Summary of Text 17: Religion and Ordeal by God

This text offers an extensive ethnological, religious-studies and psychological exploration of traditional African and archaic religious practices. Among other things, it examines the dynamics of the ordeal by God, secret societies, magical incantations, sexual initiation rites, and theological conceptions of ancestors and the Supreme Being.

1. Ordeal by God and the judicial consultation of spirits

In traditional societies, the administration of justice is closely intertwined with the sacred and occult worlds. An ordeal by God is a judicial procedure that invokes a direct decision or selection by a higher being or the spirit world.

When someone is accused of occult offences - such as sneaking around the homestead of a sick person at night or digging up animal carcasses - the magician administers a poisonous plant mixture to the suspect. If the accused urinates or suffers a nosebleed, they are considered innocent; if they succumb to paralysis or death, their guilt is deemed proven. In addition to plant poisons, consecrated fetishes are used, such as the clay vessel called *tinse*, which, through the application of sacred signs and the sacrificial blood of a chicken, goat or chameleon, is enabled to 'see into the invisible'.

A particular form of ordeal by God is the ordeal of the dead. In this practice, the corpse of a murdered person is carried on a mat by drugged bearers around a fetish vessel containing ancestral bones. The movements of the corpse - such as leaning to the left or right in response to the magician's questions - identify the guilty person. The person thus identified is subsequently ostracized and flees into the wilderness, where they die as a result of psychological disintegration and the presumed influence of spirits, symbolized by circling vultures.

2. Secret societies, leopard people and awareness of the soul

Secret societies play a dominant and sometimes criminal role within archaic religion. Initiation rites bind members to the powers of the underworld. For example, the Manja society worships the legendary man-eating spirit Ngakola. According to the myth, this spirit devours novices so that they can be reborn as initiates, renewed and strengthened. Victims who are ritually killed lose their life force and are made to serve the initiates in the underworld.

An extreme manifestation of this phenomenon is found among the leopard people and related groups such as the Simba. Initiation into such societies often requires the ritual murder of a relative, such as a parent. Clad in leopard skins, members abduct their victims, slit their throats over a consecrated

cauldron, drink their blood as a form of communion, and consume cooked organs such as the heart and liver in order to acquire occult power and invulnerability.

Alongside these dark practices, the text describes abilities associated with the control of the soul. Ethnological observations show how traditional healers can temporarily draw a person's soul out of their body. The physical body then enters an ice-cold, seemingly lifeless state, while the soul appears as a bird on the roof of the hut.

Through specific invocations and the use of an antelope horn, the soul is returned to the body. There are also structures of the soul, such as *yembo* (located in the spinal cord and associated with the recognition of danger) and *kasasa* (clairvoyance between the eyebrows), which, after initiation, make transformations of form possible - such as assuming the shape of a crocodile or wild boar (*n'doki*).

3. Incantation, the mythical serpent and magical rituals

When a person becomes possessed by a foreign spirit that displaces the soul, a therapeutic exorcism ritual is performed. Among the Luba, a possessed woman is brought into a state of ecstasy through drumming and singing, after which a fetish priestess inserts a horn containing a live lizard and fire into the vagina. The lizard acts as a protective spirit (totem) that drives away the evil spirit and restores the original harmony.

In cultures such as that of the Ngbandi, the mythical serpent occupies a central position as Toro (Supreme Spirit). The worship of the serpent governs the entire social life; twins, in particular, are believed to have an intimate bond with the serpent. Messages from the serpent are conveyed through dreams and must be followed strictly, on pain of illness or death.

Magical and symbolic actions also play a key role in rainmaking. The rainmaker cuts a 'female' furrow into the earth, surrounds it with white and black stones, and sprinkles the site with the sacrificial blood of a chicken. This blood symbolizes menstrual blood, which magically fertilizes the earth.

4. Sexuality as a sacred dimension and the role of women

Within traditional African religion, sexuality has a profound mystical and metaphysical character. Among peoples such as the Yombe, Vili and Kongo, the female sexual organ is regarded as a sacred 'tabernacle' or shrine in which the ancestral deity resides. During sexual intercourse, it is the ancestral deity who impregnates the woman through her husband. The virginity of unmarried women must therefore be strictly preserved. This is overseen by the *Mama Mfumu* (a consecrated female marriage initiator) and through institutions such as the *thingira* among the Kikuyu, where young people release sexual energy

through *Ngweko* (ritual foreplay without penetration) without violating the tabernacle.

The traditionalist view of the clitoris also belongs in this context. According to fetish priests, the deity gave women the clitoris so that they could experience pleasure before marriage without defiling the virginal womb. Clitoridectomy (female genital cutting) before marriage is then intended to direct sexual desire entirely towards internal ancestral impregnation after the marriage ceremony. In addition, secret women's societies exist, such as the Nyembe in Gabon, which perform ritual dances around a sacred earthen phallus to celebrate the social and religious role of women. Consecrated wooden phalluses are also used as 'rhetorical' supplications to the deity in order to compel the granting of offspring.

5. Magical objects, ancestors and the Supreme Being

Every new magical object - such as a sacred mask - requires careful consecration in order not to disturb the cosmos. A magician charges a mask with life force (*mana*) through incantations, singing and the writhing movements of a consecrated serpent, with the aim of providing protection against bewitchment and infant mortality. Bewitchment (*envoûtement*) manifests itself through an accumulation of symptoms: unexplained loss of energy, chronic fatigue, anxiety, relationship breakdowns, financial setbacks and unusual physical ailments.

When justice is administered in forests, as in Gabon, judges undergo initiation through the ingestion of sacred plants (*alan* and *iboga*). As a result, the spirit of the primordial ancestor Byeri or the plant spirit Mundju enters the judge's head, causing their pronouncements to become the infallible voice of truth.

Finally, the text addresses the Supreme Being. Although everyday religious life is governed by interactions with spirits, fetishes and ancestors, Africans turn to the Supreme Being in dramatic or unusual crisis situations. This Supreme Being has no equal, transcends all categories, and constitutes the ultimate origin of all reality and truth.