The Myth of the Bagre

by Adrian Edwards, C.S.Sp.

Dr Jack Goody has over a period of twenty years done extensive fieldwork in northern Ghana, mainly among the LoDagaa (more commonly known as the Dagarti) and the Gonja. In both areas, he has exercised very satisfactorily the normal skills of the anthropologist dutifully recording the size of farming groups, and the ways inheritances are divided. However, farms are cultivated, and inheritances shared by human beings, who use language and live in time; and Goody's awareness of this has made him responsible for three books which related the history and literature (both written and oral) of northern Ghana to a wider world. In *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa*[1] Dr Goody argued that Ghanian history is significantly influenced not only by the means of production, but also by the means of destruction, the horse, associated with Islam and the savannas, and guns, associated with Christendom and the forests. In a contribution to *Literacy in Traditional Societies*[2] Dr Goody showed in the West African context, but with obviously much wider relevance, that the break-through to literacy may lead not towards secularization, but rather to mythifying and mystifying to a much greater degree than before. In *The Myth of the Bagre*[3] Goody has not only increased the available corpus of African oral literature by giving us the original texts and annotated translations of the two long Bagre poems, but has also indicated its place in the religion and world-view of the LoDagaa and its relevance to contemporary discussions of myth.

The LoDagaa[4] are not, strictly speaking, a 'tribe' in the colonialist sense of an obviously distinctive group, sharply distinguished from their neighbouring tribes. As happens in a number of areas in Africa, this particular area of northern Ghana is marked by a lack of coincidence between cultural and linguistic boundaries, and by the gradual way cultural differences appear with gradually increasing distance. Even the term has been selected for use to cover a given area by Dr Goody, albeit with some justification in local usage. The LoDagaa were chiefless in the pre-colonial era. In such a situation, religious cults could and did, and can and do, spread very easily from one group to another, and this was the case with the Bagre.

By the way the LoDagaa spoke to Goody about it, one would

[1]Oxford University Press for International African Institute, 1971.

[2]Cambridge University Press, 1968. This is a collection of essays by several hands. As well as being editor, Jack Goody was joint author of the 'keynote' essay, and contributed 'Restricted Literacy in Northern Ghana'.

[3]Oxford, the Clarendon Press. *Oxford Library of African Literature*, 1972, xii + 381 pp., £9.

[4]Dr Goody has introduced this term himself. Literally it means 'Westerners Easterners'. Earlier anthropologists had used the terms 'Lobi' and 'Dagarti' as though they referred to distinct units when, in fact, the 'Lobi' are the people to my west, and the 'Dagarti' the people to my east, whatever my geographical position.

judge the Bagre to be a 'community of sufferers' not too dissimilar from the cult-associations described by V. W. Turner[1] for the Ndembu of Zambia. It is entered following illness; membership is not obligatory, nor is the Bagre the only group of the kind in LoDagaa society. Both Ndembu and LoDagaa were effectively chiefless societies in areas of fluid ethnic boundaries. Goody himself notes the considerable degree of interaction between local groups that the Bagre rituals promote, yet he does not stress the social motives and functions of Bagre so much as its ideological and intellectual aspects.

A reading of the account of the Bagre rituals given by Goody is very reminiscent of his account of LoDagaa funeral rites, indeed the LoDagaa themselves say 'Funeral and Bagre are the same' (p. 85). It would seem that LoDagaa funerals provide their society with its major paradigm of ritual. Here are the same ritualized eating and drinking, the same pretended gestures, the same whitewashing, with its dangers for the inwardly impure, the same breaking of a new exit in the courtyard wall; those who are undergoing the Bagre initiation are thus ritually approximated to both corpse and mourners, and, indeed, there is even a mock slaying and resuscitation of the initiands, which Goody compares to that in Masonic ritual. Is this, then, the central theme of the Bagre; new life through a ritual death? Yet Goody warns us about this high point of the ritual, that there is 'a climate of mixed belief and disbelief—the whole ceremony has an air of acting about it' (pp. 98-99). Paradoxically, it is this very scepticism that, as we shall see, indicates the real openness to transcendence of LoDagaa thought.

What clues, then, are given by the poems themselves? The White Bagre poem is associated with the initiation to the first grade of the Bagre. It can be read as a verbal reinforcement of one of the major themes of Bagre ritual, the celebration of agriculture hunting, and cooking. 'They cooked it again/at dawn/they finished cooking,/and when it came to the time/that the sun was high,/they scooped it out/into the vats./The wise old woman/got up again/and took/her thing/'What thing?'/The yeast/it was/They added it/and the beer swelled up./And they took/the flour/that became porridge/Night fell/and two days later/they came back/and saw the flour/that was now porridge,/they saw the malt/that was now beer,/they saw the leaves/that were now soup./' (lines 3590-3618).

