teobaldo Filesi, *Le relazioni tra il regno del Congo e la sede apostolica nel XVI secolo*, in *Rivista Storica Italiana*, year LXXXII, fasc. IV, pp. 972-978.

⁵⁵ John W. Weeks, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

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Congolese into what swiftly becomes the dominant method of production, of necessity unsettles the political structures, and lays out the conjugation of trades and responsibilities in quite a different way. As the blacksmith is no longer the *sole* producer, he loses some of his importance, and namely that part which these present reflections on the exercise of the trade take into account.

The falling-off of the blacksmith's prestige does not follow the same course all over, because, in the break-up of Congolese political structures, pockets are formed which attempt to maintain a state of total autarchy in order to safeguard those values which had made it possible to create the very social formations which are fated to disappear under the strong arm of capitalism. This, moreover, is the situation described by the English missionary quoted earlier, at the end of the XIXth century, who came across groups in which the blacksmith was always feared, and was also assured of being the only supplier of tools vital to agriculture.⁵⁵

But his role was already being threatened from the outside, thanks to the advance of colonial occupation and the concomitant expansion of capitalism. Already, and in more or less all regions, the principal role of the artisan had been replaced by that of the trader or businessman, who guaranteed the commercial link between the coast and the interior, between the Portuguese and the various groups seething inland, no matter whether it was a question of *soasos*, *pumbeiros*, *aviados*, *mbakistas* (ambaquistas) or *mbire* (mubires). The change in economic techniques also transforms the social areas in which the traffic was carried out, thus causing an obligatory transformation, and a radical one, of the methods of production. The process of degeneration affecting political power is confirmed by the parallel degeneration of the artisan.

Above all the blacksmith is no longer the manufacturer of weapons used in war and in hunting. Bows and arrows, as well as spears, and assegais, are replaced, wherever possible, by firearms. This change must have been a slow one, but its irresistible character emerges first of all from a XVIIth century Portuguese text, which states that Africans are pastmasters in the use of firearms,⁵⁶ then from the text of John W. Weeks, who says

⁵⁶ *Arquivos de Angola*, vol. IV, nos. 37-40, Jan.-April, 1938.

that for a very long time the traditional weapons made by the blacksmith are no longer in use; they have been replaced by guns. This is a somewhat excessive statement, because the traditional weapons continue to crop up and be used in fighting, but it does convey the sense of this change-over, which robs the blacksmith of his most prestigious production.

Thus it is, in the first phase of the history of the Congo, which includes the first years of contact with Europeans, that the blacksmith was directly associated with political power, which controlled both the production of implements and the production of agricultural products as well as the fruits of the hunt, whereas, in the second phase, which starts with the generalisation and continues with the exacerbation of the traffic of slaves, the method of production changes, and involves the diminution of the political structures, as well as the falling-off of the activities of the artisans. The inter-group or inter-familial relations, which used to guarantee the restricted circulation of goods, are taken over by business and trading relations, in which the individuals are alienated from the merchandise. Business replaces the political ruler and the artisan, at the same time as the market intervenes as the basic element of the social formation.

During the first phase, the status of the blacksmith had a dynamic weight to it, in as much as the production of iron, tools and weapons allowed him to affirm himself as a possible arbiter, if not a necessary one, between those who produced and those holding the reins of power. In identifying him with the king, the myth made explicit the necessary liaison between political power and artisan, the latter being the pivot of production. Medical practices confirmed the blacksmith in his superior status; it gave him indisputable authority, which he was only to lose after the spread of the slave trade and the widening importance of markets and merchants.

