



**Conversations  
with  
Ogotemmêli**

**AN INTRODUCTION TO DOGON  
RELIGIOUS IDEAS**

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IN 1948 Marcel Griaule published *Entretiens avec Ogotemméli*. Written in an informal style, it is a work of scholarship—for it was intended to make the characteristics of Dogon life more widely known—based on intensive studies of Griaule's informants among the Dogon people, since it attempted to reconstruct Dogon cosmology as he had learned it. It was suggested to Professor Griaule that it should be published but he declined, preferring to carry on his Dogon studies himself and to complete the documentation and illustrations.

Following his deeply regretted death, the Institute gave some thought to publishing an English version of his studies. It accordingly welcomed the offer of Professor Redfield, on behalf of the Department of Religion of the University of Chicago, the cost of preparing an English version proved easy to obtain such a version will be of value in the study of African religion. Professor Griaule's text is the original. Our thanks are due to Professor Redfield and to Beatrice Hooke who under-

## PREFACE

IN one of the most remarkable mountain areas in Africa lives a population of peasant-warriors who were one of the last peoples to lose their independence and come under French rule. Many Europeans have regarded the Dogon as savages, if not the most backward race in the whole region. They have been thought to practise human sacrifice and to offer resistance to outside influence all the more effectively because of the natural difficulties of the country they inhabit. Writers have described their fears when embarking on what were thought to be rash expeditions. In the light of these stories, and on account of suspected revolts, often the result of misunderstandings, whole villages have sometimes been laid under an interdict.

The Dogon, in short, were thought to present one of the best examples of primitive savagery, and this view has been shared by some Muslim Africans, who are no better equipped intellectually than Europeans to understand those of their brothers who cling to the traditions of their ancestors. Only those officials who have undertaken the hard task of governing these people have learnt to love them.

The author of this book and his numerous fellow-workers have been associated with the Dogon for some fifteen years, and through their published works these people are today the best-known tribe in the whole of the Western Sudan. *Les Ames des Dogon*, by G. Dieterlen (1941), *Les Devises*, by S. de Ganay (1941), and *Les Masques*, by M. Griaule (1938), have furnished scholars with proof that the life of these Africans was based on complicated but orderly conceptions and on institutional and ritual systems in which there was nothing haphazard or fantastic. Ten years ago these works had already drawn attention to new facts concerning the 'vital force', about which sociologists have been telling us for half a century past. They have shown the primary importance of the notion of the person and his relations with society, with the universe, and with the divine.

Thus Dogon ontology has opened new vistas for ethnologists and placed the problem on a broader basis.

More recently, too, in his notable book *La Philosophie bantoue* (1945) the Rev. Fr. Tempels presented an analysis of conceptions of this kind, and raised the question of whether 'Bantu thought should not be regarded as a system of philosophy'.

As a result of patient and methodical research, pursued for fifteen years from the time when the first steps were taken in the rocky cliffs of Bandiagara, this question can now be answered, so far as the Dogon are concerned: for these people live by a cosmogony, a metaphysic, and a religion which put them on a par with the peoples of antiquity, and which Christian theology might indeed study with profit.

The teaching on these subjects was imparted to the author by a venerable individual, Ogotemméli, of Lower Ogol. This man, a hunter who had lost his sight by an accident, was able, as a result of his infirmity, to devote long and careful study to these things. Endowed with exceptional intelligence, a physical capacity which was still apparent in spite of his affliction, and a wisdom, the fame of which has spread throughout his country, he had quickly appreciated the interest attaching to the ethnological work of the Europeans, and had been waiting fifteen years for an opportunity to impart his knowledge to them. He was anxious, no doubt, that they should be acquainted with the most important institutions, customs, and rituals of his own people.

In October 1946 he summoned the author to his house, and on thirty-three successive days, in a series of unforgettable conversations, he laid bare the framework of a world system, the knowledge of which will revolutionize all accepted ideas about the mentality of Africans and of primitive peoples in general.

It might be thought that we are here concerned with esoteric teaching; some have even suggested, on a first impression, without waiting for further details, that it was a case of personal speculations of merely secondary interest. These are, moreover, the very people who will devote a lifetime to the presumably personal ideas of Plato or Julian of Halicarnassus.

But although the full range of this teaching is known only to the elders and to certain initiates, it is not esoteric in character,

since anyone who reaches old age can acquire it. Moreover, totemic priests of all ages are acquainted with those parts of the doctrine which specially concern them, while the ritual observances attaching to this corpus of beliefs are practised by the whole people.

Obviously the ordinary people do not apprehend the profounder significance of their actions and their prayers; but this is true of all peoples. The Christian dogma of Transubstantiation cannot be called esoteric merely because the man in the street is ignorant of the word and has only vague ideas as to its meaning.

Similar reservations might be made as to the explanatory and representative value of these doctrines and their bearing on African mentality in general. It might be maintained, for example, that what is true of the Dogon is not true of the other peoples of the Western Sudan.

To that contention the author and his colleagues have a convincing reply: the thought of the Bambara is based on an equally systematic and equally rich metaphysic, the fundamental principles of which are comparable to those of the Dogon. The works of Madame G. Dieterlen and Madame de Ganay present evidence that this is so. The same is true of the Bozo fishermen of the Niger, of the Kouroumba farmers of the Niger bend, and of the mysterious iron-workers of these same regions, on which research is only just beginning.

We are not concerned, therefore, in the present instance, with a single unusual system of thought, but rather with the first example of a series which will prove to be a long one.

In his work in this connection the author hopes to attain two objects: on the one hand to present to a non-specialist public, and without the usual scientific apparatus, a work which would customarily be addressed only to experts. On the other hand he is concerned to pay a tribute to the first African in French West Africa who has revealed to the European world a cosmogony as rich as that of Hesiod, poet of a dead world, and a metaphysic that has the advantage of being expressed in a thousand rites and actions in the life of a multitude of living people.

## The Ogols

THE sun had risen abruptly from the plain of the Gondo, and was shining down upon the roofs of Lower Ogol. The birds had ceased their song, leaving the sun to take the centre of the stage. In the courtyard of the caravanserai, typical of every camping place in the French Sudan, the last moments of peace were slipping away. Round a forgotten dish of food remaining from the previous day traces of asses' hooves marked the tracks of the night's visitors. Four neat heaps of dung, which might have served as specimens for the Mammals' department of a museum, had not yet at that hour become a centre of attraction for the dung-beetles.

A large sloping rock of pinkish-grey served as a low table in the service-yard in front of the cube-shaped building of cracked earth, which faced away from the rising sun and looked out from all its entrances on the Dolo valley. No mountain broke the view in any direction except to the east, where by going up to one of the roofs it was possible to discern the gentle slope of Ninu rising above the debris of Banani.

We were engulfed in a turbulent sea of sandstone, cleft by narrow sandy valleys and broken by wave-like ridges of rock which reflected the sunlight. The only shelter was provided by folds in the arid landscape, and faces and bodies were scoured by the sand with which the air was laden.

In the shadowy interior of the building, open to every wind since it was without doors or windows, the first stirrings of early morning activity were beginning. Four Europeans under mosquito-nets were exchanging the usual trivial remarks. In the courtyard, now bathed in a subdued pinkish-yellow light, a figure flooded with sunlight appeared between two pillars of the surrounding wall. He paused for a moment to contemplate the scene inside, still arranged for the night. He saw the bowl and