The White Bagre poem, at another level, has a mnemonic function. It is recited repeatedly during the initiation rituals, and much of it is taken up with descriptions of the various rites, in a setting of mythical time. At the end, various questions are posed by the initiands and answered. So far, so good. Nothing to disturb our dogmatic slumbers, the dogma in question being the normal 'British school' position, derived from Malinowski, that myth serves to provide a charter for ritual, or indeed any social institution, by

[1]See *The Drums of Affliction*, by V. W. Turner, Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 16.

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linking it to a golden age when sacred beings ordered the world. Even in the White Bagre poem, with its confident traditionalism, there are, however, hints that the Bagre has its limitations. Thus, after a long discussion on where God is, a spirit of the wild, one of the non-ancestral, rather ambivalent, creatures, referred to in English-language ethnography as 'sprites',[1] takes on himself to assume the role of the absent, mysterious God. 'The being of the wild/wanted to tempt them./He came/and descended,/declaring/that he/was God/in the Bagre house./' (lines 2457-2463). Later on, one of the initiands raises the question of why God does not come down among men. The answer given is that for Him to do so would lead to His involvement in human conflict and wrangling. 'That is why/God/doesn't want us/to see him/He is near/and yet far.'/(lines 6074-6079).

The other Bagre poem is associated with the second grade of the cult, the Black Bagre. It would not be possible to summarize it here; indeed, the summary which Dr Goody has thoughtfully provided takes five pages. It has something of a Genesis quality about it. The origins of fire, cooking, smithing, the making of bows and arrows, are described, or rather their transmission from the beings of the wild to the youngest brother, who is the main hero of the poem. Sexuality, however, is learnt from a snake. All this seems to fit the African pattern of creation myths, where the emphasis is laid on the gradual acquisition of specifically human characteristics. There is also stress laid on the growth of violence in human society, conflict between the generations, conflict between men over women, suicide. There is also the theme of the quest; the younger brother, aided by the spider, the joker-figure of Ghanaian folktales, climbs up to Heaven to see God.

Yet all this is subsidiary to the extraordinary double twist that is revealed. The Bagre, the most sacred rite known to its practitioners, is a deceit, given by the beings of the wild, as part of a successful effort to mislead man by usurping God's role. In reality, all that they give man has ultimately come from God, and their real originality lies in sowing confusion. There is a powerful passage (lines 4129-4670), where we seem to pass from Genesis to Job, God, and the being of the wild, and human interlocutors, debating the actual confused condition of mankind. Yet this is but a prologue to the final twist. Although the Bagre ritual is recognized as ambivalent, with both good and bad, and although it is part of man's separation from God, one might say an anti-covenant, yet its practitioners will not abandon it. To translate what seems to be their thought, it is the best they can do in the actual situation. If it does not offer a personal relationship with the distant Creator, it is helpful for them in life as they live it. 'It is/a matter of childbirth./That's why/they call it/the Black Bagre./

[1]French anthropologists call them 'genies'. They might be called 'fairies', provided we keep in mind the tricky gift-givers of the Celtic peoples rather than the prettified figures of English pantomime.

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It is/a matter of bows./That's why/they call it/the Black Bagre./ It is/a matter of farming./That's why/they call it/the Black Bagre.'/ (lines 5495-5505). Belief in God among the LoDagaa remains, as Goody makes abundantly clear, as an indicator of other possibilities beyond and apart from the Bagre. 'God emerges as an explanatory principle rather than as an active ingredient of LoDagaa religion. His position, as an otiose God is a function of the problem of evil. As the creator, he is good and omnipotent—With his aid, disease, evil, and misfortune could be banished.—But misfortune does exist and hence God is not amongst us. We have to deal as best we may with other agencies, who are in a sense creatures of God—they carry on an independent existence, come into conflict with him, reject his ways, and yet are more potent as far as mankind is concerned—there is always the possibility of drawing God back into the human situation.' (p. 32).

If it is possible for the European to find parallels to the Bagre poems and rites in customs and literatures with which he is acquainted, it is much less easy for him to find similar attitudes of mind to this awareness of transcendence, coupled with a tranquil acceptance of the second best. Faith and doubt and defiance are all attitudes to God with which we can have some empathy; but not surely, this choice of the unredeemedly and unredeemingly empirical. Certainly, the LoDagaa fit none of the theologians' cubbyholes for pagans; they are not continually terrified by fear of the unknown, their piety is scarcely uncritical and naïve, nor are they really 'anonymous Christians' cheerfully finding the equivalent of Christian salvation in their own religion, since the Bagre explicitly does not offer any saving breakthrough by the true God into human affairs. Equally, it does not exclude such a breakthrough; and it may be noted that the Catholic mission has gained many converts among the LoDagaa, and there have been a number of vocations to the priesthood.[1]

Apart from the markedly theocentric world-view which this myth offers us, there is, as Dr Goody points out, another theoretical lesson of high importance to be learnt from these poems. While theologians have been de-mythologizing and de-ritualizing Christianity, it is at least possible, assuming the counter-culture to be a valid sign, that they are arriving, not merely like the Church 'breathless and a little late', but on the wrong platform, with therefore no one to meet them. The last twenty years have seen an enormous growth of interest in the questions of hermetic communication, through myth, ritual and symbol, in different fields of human knowing and doing. Yet Goody does not assume, as he might very well have done, the role of guardian and guide to yet another closed universe, where all signs are changed from ours. For him, LoDagaa thought, even as expressed

[1]Father Augustine Dery, a LoDagaa priest, tells me that Bagre initiates readily appreciated much of Catholic symbolism.