Indeed, commercial relations existed in the Congo before the appearance there of Europeans, but they were not determining or decisive, because the political structures controlled the local exchanges as well as the long-distance ones. The Portuguese were obliged to spring the appearance of specialists in order to impose new merchant relations, which undermined the authority of the political chiefs. The evolution from one method of production to the other per force supposed a structural break-up

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of the production relations, and shed some light on the political power and things associated with it. Then by introducing tools, but most of all the raw materials necessary for their manufacture, the European first of all reduces and later eliminates the whole function and authority of the blacksmith. It is the massive introduction of raw materials and tools which explains at once the disappearance of the blacksmith as a key figure of production and the abandonment of a trade such as this by the nobility—a fact which actual practice accounts for, although it may be an ideological slant which falsifies history.⁵⁷ Not only is there a loss of social relations, but more important a transformation of the production relations, thus of social relations too, which is explained by the disappearance of the technical reasons which allowed the blacksmith to be socially differentiated: his arbitrary power is replaced by the laws governing the market.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we are still lacking a fairly significant amount of information. It has seemed worthwhile to us, nonetheless, to deviate from any analysis based on mythological explanations, in order to detach the participation of the blacksmith in every form of social practice. Reference to the myth has been replaced by reference to the state of things as they are.

This confrontation with the practice has demonstrated the impossibility of keeping the opposition between agricultural societies and cattle-raising societies as the unique criterion with

⁵⁷ Such a situation certainly calls to mind that of the Gouro, where "the absence of iron ore in the country and these exchange relationships (the iron was imported already refined in the form of metal lengths (*sompê*), dispensed with the use of advanced metallurgical techniques: there was neither extraction nor refinement of iron ore, only the work of fashioning the tools and weapons. The role of the blacksmiths, as well as their economic and social function, was, in these conditions, of too slight an importance for them to occupy any special position in society. They were not specialised, and they had no caste: the techniques of metallurgy had not yet reached the point of allowing any social differentiation, of the group." Claude Meillassoux, *Anthropologie économique des Gouro*, Paris, Mouton & Cie, 1964, p. 90. In this connection the fact is that for Congolese society it is a question of erasing the social difference, which can no longer be maintained by the relations of production, which have been severely overturned by the introduction of European merchandise.

regard to the integration of production methods. It goes without saying that the various attitudes towards the blacksmith which result from this criterion (the blacksmith being despised in cattle-raising societies, and respected in agricultural societies) must also have been rejected.

Under analysis, the relations between these groups and the blacksmith have appeared to be far less subtle and shaded and in no case can they be schematised in the decisive terms normally used. By only taking into account the ideologies—with which myth must be to some extent versed—it becomes impossible to understand the rules which define the social formations, which alone are capable of locating the position of the blacksmith, and the artisan, on a more general plane.

We therefore propose the impossibility of reducing the position of the blacksmith in the social formations, in which the dominant method of production is agriculture, by any single characterisation:

a) in those societies where agriculture is the only means of subsistence, the blacksmith has his caste, but he is feared and whatever the attitudes engendered by his position may be, this can be considered marginal. Nevertheless the prestige goods which he has to offer to the political headmen and the wealthy are an indirect participation in the political power structure, which is hereby confirmed and strengthened; the counterpart offered by the political chiefs and the men of means assures the artisan an important means of tapping the surplus produced by the whole complex of producers;

b) when agriculture, as the dominant method of production, is accompanied by the intensive practice of hunting, and often of war, the position of the blacksmith is radically modified; he is in a position to exercise a political control, if not the actual power;

c) in both cases, the metallurgical technique is sufficiently developed to allow some social differentiation of the group to be made. Nevertheless, when the merchant economy becomes dominant, the blacksmith is replaced by the trader;

d) In those societies where the method of production is cattle-raising, backed up by war and raiding parties, the blacksmith also has his caste, but he takes absolutely no part in the

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division of reinforcement of political power (he has no access to any part of the possible surplus; on the contrary, he must pay all his excess head of cattle to the dominant groups).

Thus we can isolate four situations which cannot be reduced down into terms of opposites: direct participation in political power, direct exercise of this power, simultaneous disappearance of the political power and of the social importance (thus technique) of the blacksmith, radical exclusion from all political power.

This inventory is not exhaustive. Other variations can be defined by more systematic analyses, which will take stock of the whole gamut of ethnographic facts.