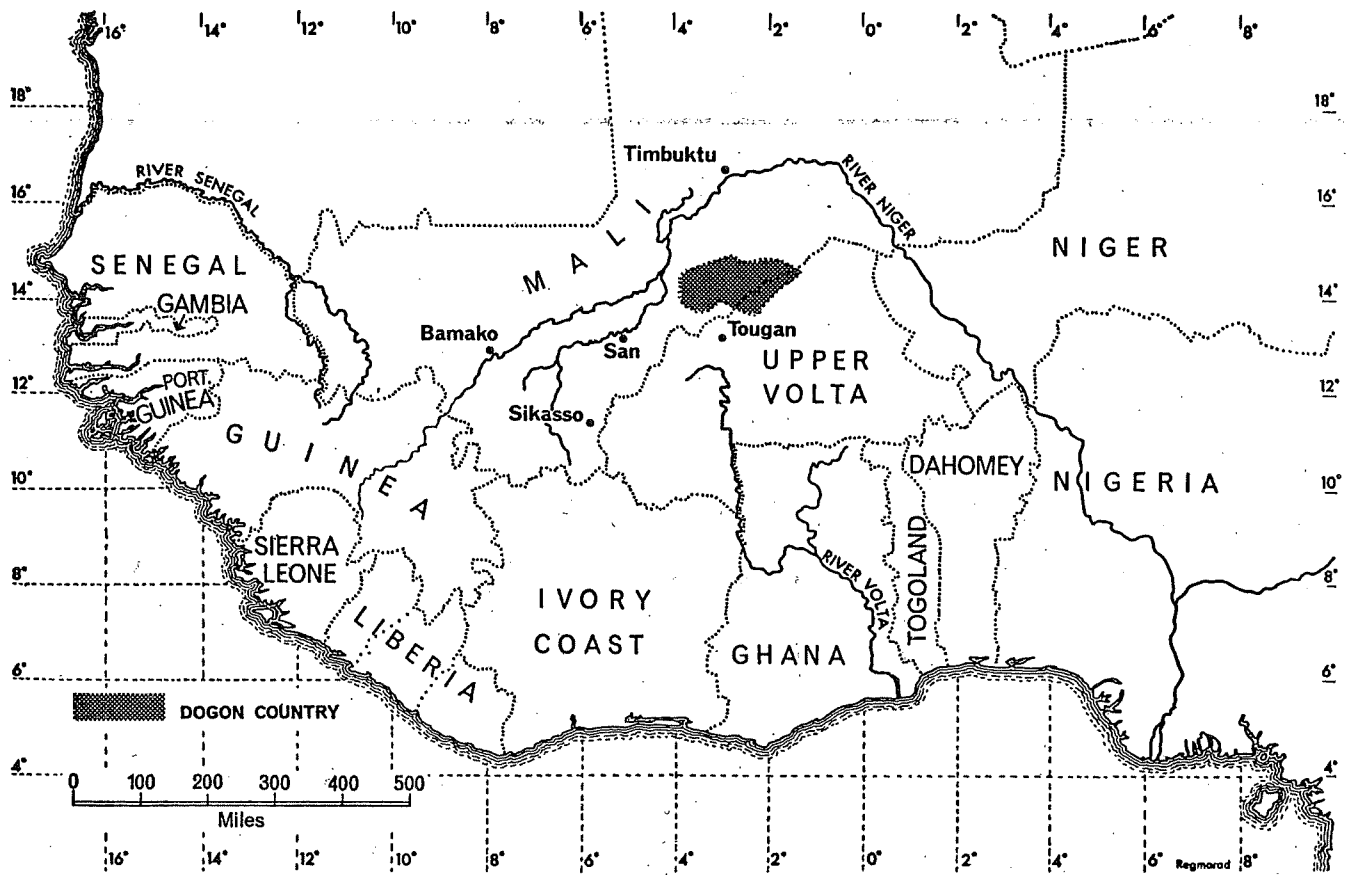


FIG. 1. West Africa showing Dogon country

the ass-droppings and, fallen in the dust, the barrier of mats which should have screened the kitchen. Eventually his glance came to rest on the window of the store-room, and he noticed the disorder of the millet stalks put up to keep out the cats.

Ményu was a gentle African of Upper Ogol, the devoted servant of the four foreigners, whom he had known for a long time. He stifled an oath and, waving his arms in the wide sleeves of his long white coat, advanced to deal with these calamities.

The action of the day began to take shape. Apurali, the steward, had already exchanged interminable greetings with his colleague. Other Dogon made their appearance, filling the courtyard; a woman with their children on their backs needing eye-treatment; a girl with a skull injury; naked babies with bulging stomachs settled themselves to watch the spectacle which was going to last all day. On the walls, on the rock in the centre, on the steps of the house, informants and interpreters waited in groups till their names were called. The scene was a repetition of what had happened the day before and the day before that, and every day for fifteen years past whenever white men visited the southern ridge of Upper Ogol.

In a corner of the verandah a European was continuing an enquiry, begun the day before, into a mysterious sacrifice which had taken place in a cleft in the Gorge of I. On the previous day he had penetrated into the caves and funnels in the sandstone and, descending by ledges in the rocks, had come to some ruins where the scent of wild animals and bats was strong. An elderly Dogon was giving scraps of information in reply to his questions, reluctantly surrendering the bare bones of the truth, now going back on what he had said before, now proffering lies, smiling or abashed, but resolutely clinging to his mysteries. His brown Phrygian cap hung down over one ear, covering his dark face with its only slightly thick lips, his thin nose and eyes without lashes.

In the north gallery actions were more animated. A young European woman was conducting a choir of four Dogon belonging to different groups, each speaking a dialect of its own; since each possessed a rich vocabulary and a great number of verbs of action, the four speakers soon became impassioned actors, miming the attitudes they were expressing and shouting examples.

The north room was more like a confessional; priests of the cult of the ancestors were speaking in lowered voices to a European woman who was at once patient and persistent.

In the south gallery another white woman was writing down the text of prayers to Komo at the dictation of a bright-eyed Bambara.

'Komo! Killer of fat dead!'

'Shroud of the living!'

All four points of the compass therefore were full of the usual daily sequence of rumour, short-lived outbursts, and slackening of tension.

But now a novelty was approaching in the person of Gana, son of the Hogon, the oldest man, and consequently the religious chief, of Ogol. He was coming towards the building along the embankment a bare handbreadth wide between two fields of high millet. Between his lips he had a chewing-stick, which he took in his hand when he wished to greet his acquaintances. His baggy breeches and full tunic introduced a touch of brown colour among the cornstalks.

On reaching the rocky slope of Upper Ogol, he proceeded to climb it, following the track worn smooth by thousands of feet. He saluted the building from the outside before entering the courtyard. There he came up to the European and smiled; his ears seemed to draw closer to each other on either side of his narrow skull.

'A hunter wishes to see you.'

'Is he sick?'

When an African asks to see a European, it is usually because he is sick; otherwise he is not particularly interested in meeting a white man.

'No! He wishes to sell you an amulet.'

'What amulet?'

'The amulet you ordered ten years ago in return for the bullets.'

'I have no recollection of that.'

The European bit his lip, realizing suddenly the unusual character of this request. 'Good!' he said and, continuing his conversation with the man who had offered the sacrifice, sent Gana to fetch the amulet.

The latter with his chewing-stick in his mouth made his way

back along the path he had come by, leaping down the rocks of Upper Ogol and crossing through the millet, till he was lost to view in the tangle of houses in Lower Ogol. Here he entered a courtyard, and said something in a low voice in front of an open door. A thin hand emerged from the shadows within to hand him a trapeze-shaped piece of leather covered with dried blood.

Gana made his way back along the same path, and appeared before the European.

'And the formula?' said the white man. 'Have you got that?'

'What formula?'

'The formula for its manufacture and use. Go and get it!'

'I know it,' said the man who had offered the sacrifice, speaking when Gana's back was turned, and proceeded at once to repeat it to the European, who wrote it down.

The seventeen-year-old Gana knew well enough what to make of these concerns of his elders and betters. Once again he leapt down the rocks of Upper Ogol, but this time he remained standing stiffly on the track, and with a quick movement took his chewing-stick from his mouth: he had got a thorn in his foot. Then he proceeded on his way limping, and again sought out the courtyard in the labyrinth of narrow streets. Sitting down on the threshold of the African's house he spoke at length, while he removed a splinter from his toe. A slow voice answered him, to which he listened respectfully. Then with a slight sigh he returned to the white man, whom he now found alone on the verandah. To him, after removing his chewing-stick, he repeated the formula, forgetting three verses, which his interlocutor promptly read out to him from his notes. Gana's jaw dropped for a moment in astonishment.

'But who is this old hunter?' the white man asked.

He did not understand. He thought that the European wanted to know the man's device.

'*Vizé!*' he said. '*Vizé karankang!*'

Which means: 'A man to keep away from! A terrible man!'

FIRST DAY

Ogotemméli

Lower Ogol, like all Dogon villages, was a collection of houses and granaries all crowded together, flat roofs of clay alternating with cone-shaped roofs of straw. Picking one's way along its narrow streets of light and shade, between the truncated pyramids, prisms, cubes or cylinders of the granaries and houses, the rectangular porticoes, the red or white altars shaped like umbilical hernias, one felt like a dwarf lost in a maze. Everything was mottled by the rains and the heat; the mud-walls were fissured like the skins of pachyderms. Over the walls of the tiny courtyards might be seen, under the floors of the granaries, fowls, yellow dogs, and sometimes great tortoises, symbols of the patriarchs.