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in the Bagre, is remarkable for its essential kinship with that of 'Western man'; it offers a universe of discourse characterized by its openness, its incompleteness, and its essential rationality, given the culture in which it exists. For that culture is, of course, an oral one; and it is, suggests Goody, the influence of our literate way of life that makes us quest, in meeting non-European religions, for some key which will unlock the inner doctrines and make everything fall into place. In reality, there is 'no defined, unchanging body of knowledge to unlock' (p. 16). A more appropriate model for Goody is the following of a mass of threads; an unwritten religion is like a conversation, with recurrent themes, dominant metaphors, occasional self-contradictions, a good dea of repetition, and no very ordered sequence or defined boundaries.

Goody's position is one of those that, as soon as they have been stated, seem obvious. But it leads him to attack fashionable positions; 'myth . . . does not have the central role in human cultures that Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss, and others have assigned, but is in many ways, peripheral, changing, the sort of thing that mankind can take or leave' (p. 33). Any one myth has to be seen not as womb-tomb where its devotees can dream away the pain of living, but as an attempt at explanation, unlikely to be more than partially successful at giving all the answers, and hence perpetually faced with revision or discarding.

If we accept this line of argument, clay-footedness becomes epidemic among intellectual idols. The contrasts between 'mythopoeic' and 'logico-empirical' thought appear quantitative rather than qualitative. The world of thought of tribal peasants may well be as open as that of academics. Modern man, that favoured interlocutor of theologians, may very well be taking, like the Bagre members, the path of empiricism and evident results, between metaphysical nostalgia and material pressures. The human mind that produced the Bagre is, reassuringly, much more like the human minds, which one finds among human beings, than the vast computer of Lévi-Strauss' imagining where 'myths think themselves without man's awareness'.[1]

It will, perhaps, be suggested that Goody's approach is to some degree a return to the 'intellectualist' explanations of myth favoured by nineteenth-century British anthropologists, notably Tylor, and he may even be classified with Robin Horton as a 'neo-Tylorian'.[2] It would be doubtful, I think, if Goody would accept Horton's comparison between science in Western society and religion in tribal societies (both providing explanatory models of the working of the world); indeed, Goody's originality, when compared to others who have contributed to the discussion of the sociology of reasoning since

[1]The French original is 'les mythes se pensent dans les hommes et a leur insu'. See Edmund Leach, *Lévi-Strauss*, Fontana/Collins, 1970, p. 51.

[2]For Robin Horton and his critics, see Gillian Ross, 'Neo-Tylorianism: a reassessment', *Man*, March 1971, pp. 105-116.

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the publication of Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* in 1937, lies precisely in his stressing the limited, incomplete, tentative character of much socially acceptable thought in traditional African societies, rather than seeing it as characterized by elaborate paradigms[1] of hypotheses, highly consistent with each other, and hence very difficult to refute. If we bring Goody's argument in his present book into relation with the arguments in *Literacy in Traditional Society*, it can be argued that the publicly accepted set of ideas in an oral culture is likely to have this conversational quality, hence a good many blurred edges, hence also a considerable capacity for adjusting to change, and absorbing new beliefs and ideas. The limited, sacral, quality of early literacy, on the other hand, is likely to promote rigid adherence to accepted patterns of thought. Obviously, this raises all sorts of questions about the way people in both oral and literate societies change their ideas or for that matter relate thought to action.

A word should be said in praise of Dr Goody's work as editor and translator. The shoals which earlier printings of African sacred texts have hit seem to have been avoided. News (as Dr Goody puts it) has been distinguished from views. The social setting of the text has been satisfactorily indicated. The LoDagaa text used has been printed in order to provide hatchet-carrying critics with every opportunity. We are even given some comments by a LoDagaa on text, translation, and rituals. Readers of Christine Brooke-Rose's *The Languages of Love* may remember a remark to the effect that creative art requires a gift of sympathy, whereas selfish people should stick to translating. Reflection on *The Myth of the Bagre* suggests a very different view; that effective translation requires a very considerable degree of self-sacrifice and self-effacement.

Morality is Marxism
by Denys Turner

Morality and the science of society

I have written this paper on the basis of the hunch that there is something very misleading about the relationship, as Marx sometimes

[1]For an interesting attempt to relate T. S. Kuhn's scientific paradigms to the way anthropologists have discussed the relation of beliefs to social structure, see S. B. Barnes, 'Paradigms-scientific and social', *Man*, March 1969, pp. 94-102. Perhaps further studies will show some oral cultures 'think' paradigmatically, others conversationally. How this presence or absence of sharply marked boundaries in beliefs relates to the presence or absence of social boundaries is yet another question.

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