At a turn of the street there was a door, shaped with an axe, but, even when new, it could never have fitted the entrance built of earthen pillars with a pediment of wooden blocks. The door was as wide as a man's two shoulders; winter rains had ploughed wave-like furrows in the wood between which the knots looked like open eyes. Drought, clutching hands, and the muzzles of goats had worn it away so that it grated on its hinges and swung back against the wall with a bang like a gong, revealing a squalid courtyard, which belonged to the most remarkable man of the plains and rocks from Oropa to Nimbé, Asákarba and Tintam.

The white man stepped over the scanty midden of an old man with no family. A row of cabins, broken by a low door on the ground floor and a flat panel on the floor above, stood in the middle of the courtyard forming a façade which concealed the main building behind it. In the pediment were ten swallows' nests, and the edge of the roof was adorned by eight cones with flat stone tops. To right and left were six granaries in a row like big dice, two of them facing the neighbouring



house, to which they belonged. Of the other four one was empty, another rickety, and the third split across like a half-bitten fruit. Only one of them was in use: it was half full of grain.

Opposite, between the main building and the granaries, a low house, in which there were faint sounds of life, completed the enclosure of the courtyard. On the right in a store-room open to the sky there was a perpetual whirl of down blown about by a light breeze.

The man accompanying the European pronounced the usual words of greeting. Immediately a voice replied clearly and distinctly:

'God brings you! God brings you!'

'Greetings! How is your health?'

Slowly the voice drew nearer. From the shadows of the interior came the sound of hands feeling their way along walls and woodwork. A stick tapped on the floor: there was a sound of hollow earthenware: some tiny chickens made their way out one by one through the cat-hole, thrust out by the great being who was approaching.

At last there appeared a brown tunic, drawn in at the seams and frayed by long use like the standards of the warriors of old. Then a head bent beneath the lintel of the door, and the man stood up to his full height, turning towards the stranger a face that no words can describe.

'Greetings!' he said, 'Greetings to those who are athirst!'

The thick lips spoke the purest Sanga language. So alive were they that one saw nothing else. All the other features seemed to be folded away, particularly as, after the first words, the head had been bent. The cheeks, the cheek-bones, the forehead and the eyelids seemed all to have suffered the same ravages; they were creased by a hundred wrinkles which had caused a painful contortion as of a face exposed to too strong a light or battered by a hail of stones. The eyes were dead.

The two visitors came from outside, and might therefore be supposed to have been working in the heat. Accordingly the old man leaning on his stick greeted them with the words:

'Welcome! Welcome after weariness! Welcome from the sun!'

The longest task of the first day was the choice of a place for

the conversations. The space in front of the dwelling-house, even if the aged Ogotemméli remained indoors, and even if the white man bent his head towards him and spoke in low tones as if in the confessional, was, according to Ogotemméli, open to the objection that interviews there might excite the eternal curiosity of the women. The minute courtyard on the other side of the building, on the other hand, which was exposed to all the winds from the north, might be watched by children hidden in the ruined granary. There remained the courtyard itself with its wretched dung-heap, its hollow stone, its ashes and its dilapidated wall with a gap in the middle of it just high enough for curious eyes to look through.

Ogotemméli still hesitated; he had much to say about the inconvenience of the courtyard for the purpose of conversations between men of mature years. The European for his part did not open his mouth except to agree; he even stressed the indiscreet nature of walls and the stupidity of men and, naturally, the unconscionable curiosity of women and their insatiable thirst for novelties. All these precautions interested him: they seemed so out of proportion to the simple sale of an amulet.

In the end Ogotemméli sat down on the threshold of the lower door of the main façade; doubled up, with his face bent downwards and his hands crossed above his head, his elbows resting on his knees, he waited.

The white man was beginning to realize that the sale of the amulet was only a pretext. There was no reference to it in the subsequent conversations, and the underlying reason for the old man's action never transpired. But from various details it appeared, as time went on, that Ogotemméli wished to pass on to the foreigner, who had first visited the country fifteen years before, and whom he trusted, the instruction which he himself had received first from his grandfather and later from his father.

But he was waiting. He was perplexed by the result of his own approaches to this man whom he could not see. Not that the man was unknown to him: for fifteen years he had been hearing about groups of Europeans, who came, under this man's guidance, to live rough and to ride about the country studying the customs of the people.

He had even followed their work since the beginning, for he had been closely associated with Ambibé Babadyé, the great

dignitary of the masks and the white men's regular informant, who had only recently died. Many times in the last fifteen years Ambibé had come to Ogotemméli for information and advice. From what Ambibé had told him, and from the reports of a number of other persons, he had formed a correct idea of the aims and objects of his interlocutor and his unwearying passion for research.

But the situation was unique. How was one to instruct a European? How could one make him understand things and rites and beliefs? Moreover this white man had already found out about the masks, and knew their secret language. He had been all over the country in every direction, and about some of its institutions he knew as much as he knew himself. How then to set about it?

The European relieved him of his embarrassment.

'When your gun exploded in your face, what were you firing at?'

'At a porcupine.'

The white man was trying by an indirect approach to lead the conversation to hunting and the attitude towards the animal world, and so to totemism.

'It was an accident,' said the old man. 'But it was also a last warning. I knew by divination that I was to give up hunting if I wanted to protect my children. Hunting is a work of death, and it attracts death. I have had twenty-one children, and now only five are left.'

All the tragedy of African mortality was in his words, and all the deep questionings of these men about death and their defencelessness in the face of it. They clung to their beliefs, as do all men everywhere, but though beliefs may console and explain, they cannot avert the experience.

It was on this plane of suffering that Ogotemméli's personality was revealed, in itself and in its relation with supernatural powers. From the age of fifteen he had been initiated in the mysteries of religion by his grandfather. After the latter's death his father had continued the instruction. It seemed that the 'lessons' had gone on for more than twenty years, and that Ogotemméli's family was not one that took these things lightly. Ogotemméli himself, no doubt, had from a very early age shown signs of an eager mind and considerable shrewdness.

Until he lost his sight, he was a mighty hunter who, though one-eyed from childhood as a result of smallpox, would always come back from the chase with a full bag, while the others were still toiling in the gorges. His skill as a hunter was the fruit of his profound knowledge of nature, of animals, of men and of gods. After his accident he learnt still more. Thrown back on his own resources, on his altars and on whatever he was able to hear, he had become one of the most powerful minds on the cliffs.

Indeed his name and his character were famous throughout the plateau and the hills, known (as the saying was) to the youngest boy. People came to his door for advice every day and even by night.

Phrygian caps were even now showing above the walls, and the women were making signs from a distance. It was time to go, and make room for the clients. But contact had now been made, and the conversations thereafter came about by tacit consent, according to a sort of programme and at convenient times.

## SECOND DAY

# The First Word and the Fibre Skirt

OgOTEMMÉLI, seating himself on his threshold, scraped his stiff leather snuff-box, and put a pinch of yellow powder on his tongue.

'Tobacco,' he said, 'makes for right thinking.'

So saying, he set to work to analyse the world system, for it was essential to begin with the dawn of all things. He rejected as a detail of no interest, the popular account of how the fourteen solar systems were formed from flat circular slabs of earth one on top of the other. He was only prepared to speak of the ser-viceable solar system; he agreed to consider the stars, though they only played a secondary part.

'It is quite true,' he said, 'that in course of time women took down the stars to give them to their children. The children put spindles through them and made then spin like fiery tops to show themselves how the world turned. But that was only a game.'

The stars came from pellets of earth flung out into space by the God Amma, the one God. He had created the sun and the moon by a more complicated process, which was not the first known to man but is the first attested invention of God: the art of pottery. The sun is, in a sense, a pot raised once for all to white heat and surrounded by a spiral of red copper with eight turns. The moon is the same shape, but its copper is white. It was heated only one quarter at a time. Ogotemméli said he would explain later the movements of these bodies. For the moment he was concerned only to indicate the main lines of the design, and from that to pass to its actors.

He was anxious, however, to give an idea of the size of the sun. 'Some,' he said, 'think it is as large as this encampment, which

would mean thirty cubits. But it is really bigger. Its surface area is bigger than the whole of Sanga Canton.'

And after some hesitation he added:

'It is perhaps even bigger than that.'

He refused to linger over the dimensions of the moon, nor did he ever say anything about them. The moon's function was not important, and he would speak of it later. He said however that, while Africans were creatures of light emanating from the fullness of the sun, Europeans were creatures of the moonlight: hence their immature appearance.

He spat out his tobacco as he spoke. Ogotemméli had nothing against Europeans. He was not even sorry for them. He left them to their destiny in the lands of the north.

The God Amma, it appeared, took a lump of clay, squeezed it in his hand and flung it from him, as he had done with the stars. The clay spread and fell on the north, which is the top, and from there stretched out to the south, which is the bottom, of the world, although the whole movement was horizontal. The earth lies flat, but the north is at the top. It extends east and west with separate members like a foetus in the womb. It is a body, that is to say, a thing with members branching out from a central mass. This body, lying flat, face upwards, in a line from north to south, is feminine. Its sexual organ is an ant-hill, and its clitoris a termite hill. Amma, being lonely and desirous of intercourse with this creature, approached it. That was the occasion of the first breach of the order of the universe.

Ogotemméli ceased speaking. His hands crossed above his head, he sought to distinguish the different sounds coming from the courtyards and roofs. He had reached the point of the origin of troubles and of the primordial blunder of God.

'If they overheard me, I should be fined an ox!'

At God's approach the termite hill rose up, barring the passage and displaying its masculinity. It was as strong as the organ of the stranger, and intercourse could not take place. But God is all-powerful. He cut down the termite hill, and had intercourse with the excised earth. But the original incident was destined to affect the course of things for ever; from this defective union there was born, instead of the intended twins, a single being, the *Thos aureus* or jackal, symbol of the difficulties of God.

Ogotemmelí's voice sank lower and lower. It was no longer a question of women's ears listening to what he was saying; other, non-material, ear-drums might vibrate to his important discourse. The European and his African assistant, Sergeant Koguem, were leaning towards the old man as if hatching plots of the most alarming nature.

But, when he came to the beneficent acts of God, Ogotemmelí's voice again assumed its normal tone.

God had further intercourse with his earth-wife, and this time without mishaps of any kind, the excision of the offending member having removed the cause of the former disorder. Water, which is the divine seed, was thus able to enter the womb of the earth and the normal reproductive cycle resulted in the birth of twins. Two beings were thus formed. God created them like water. They were green in colour, half human beings and half serpents. From the head to the loins they were human; below that they were serpents. Their red eyes were wide open like human eyes, and their tongues were forked like the tongues of reptiles. Their arms were flexible and without joints. Their bodies were green and sleek all over, shining like the surface of water, and covered with short green hairs, a presage of vegetation and germination.

These spirits, called Nummo, were thus two homogeneous products of God, of divine essence like himself, conceived without untoward incidents and developed normally in the womb of the earth. Their destiny took them to Heaven, where they received the instructions of their father. Not that God had to teach them speech, that indispensable necessity of all beings, as it is of the world-system; the Pair were born perfect and complete; they had eight members, and their number was eight, which is the symbol of speech.

They were also of the essence of God, since they were made of his seed, which is at once the ground, the form, and the substance of the life-force of the world, from which derives the motion and the persistence of created being. This force is water, and the Pair are present in all water: they *are* water, the water of the seas, of coasts, of torrents, of storms, and of the spoonfuls we drink.

Ogotemmelí used the terms 'Water' and 'Nummo' indiscriminately.

'Without Nummo,' he said, 'it was not even possible to create the earth, for the earth was moulded clay and it is from water (that is, from Nummo) that its life is derived.'

'What life is there in the earth?' asked the European.

'The life-force of the earth is water. God moulded the earth with water. Blood too he made out of water. Even in a stone there is this force, for there is moisture in everything.'

'But if Nummo is water, it also produces copper. When the sky is overcast, the sun's rays may be seen materializing on the misty horizon. These rays, excreted by the spirits, are of copper and are light. They are water too, because they uphold the earth's moisture as it rises. The Pair excrete light, because they are also light.'

While he was speaking, Ogotemmelí had been searching for something in the dust. He finally collected a number of small stones. With a rapid movement he flung them into the courtyard over the heads of his two interlocutors, who had no time to bend down. The stones fell just where the Hogon's cock had been crowing a few seconds before.

'That cock is a squalling nuisance. He makes all conversation impossible.'

The bird began to crow again on the other side of the wall, so Ogotemmelí sent Koguem to throw a bit of wood at him. When Koguem came back, he asked whether the cock was now outside the limits of the Tabda quarter.

'He is in the Hogon's field,' said Koguem. 'I have set four children to watch him.'

'Good!' said Ogotemmelí with a little laugh. 'Let him make the most of what remains to him of life! They tell me he is to be eaten at the next Feast of Twins.'

He returned to the subject of the Nummo spirits, or (as he more usually put it, in the singular) of Nummo, for this pair of twins, he explained, represented the perfect, the ideal unit.

The Nummo, looking down from Heaven, saw their mother, the earth, naked and speechless, as a consequence no doubt of the original incident in her relations with the God Amma. It was necessary to put an end to this state of disorder. The Nummo accordingly came down to earth, bringing with them fibres pulled from plants already created in the heavenly regions. They took ten bunches of these fibres, corresponding to

the number of their ten fingers, and made two strands of them, one for the front and one for behind. To this day masked men still wear these appendages hanging down to their feet in thick tendrils.

But the purpose of this garment was not merely modesty. It manifested on earth the first act in the ordering of the universe and the revelation of the helicoid sign in the form of an undulating broken line.

For the fibres fell in coils, symbol of tornadoes, of the windings of torrents, of eddies and whirlwinds, of the undulating movement of reptiles. They recall also the eight-fold spirals of the sun, which sucks up moisture. They were themselves a channel of moisture, impregnated as they were with the freshness of the celestial plants. They were full of the essence of Nummo: they *were* Nummo in motion, as shown in the undulating line, which can be prolonged to infinity.

When Nummo speaks, what comes from his mouth is a warm vapour which conveys, and itself constitutes, speech. This vapour, like all water, has sound, dies away in a helicoid line. The coiled fringes of the skirt were therefore the chosen vehicle for the words which the Spirit desired to reveal to the earth. He endured his hands with magic power by raising them to his lips while he plaited the skirt, so that the moisture of his words was imparted to the damp plaits, and the spiritual revelation was embodied in the technical instruction.

In these fibres full of water and words, placed over his mother's genitalia, Nummo is thus always present.

Thus clothed, the earth had a language, the first language of this world and the most primitive of all time. Its syntax was elementary, its verbs few, and its vocabulary without elegance. The words were breathed sounds scarcely differentiated from one another, but nevertheless vehicles. Such as it was, this ill-defined speech sufficed for the great works of the beginning of all things.

In the middle of a word Ogotemméli gave a loud cry in answer to the hunter's halloo which the discreet Akundyo, priest of women dying in childbirth and of stillborn children, had called through the gap in the wall.

Akundyo first spat to one side, his eye riveted on the group of men. He was wearing a red Phrygian cap which covered his

ears, with a raised point like a uraeus on the bridge of the nose in the fashion known as 'the wind blows'. His cheek-bones were prominent, and his teeth shone. He uttered a formal salutation to which the old man at once replied and the exchange of courtesies became more and more fulsome.

'God's curse,' exclaimed Ogotemméli, 'on any in Lower Ogol who love you not!'

With growing emotion Akundyo made shift to out-do the vigour of the imprecation.

'May God's curse rest on me,' said the blind man at last, 'if I love you not!'

The four men breathed again. They exchanged humorous comments on the meagreness of the game in the I valley. Eventually Akundyo took his leave of them, asserting in the slangy French of a native soldier that he was going to 'look for porcupine', an animal much esteemed by these people.

The conversation reverted to the subject of speech. Its function was organization, and therefore it was good; nevertheless from the start it let loose disorder.

This was because the jackal, the deluded and deceitful son of God, desired to possess speech, and laid hands on the fibres in which language was embodied, that is to say, on his mother's skirt. His mother, the earth, resisted this incestuous action. She buried herself in her own womb, that is to say, in the anthill, disguised as an ant. But the jackal followed her. There was, it should be explained, no other woman in the world whom he could desire. The hole which the earth made in the anthill was never deep enough, and in the end she had to admit defeat. This prefigured the even-handed struggles between men and women, which, however, always end in the victory of the male.

The incestuous act was of great consequence. In the first place it endowed the jackal with the gift of speech so that ever afterwards he was able to reveal to diviners the designs of God.

It was also the cause of the flow of menstrual blood, which stained the fibres. The resulting defilement of the earth was incompatible with the reign of God. God rejected that spouse, and decided to create living beings directly. Modelling a womb in damp clay, he placed it on the earth and covered it with a pellet flung out into space from heaven. He made a male organ

in the same way and having put it on the ground, he flung out a sphere which stuck to it.

The two lumps forthwith took organic shape; their life began to develop. Members separated from the central core, bodies appeared, and a human pair arose out of the lumps of earth.

At this point the Nummo Pair appeared on the scene for the purpose of further action. The Nummo foresaw that the original rule of twin births was bound to disappear, and that errors might result comparable to those of the jackal, whose birth was single. For it was because of his solitary state that the first son of God acted as he did.

'The jackal was alone from birth,' said Ogotemmêli, 'and because of this he did more things than can be told.'

The Spirit drew two outlines on the ground, one on top of the other, one male and the other female. The man stretched himself out on these two shadows of himself, and took both of them for his own. The same thing was done for the woman. Thus it came about that each human being from the first was endowed with two souls of different sex, or rather with two principles corresponding to two distinct persons. In the man the female soul was located in the prepuce; in the woman the male soul was in the clitoris.

But the foreknowledge of the Nummo no doubt revealed to him the disadvantages of this makeshift. Man's life was not capable of supporting both beings: each person would have to merge, himself in the sex for which he appeared to be best fitted.

The Nummo accordingly circumcised the man, thus removing from him all the femininity of his prepuce. The prepuce, however, changed itself into an animal which is 'neither a serpent nor an insect, but is classed with serpents'. This animal is called a *nyy*. It is said to be a sort of lizard, black and white like the pall which covers the dead. Its name also means 'four', the female number, and 'Sun', which is a female being. The *nyy* symbolized the pain of circumcision and the need for the man to suffer in his sex as the woman does.

The man then had intercourse with the woman, who later bore the first two children of a series of eight, who were to become the ancestors of the Dogon people. In the moment of birth the pain of parturition was concentrated in the woman's

clitoris, which was excised by an invisible hand, detached itself and left her, and was changed into the form of a scorpion. The pouch and the sting symbolized the organ: the venom was the water and the blood of the pain.

The European, returning through the millet field, found himself wondering about the significance of all these actions and counteractions, all these sudden jerks in the thought of the myth.

Here, he reflected, is a Creator God spoiling his first creation; restoration is effected by the excision of the earth, and then by the birth of a pair of spirits, inventive beings who construct the world and bring to it the first spoken words; an incestuous act destroys the created order, and jeopardizes the principle of twin-births. Order is restored by the creation of a pair of human beings, and twin-births are replaced by dual souls. (But why, he asked himself, twin-births at all?)

The dual soul is a danger; a man should be male, and a woman female. Circumcision and excision are once again the remedy. (But why the *nyy*? Why the scorpion?)

The answers to these questions were to come later, and to take their place in the massive structure of doctrine, which the blind old man was causing to emerge bit by bit from the mists of time.

Over the heads of the European and Koguem the dark millet clusters stood out against the leaden sky. They were passing through a field of heavy ears, stiffly erect and motionless in the breeze. When the crop is backward and thin, the ears are light and move with the slightest breath of wind. Thin crops are therefore full of sound. An abundant crop, on the other hand, is weighed down by the wind and bows itself in silence.

### THIRD DAY

## The Second Word and Weaving

ANYONE entering the courtyard upset its arrangements. It was so cramped that the kites, most cunning of all the acrobats of the air, could not get at the poultry. In a hollow stone there were the remains, or rather, the dregs of some millet-beer, which the poultry, cock, hen and chickens, were glad to drink. So was a yellow and white striped dog with tail erect like an Ethiopian sabre. When the door banged, all these creatures dispersed, leaving the courtyard to the humans.

Ogotemmelí, ensconced in his doorway, proceeded to enumerate the eight original ancestors born of the couple created by God. The four eldest were males: the four others were females. But by a special dispensation, permitted only to them, they were able to fertilize themselves, being dual and bisexual. From them are descended the eight Dogon families.

For humanity was organizing itself in this makeshift condition. The permanent calamity of single births was slightly mitigated by the grant of the dual soul, which the Nummo traced on the ground beside women in childbirth. Dual souls were implanted in the new-born child by holding it by the thighs above the place of the drawings with its hands and feet touching the ground. Later the superfluous soul was eliminated by circumcision, and humanity limped towards its obscure destiny.

But the divine thirst for perfection was not extinguished, and the Nummo Pair, who were gradually taking the place of God their father, had in mind projects of redemption. But, in order to improve human conditions, reforms and instruction had to be carried out on the human level. The Nummo were afraid of the terrifying effect of contact between creatures of flesh and

blood on the one hand and purely spiritual beings on the other. There had to be actions that could be understood, taking place within the ambit of the beneficiaries and in their own environment. Men after regeneration must be drawn towards the ideal as a peasant is drawn to rich farmland.

The Nummo accordingly came down to earth, and entered the anthill, that is to say, the sexual part of which they were themselves the issue. Thus, they were able, among other tasks, to defend their mother against possible attempts by their elder, the incestuous jackal. At the same time, by their moist, luminous, and articulate presence, they were purging that body which was for ever defiled in the sight of God, but was nevertheless capable of acquiring in some degree the purity required for the activities of life.

In the anthill the male Nummo took the place of the masculine element, which had been eliminated by the excision of the termite-hill clitoris, while the female Nummo took the place of the female element, and her womb became part of the womb of the earth.

The Pair could then proceed to the work of regeneration, which they intended to carry out in agreement with God and in God's stead.

'Nummo in Amma's place,' said Ogotemmelí, 'was working the work of Amma.'

In those obscure beginnings of the evolution of the world, men had no knowledge of death, and the eight ancestors, offspring of the first human couple, lived on indefinitely. They had eight separate lines of descendants, each of them being self-propagating since each was both male and female.

The four males and the four females were couples in consequence of their lower, i.e. of their sexual, parts. The four males were man and woman, and the four females were woman and man. In the case of the males it was the man, and in the case of the females it was the woman, who played the dominant role. They coupled and became pregnant each in him or herself, and so produced their offspring.

But in the fullness of time an obscure instinct led the eldest of them towards the anthill which had been occupied by the Nummo. He wore on his head as head-dress and to protect him

from the sun, the wooden bowl he used for his food. He put his two feet into the opening of the anthill, that is of the earth's womb, and sank in slowly as if for a parturition *a tergo*.

The whole of him thus entered into the earth, and his head itself disappeared. But he left on the ground, as evidence of his passage into that world, the bowl which had caught on the edges of the opening. All that remained on the anthill was the round wooden bowl, still bearing traces of the food and the finger-prints of its vanished owner, symbol of his body and of his human nature, as, in the animal world, is the skin which a reptile has shed.

Liberated from his earthly condition, the ancestor was taken in charge by the regenerating Pair. The male Nummo led him into the depths of the earth, where, in the waters of the womb of his partner he curled himself up like a foetus and shrank to germinal form, and acquired the quality of water, the seed of God and the essence of the two Spirits.

And all this process was the work of the Word. The male with his voice accompanied the female Nummo who was speaking to herself and to her own sex. The spoken Word entered into her and wound itself round her womb in a spiral of eight turns. Just as the helical band of copper round the sun gives to it its daily movement, so the spiral of the Word gave to the womb its regenerative movement.

Thus perfected by water and words, the new Spirit was expelled and went up to Heaven.

All the eight ancestors in succession had to undergo this process of transformation; but, when the turn of the seventh ancestor came, the change was the occasion of a notable occurrence.

The seventh in a series, it must be remembered, represents perfection. Though equal in quality with the others, he is the sum of the feminine element, which is four, and the masculine element, which is three. He is thus the completion of the perfect series, symbol of the total union of male and female, that is to say of unity.

And to this homogeneous whole belongs especially the mastery of words, that is, of language; and the appearance on earth of such a one was bound to be the prelude to revolutionary developments of a beneficent character.

In the earth's womb he became, like the others, water and spirit, and his development, like theirs, followed the rhythm of the words uttered by the two transforming Nummo.

'The words which the female Nummo spoke to herself,' Ogotemélli explained, 'turned into a spiral and entered into her sexual part. The male Nummo helped her. These are the words which the seventh ancestor learnt inside the womb.'

The others equally possessed the knowledge of these words in virtue of their experiences in the same place; but they had not attained the mastery of them nor was it given to them to develop their use. What the seventh ancestor had received, therefore, was the perfect knowledge of a Word—the second Word to be heard on earth, clearer than the first and not, like the first, reserved for particular recipients, but destined for all mankind. Thus he was able to achieve progress for the world. In particular, he enabled mankind to take precedence over God's wicked son, the jackal. The latter, it is true, still possessed knowledge of the first Word, and could still therefore reveal to diviners certain heavenly purposes; but in the future order of things he was to be merely a laggard in the process of revelation.

The potent second Word developed the powers of its new possessor. Gradually he came to regard his regeneration in the womb of the earth as equivalent to the capture and occupation of that womb, and little by little he took possession of the whole organism, making such use of it as suited him for the purpose of his activities. His lips began to merge with the edges of the anthill, which widened and became a mouth. Pointed teeth made their appearance, seven for each lip, then ten, the number of the fingers, later forty, and finally eighty, that is to say, ten for each ancestor.

These numbers indicated the future rates of increase of the families; the appearance of the teeth was a sign that the time for new instruction was drawing near.

But here again the scruples of the Spirits made themselves felt. It was not directly to men, but to the ant, avatar of the earth and native to the locality, that the seventh ancestor imparted instruction.

At sunrise on the appointed day the seventh ancestor Spirit spat out eighty threads of cotton; these he distributed between his upper teeth which acted as the teeth of a weaver's reed. In



this way he made the uneven threads of a warp. He did the same with the lower teeth to make the even threads. By opening and shutting his jaws the Spirit caused the threads of the warp to make the movements required in weaving. His whole face took part in the work, his nose studs serving as the block, while the stud in his lower lip was the shuttle.

As the threads crossed and uncrossed, the two tips of the Spirit's forked tongue pushed the thread of the weft to and fro, and the web took shape from his mouth in the breath of the second revealed Word.

For the Spirit was speaking while the work proceeded. As did the Nummo in the first revelation, he imparted his Word by means of a technical process, so that all men could understand. By so doing he showed the identity of material actions and spiritual forces, or rather the need for their co-operation.

The words that the Spirit uttered filled all the interstices of the stuff: they were woven in the threads, and formed part and parcel of the cloth. They were the cloth, and the cloth was the Word. That is why woven material is called *soy*, which means 'It is the spoken word'. *Soy* also means 'seven', for the Spirit who spoke as he wove was seventh in the series of ancestors.

While the work was going on, the ant came and went on the edge of the opening in the breath of the Spirit, hearing and remembering his words. The new instruction, which she thus received, she passed on to the men who lived in those regions, and who had already followed the transformation of the sex of the earth.

Up to the time of the ancestors' descent into the anthill, men had lived in holes dug in the level soil like the lairs of animals. When their attention was drawn to the bowls which the ancestors had left behind them, they began to notice the shape of the anthill, which they thought much better than their holes. They copied the shape of the anthill accordingly, making passages and rooms as shelters from the rain, and began to store the produce of the crops for food.

They were thus advancing towards a less primitive way of life; and, when they noticed the growth of teeth round the opening, they imitated these too as a means of protection against wild beasts. They moulded great teeth of clay, dried them and set them up round the entrances to their dwellings.

At the moment of the second instruction, therefore, men were living in dens which were already, in some sort, a prefiguration of the place of revelation and of the womb into which each of them in due course would descend to be regenerated. And, moreover, the human anthill, with its occupants and its store-chambers for grain, was a rudimentary image of the system which, much later, was to come down to them from Heaven in the form of a marvellous granary.

These dim outlines of things to come predisposed men to take advice from the ant. The latter, after what it had seen the Spirit do, had laid in a store of cotton-fibres. These it had made into threads and, in the sight of men, drew them between the teeth of the anthill entrance as the Spirit had done. As the warp emerged, the men passed the thread of the weft, throwing it right and left in time to the opening and shutting movements of the jaws, and the resulting web was rolled round a piece of wood, fore-runner of the beam.

The ant at the same time revealed the words it had heard and the man repeated them. Thus there was recreated by human lips the concept of life in motion, of the transposition of forces, of the efficacy of the breath of the Spirit, which the seventh ancestor had created; and thus the interlacing of warp and weft enclosed the same words, the new instruction which became the heritage of mankind and was handed on from generation to generation of weavers to the accompaniment of the clapping of the shuttle and the creaking of the block, which they call the 'creaking of the Word'.

All these operations took place by daylight, for spinning and weaving are work for the daytime. Working at night would mean weaving webs of silence and darkness.

#### FOURTH DAY

## The Third Word and the Granary of Pure Earth

OGOTEMMÉLI had no very clear idea of what happened in Heaven after the transformation of the eight ancestors into Nummo. It is true that the eight, after leaving the earth, having completed their labours, came to the celestial region where the eldest Pair, who had transformed them, reigned. It is true also that these elders had precedence of the others, and did not fail to impose on them at once a form of organization and rules of life.

But it was never quite clear why this celestial world was disturbed to the point of disintegration, or why these disorders led to a reorganization of the terrestrial world, which had nothing to do with the celestial disputes. What is certain is that in the end the eight came down to earth again in a vast apparatus of symbols, in which was included a third and definitive Word necessary for the working of the modern world. All that could be gathered from Ogotemméli, by dint of patient attention to his words, was the evasive answer: 'Spirits do not fall from Heaven except in anger or because they are expelled.'

It was obvious that he was conscious of the infinite complexity of the idea of God or the Spirits who took his place, and was reluctant to explain it. However an outline, slight but nevertheless adequate, of this obscure period was eventually obtained.

The Nummo Pair had received the transformed eight in Heaven. But though they were all of the same essence, the Pair had the rights of the elder generation in relation to the newcomers, on whom they imposed an organization with a network of rules, of which the most onerous was the one which separated

them from one another and forbade them to visit one another. The fact was that, like human societies in which numbers are a source of trouble, the celestial society would have been heading for disorder, if all its members had gathered together.

Though this rule was their security, the new generation of Nummo, however, proceeded to break it and thereby overthrew their destiny; and this was how it came about.

God had given the eight a collection of eight different grains intended for their food, and for these the first ancestor was responsible. Of the eight, the last was the *Digiaria*, which had been publicly rejected by the first ancestor when it was given to him, on the pretext that it was so small and so difficult to prepare. He even went so far as to swear he would never eat it.

There came, however, a critical period when all the grains were nearly exhausted except the last. The first and second ancestors, who incidentally had already broken the rule about separation, met together to eat this last food. Their action was the crowning breach of order, confirming as it did their first offence by a breach of faith. The two ancestors thereby became unclean—that is to say, of an essence incompatible with life in the celestial world. They resolved to quit that region, where they felt themselves to be strangers, and the six other ancestors threw in their lot with them and made the same decision. Moreover, they proposed to take with them when they left anything that might be of use to the men they were going to rejoin. It was then that the first ancestor, no doubt with the approval and perhaps with the help of God, began to make preparations for his own departure.

He took a woven basket with a circular opening and a square base in which to carry the earth and puddled clay required for the construction of a world-system, of which he was to be one of the counsellors. This basket served as a model for a basket-work structure of considerable size which he built upside down, as it were, with the opening, twenty cubits in diameter, on the ground, the square base, with sides eight cubits long, formed a flat roof, and the height was ten cubits. This framework he covered with puddled clay made of the earth from heaven, and in the thickness of the clay, starting from the centre of each side of the square, he made stairways of ten steps each

facing towards one of the cardinal points. At the sixth step of the north staircase he put a door giving access to the interior in which were eight chambers arranged on two floors.

The symbolic significance of this structure was as follows: The circular base represented the sun.

The square roof represented the sky.

A circle in the centre of the roof represented the moon. The tread of each step being female and the rise of each step male, the four stairways of ten steps together prefigured the eight tens of families, offspring of the eight ancestors.

Each stairway held one kind of creature, and was associated with a constellation, as follows:

The north stairway, associated with the Pleiades, was for men and fishes;

The south stairway, associated with Orion's Belt, was for domestic animals.

The east stairway, associated with Venus, was for birds.

The west stairway, associated with the so-called 'Long-tailed Star', was for wild animals, vegetables, and insects.

In fact, the picture of the system was not easily or immediately grasped from Ogotemméli's account of it.

'When the ancestor came down from Heaven,' he said at first, 'he was standing on a square piece of Heaven, not a very big piece, about the size of a sleeping-mat, or perhaps a bit bigger.'

'How could he stand on this piece of Heaven?'

'It was a piece of celestial earth.'

'A thick piece?'

'Yes! As thick as a house. It was ten cubits high with stairs on each side facing the four cardinal points.'

The blind man had raised his head, which was almost always bent towards the ground. How was he to explain these geometrical forms, these steps, these exact measurements? The European had begun by thinking that what was meant was a tall prism flanked by four stairways forming a cross. He kept returning to this conception in order to get it quite clear, while the other, patiently groping in the darkness which enveloped him, sought for fresh details.

At last his ravaged face broke into a kind of smile: he had found what he wanted. Reaching into the inside of his house

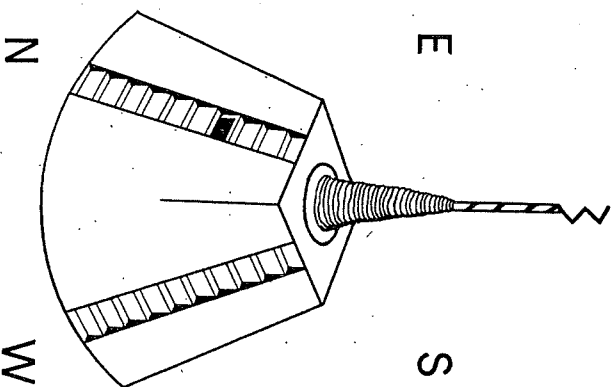
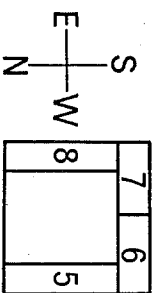
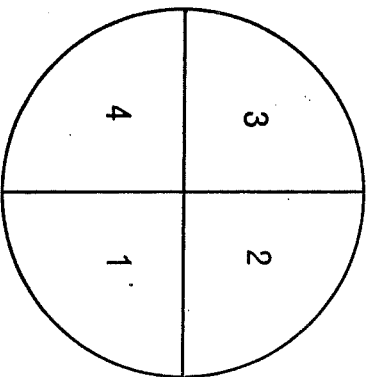


Fig. 2. World-system



Plan of upper storey



Ground plan

Fig. 3. World-system: plan

and lying almost flat on his back, he searched among a number of objects which grated or sounded hollow as they scraped the earth under his hand. Only his thin knees and his feet were still visible in the embrasure of the doorway; the rest disappeared in the shadows within. The front of the house looked like a great face with the mouth closed on two skinny shin-bones.

After much tugging, an object emerged from the depths and appeared framed in the doorway. It was a woven basket, black with dust and soot of the interior, with a round opening and a square base, crushed and broken, a wretched spectacle.

The thing was placed before the door, losing several strands in the process, while the whole of the blind man's body re-appeared, his hand still firmly grasping the basket.

'Its only use now is to put chickens in,' he said.

He passed his hands slowly over its battered remains, and proceeded to explain the world-system.

#### FIFTH DAY

## The Third Word and the Classification of Things

The basket had been put away, with some embarrassment; returned to the place of mystery behind Ogotemmel's back, no one ever alluded to it again. The exposure of this ruin to the light of day had been, as it were, a defiance of worldly vanity; but it had served its purpose. All was now clear and the divine geometry was defined. It was possible to make a beginning with the detailed enumeration of the beings posted at the four cardinal points of the structure.

The west stairway was occupied by wild animals. From the top stair to the bottom stair it was given up to antelopes, hyenas, cats (two stairs for these), reptiles and saurians, apes, gazelles, marmots, the lion, and the elephant.

After the sixth step came the trees from the baobab to the *Lanna acida*, and on each of them were the insects commonly found there today.

On the south stairway were the domestic animals, beginning with fowls, then sheep, goats, cattle, horses, dogs and cats.

On the eighth and ninth steps were the chelonians, the giant tortoises, which today in each family take the place of the family heads, while these are absent, and the smaller tortoises, which are slowly done to death in the regional purification sacrifices.

On the tenth step were mice and rats (house and field).

The east stairway was occupied by birds. On the first step were the larger birds of prey and the hornbills; on the second were ostriches and storks; on the third, the small bustards and lapwings; on the fourth, vultures. Then came the smaller birds of prey, and then the herons. On the seventh step were the

Méndi stood up like a dome above the northern plateau not far from Tintam, two days' march from Sanga. The European had seen it some time before in a dry mist, swollen like a volcano about to erupt.

'It is called "Copper water", because it contains copper and is an abundant source of water; and that is why the souls of the dead go there before starting on their journey to the south. They provide themselves with copper there, which they drink on their long journey. That is what they do for water.'

The European recalled what he had been told, when he saw the mountain. The souls of the dead, his informant had told him, come there in large numbers. They come on foot, on horseback, on pack-oxen, and nowadays in packed lorries, to fetch water. They all crowd to Méndi.

'One useful thing about the Nummo,' said Ogoteméli, 'is his having given copper to men.'

## NINETEENTH DAY

# The Cult of the Binu

It might be supposed that the institution of Lébé was the centre of the Binu worship, that 'pseudo-totemism', as the Europeans were for a long time in the habit of calling it.

Investigations carried out during this most recent expedition had only tended to confirm what had been published up till then by the research team. Binu worship venerates the souls of the eight ancestors and of certain men of note, who followed in the wake of the eight in later times, and secures their favour on behalf of the living.

After a long time, after the revelation of the third Word and the present-day organization of the world, Death made its appearance on the scene. Up to that time men were immortal, or at least, after a long life, underwent a transformation like that of the eight Great Ones—that is to say, they went down into the anthill and were seen no more, the only traces they left being the bows lying by the opening. But, instead of becoming Nummo and going up to heaven, they remained on earth.

When Death appeared, only a few very old men were able to transform themselves in this way. The others submitted to the destruction of their bodies, and new rites were introduced for regulating the spiritual forces liberated by their deaths.

From this time onwards men were subject to hitherto unknown dangers, and their ancestors, who had not experienced death, came to their aid and returned to their people—whence their name of Binu.

In order to reveal himself, a Binu would appear to one of his descendants in human or animal form, and give him one of the covenant-stones (*dogué*) found in the tomb of Lébé. These stones had been carried away by the old people in their migrations, or

had been left in the earth and, by mysterious routes, had found their way to the present country of the Dogon.

Armed with this stone and with various objects which had belonged to his ancestor, the man selected for the revelation would build a sanctuary and found a cult, of which he would be the priest.

Before his death he would hide the stone in the gorges or marshes, and his successor, inspired by the Nummo and the spirit of the Binu, would go in search of it, wandering among the rocks and searching in the waters till he found it, and proved thereby the authenticity of the call from heaven.

Even today, in the villages, one may come upon such men, with their shining eyes, who leave their work to get up in the middle of the night to pursue this unwearying search, which often goes on for years and years. The European had seen in the Dodyou Oreil quarter one of the most intelligent and well-educated youths in Sanga, who was a candidate for the succession to the office of priest of the Binu Ogoiné. This young man was seeking to revive a cult, the previous priest of which had been dead more than a century, and since that time the necessary ritual objects had never been found.

Each family belonging to one of the eight big ancestral groups has a Binu belonging to that group. This ancestor may be common to a number of scattered families, which together form a large aggregate. It may also happen that the ritual objects of one sanctuary are shared among several families.

Regular sacrifices are offered to the Binu at sowing time and at harvest, in order that the people may derive benefit from the powers of the ancestor, powers instinct with life since he never experienced death.

From the very beginning of their investigations, which went back nearly fifteen years, the research team had been led to study this institution. The appearances were convincing; at the turning-points of the myths, animals appeared, spewing out the covenant-stones given them by the ancestor and becoming for that reason forbidden or 'tabu' as the Europeans say in their anthropological jargon. Some of them seemed to figure simply as auxiliaries, as the bearers of messages or as saviours. Others, on the contrary, were identified with the ancestor himself. The myth of the Binu Tiré, ancestor of Ogotemmêli's family,

which originated in the Sodamma quarter of Upper Ogol, was a good example of this.

The ancestor, when he became an old man, was in the habit of looking after the children in his eldest son's house, while the adults were away at work. One day he changed himself into a serpent, which frightened the children. As, however, he resumed his ordinary appearance when the men came back from work, the whole thing was put down to childish fantasies. But it happened again, and one day the eldest son, returning unexpectedly from the fields, surprised the old man in his metamorphosis. The latter, ashamed at being discovered thus, at once changed into an antelope of the kind called equine, in order to run away faster. Pursued by his son, he made for the cave of Kommo Dama, south-west of the Ogols, and disappeared into it.

The son, not daring to follow, remained at the entrance of the cave, listening to the sound of the galloping hooves of the animal growing fainter as it disappeared into the bowels of the earth. He was about to go away, hearing nothing more, when he became aware of a murmur, which gradually grew louder. From a murmur it became a rumbling, and then a storm, till finally a huge wave broke out from the depths of the cave, died away at his feet, and immediately withdrew.

Looking at the ground when it had gone, the man found a stone which the flood had deposited there. It was the covenant-stone left by the old man before his disappearance into another world. The man picked it up, and later entrusted it to a member of the family, who was found to be possessed by the spirit of the ancestor and by the Nummo, and became the first priest of the Binu Tiré of Sodamma.

It was natural to suppose that Dogon totemism, though it might have particular features of its own, would nevertheless conform to the criteria prescribed by the anthropologists. Moreover the natives themselves lent weight to this supposition by a misuse of words: they gave the name 'Binu' indiscriminately to the ancestor and to the prohibited animal. But some doubt persisted. It was the human ancestor alone who played the chief part in the cult. The animal seemed always to be an accessory; the links between the man and the animal were not at all clear. The team of Europeans had come to the point

of avoiding the word 'totem' and experimenting with the invention of new terms. How would 'binusim' do? Till the question of the relations between man and animal was settled, no decision in the matter was possible.

Ogotemméli was to offer a solution—a provisional solution no doubt, but so original as to reopen the whole question of totemism.

He began the discussion, however, with certain aphorisms which were not of such a kind as to throw light on the problem.

'Animals,' he said, 'are superior to men, because they belong to the bush and do not have to work. Many animals feed themselves on what man grows by painful toil.'

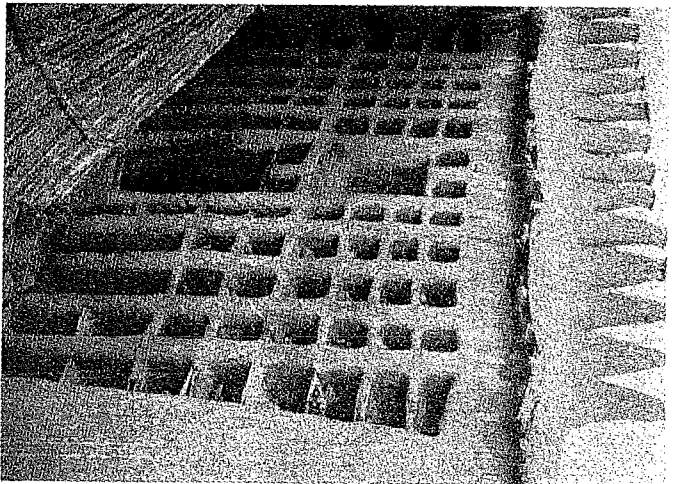
He even went so far as to say that animals were more perfectly made than men, seeing that they lacked speech. It was an excellence in them to be without the power of speech.

Did he mean by this that speech, the instrument of progress, the foundation of the world-order, was in the last analysis a disaster? Did he mean to say that speech was, in a sense, the fruit of disorder, inasmuch as it was necessary for the restoration of the normal movement of things? Did he mean that, if the world had developed without hindrances from its original basis, there would have been no need for speech, no need for technical processes, for the two things were bound inextricably together? Did he mean that animals were immune from human misfortunes?

To all these questions Ogotemméli never made any answer.

It appeared from his earliest statements that the part played by animals was connected with the original system of twin births, and that it was a form of reparation, of reorganization, of compensation.

'Man,' said the European to himself, in an effort to sort out his ideas, 'loses the system of twin births. The Nummo intervenes, and gives each child two souls of different sexes. Objection: the creature is both male and female, whereas it should be either one or the other. Solution: circumcision and excision. The parts in which the second soul resides, prepuce and clitoris, are eliminated. Objection: one soul remains disembodied. Solution: the prepuce becomes the lizard called "Sun", and the clitoris becomes the scorpion. Objection: these animal carriers are crude, too close to the primitive creatures



(a) A large house



(b) The Dogon cap



(a) Priest wearing Covering of the Dead



(b) Patriarchal tortoise

of the dawn of the world. The second soul, which continues to be in contact with the person concerned, is not adequately provided for. What is the solution,?'

Ogotemmelí pondered. They were at the root of one of the oldest human institutions.

'When the eight ancestors,' he said at last, 'were born to the first pair, eight different animals were born in heaven.'

'Born to whom?'

'To pairs of animals created in the beginning by the God Amma. Up to this time they had had no connection with the earth. When the eight men appeared, each of them shared a soul with an animal; but the man remained on earth, while his animal associate remained in Heaven. It was not till after their metamorphosis in the anthill and their transformation into Nummo that the ancestors went up to heaven and re-joined their animal associates there, though without becoming one with them.'

As for the men who came after them, they were transformed in the same way, but did not go up to heaven, so that they were separated indefinitely from the associates who had been born at the same time as themselves in the species of animals linked with their respective families.

When Death came into the world, the new world-system had already come down in the form of the celestial granary, on which all the animals figured. Consequently the metamorphosed ancestors were in some sense represented by their animal associates, who from that moment lived in the uncultivated areas round the villages and no longer in heaven.

'The animal,' said Ogotemmelí finally, 'is, as it were, man's twin.'

And an ancestor could use the animal which was, so to speak, his twin, to make himself known to the living men whom he wished to help. True, the animal was distinct from him, born elsewhere and to all appearance different in form, but it was of the same essence and was recalled to heaven in the same batch.

The ancestor, by revealing himself, gave valuable help to men, one of its most efficacious elements being the revelation of the unknown twin, to whom each man was linked without being aware of it, and who was to be venerated by becoming



one of the prohibitions observed by the family. Thus, from revelation to revelation, the whole Dogon people settled into a new system, in which each man possessed two supporters for his second soul: one from his birth, consisted of the animal and the other, after circumcision, was the 'sun' lizard.

Ogotemméli had much to say of the function of the animal regarded as man's twin, and of the distribution of spiritual powers, and of a man's duties towards his related animal, the object of prohibition, the pledge of life outside himself. But suddenly, in the course of the old man's discourse, the amazing complications of the system became apparent.

'I said,' he observed, summarizing, as his custom was, the account he had given, 'that the first children and the animals in heaven had no successors.' (This was a mistake on Ogotemméli's part. What he had said, and what he meant, was that there were no relations between them.) 'Relations began with circumcision and excision. At every human birth, therefore, a prohibited animal is born. But the animal itself has a twin, a prohibited animal; and this animal likewise, and so on. Every human family is thus at the head of a whole class of animals.' Ogotemméli emphasized this important point. Every human family was part of a long series of creatures, and the whole aggregate of human families was connected with the whole animal kingdom. And behind that was a dim suggestion of vegetable series.

'When man is born,' said the old man, 'since he is the head (that is, the chief) of all the prohibited animals, all the prohibited animals' prohibited animals are born at the same time.' In each of the eight families, therefore, man was the originator of beings whose life had repercussions extending to the last term of a series affecting the eighth part of creation.

This whole order of things rested on the assumption that the obligation imposed by the prohibitions, so far as man was concerned, extended to the whole species. In fact it applied only to one or two animals and one vegetable: otherwise men would have found themselves involved in a network of impossible contingencies.

'When I was born,' said Ogotemméli, in illustration of his argument, 'an equine antelope was born too. The antelope's prohibited animal is the panther. A panther also was born. But

the panther's forbidden animal is the antelope. The circle was thus closed and complete.'

'But,' he added, 'although a man is not concerned with all the creatures of the series, it is nevertheless true that every childbirth sets in motion the birth of all the animals and vegetables associated with the family of the child.'

That meant that when a child was born in any one of the eight families, the whole of creation went into action.

The European took his leave. The first sounds of the braying of the asses returning from the pastures could be heard in the direction of Lullu.

Behind every man he met in the narrow streets he seemed to see the shadows of an eighth part of all the living creatures of the world.