

The Unseen World
The Rise of Gods and Spirits

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The Rise of Gods and Spirits

*‘The humanization of nature is derived from the need to put an end to man’s perplexity and helplessness in the face of its dreaded forces, to get into a relation with them, and finally to influence them.’ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*.*

Throughout his history, man has sought answers to his questions about the meaning of life, his place in the world and in the cosmic order. He has come up with ideas which sought to explain the structure of reality in the context of the circumstances under which he lived; solutions which made sense to him, and which helped him to operate more effectively. Their wealth and scope is a testimony to his astonishing and versatile brain.

He has attempted to apply these solutions through concepts that include magic, tribal organisation, religion, philosophy and education. And he has continued to adapt them to the conditions around him, often operating them as formulas.

What is less widely observed is that many of these former solutions are still with us. They still have power, and many of them are constantly updated and reapplied. Because we do not always recognize them for what they are, we often miss their value. In other cases, short-term solutions remain fossilized holy relics, which themselves become barriers to further progress.

This and several other monographs will deal with some of the earliest solutions arrived at by our ancestors. They will look at how these solutions helped people adapt and survive, and how they helped them to progress in sometimes quite unexpected – and apparently unrelated – directions. They will discuss the evolution of some of these solutions, and the ways in which they linger in our own lives and those of other peoples today. Their purpose is not to be a museum showcase, but to reclaim some of the power and usefulness of what are quite revolutionary ideas and concepts. They are our common human property.

Thinking beyond the visible: The structure of the unseen world

Unseen forces are closer to you than your own breath. They are veiled from sight but in every word you speak, in every act

you perform, you must take these forces into account or bear the consequences...

The spiritual impulse is so connected with your own life and substance that, were it to be withdrawn from you, you would wither and die, as surely as if you had been deprived of oxygen or of water...

Another dimension, a parallel world, interacts often invisibly with our own. Form itself is changeable – the boundaries between human and animal, god and animal, spirit and human are blurred. This parallel world is all around us, and keeps breaking through...

These ideas are all ways of viewing the world common to the simplest and most primitive peoples on earth: hunter-gatherer, nomadic and early agricultural societies. Our ancestors have always believed that there is another world, another medium, beyond what we perceive with our senses. From the Old Stone Age, came the concept of:

‘The control of cosmic forces by a transcendent providence which sustained the universe and its operations ... and was felt to be responsive to human needs by means of religion and magic.’¹

There is no human society that has not held this conviction, nor tried to reach or accommodate this world by one means or another. This feeling of ‘otherness’ is common to humankind. It is not the place of these papers to take a position on whether it is a psychological phenomenon or a divine one. Let us merely assume that this impulse is virtually universal.

In the earliest philosophies there is rarely a moral sense – no system of spiritual reward and punishment. Nor is there any emphasis upon the need for faith. Yet the belief created by such structures has been so profound that the Celts, for instance, would lend large sums of money on a promise of repayment in the next life. Neither fear of Hell nor promise of Paradise was necessary to produce faith of a depth to which religious paragons of our Western culture might merely aspire.

Such systems are based upon a conviction that there is a spiritual force which surrounds us. We are a part of it, and may tap into it for knowledge or other purposes. The Bantu, for instance, base their philosophy upon a ‘vital force’ running through the whole universe. The Iroquois of North America use the term *orenda* to describe the vital power inherent in every material thing or process.²

Among their complex system of unseen influences, the Maoris believe in an intangible spiritual force, called *wairua*, possessed by all things. Without this spiritual essence, they could not be material entities. Elsdon Best quotes a Maori elder:

‘Were a thing not possessed of the *wairua* ... then that thing could not possess form.’³

Like all things, human beings too possess *wairua*. A person’s *wairua* may leave his body while he is asleep. Maoris are reluctant to wake a sleeper suddenly, in case his *wairua* is abroad. In this state, the *wairua* may obtain direct knowledge from the spiritual source – for instance, it can warn of spells being directed against him:

‘I have heard natives say: “I went to the spirit world last night and saw so-and-so” mentioning some dead person.’⁴

The Australian aborigines believed that the ‘life force’ possessed by all things originated in the spiritual epoch they call the Dreaming. This supra-human quality draws together the world of living things. Thus, a human embryo at conception has no life force until it is animated by the entry of a spirit associated with a mythic being. This is usually a specific event. For example:

‘A man may spear a creature at a particular place mythically associated with himself and realise from its atypical actions that it is a vehicle for the transmission to his wife of that mythic character’s spirit.’⁵

This sense of the spiritual interconnectedness of things and the identification of humanity with nature are common themes. The Maoris often planted a tree on the birth of a child. It was viewed as the ‘material *mauri*’, the symbol that represented the life principle of that child. This was closely observed, because if it flourished, so did the child. The Maoris also believe that every physical object leaves an intangible residue, which remains in some way connected to the original. This is known as the *Ahua*. The Gods, for instance, absorb the *Ahua* of any food offered to them – but do not consume it physically. If a man and wife wished to become separated, they would be obliged to undergo a ceremony designed to remove the *Ahua* of her affection from him.

It is a brief step from an underlying spirit pervading all things, to the concept that all things are possessed of spirit. Virtually every human community which has reached a certain stage of social development, has shared this view. It is poetically summarised in the ancient Japanese chronicles, the *Nihon-gi* (translated by W.G. Aston):

‘In that Land there were numerous deities (or spirits) which shone with a lustre like that of fireflies, and evil deities, which buzzed like flies. There were also trees and herbs which could speak.’⁶

Shinto, the ancient and indigenous religion of the Japanese, is typical of many religions of hunter-gatherer and agricultural peoples. It holds that the world we see is full of spirits or deities called *kami* – the word has the connotation of superior, sacred or miraculous. Gods or spirits, animals and trees, even rocks and streams, were believed to be in living communion with men. Princes and heroes were *kami*, in human form:

‘... any object or being which evokes a thrill of emotion ... appealing to the sense of mystery, might be regarded as a *kami*.’⁷

It was easy for gods, spirits and men to pass from one realm to the other. And again, there is a blurring between types of beings: in the beginning men and animals were gods, and plants had speech. Even now, it is not entirely otherwise:

‘In short, Shinto as a religion was an unorganized worship of spirits. It was rooted in the instinctive ... human nature feeling itself in communion with the living forces of the world and showed its vitality in the communal cult.’⁸

So we see a very different spiritual picture than our customary one of God as a remote old man sitting in heaven. The visible and invisible are in constant interaction. The Celts believed there were three worlds: the sky world, home to gods and goddesses of the sky, which special humans might reach – in shamanistic flight, for example. Then there was the earth world – populated by humans, animals, spirits and deities of nature. Finally there was the underworld – the abode of dead humans, fairies and elder gods and goddesses.

Thus, for the Celts, lakes, rivers, springs, caves, woods were

entrances to the Otherworld. One footstep could potentially take you there. The spirits which dwelt therein could be tangibly reached by depositing gifts in these liminal places. Nor were the Celts tardy in making such offerings. So well known was their habit of throwing gold objects into water sources, that the Romans auctioned off the interest to the lakes of Gaul in anticipation of their conquest.

Several Central African peoples still regard the forest as the dwelling-place of the gods. It provides the things that they need most – game, wood and fruit. But so great is its spiritual power that anyone entering it must take special precautions in the form of rituals. There is a sense that, to safely enter the realm of the ‘other’, you must be in a special state yourself. The forest has its own special rules, which must be observed during hunting and foraging.

Malinowski points out that, alongside their belief in the unseen world, such peoples invariably possess concrete technical skills. He points out that the ‘savage’ knows that, if his seed is washed away, or his fences broken, then he must work, not seek the aid of supernatural forces. He sees the latter as the attempt to control those things which are normally beyond human reach:

‘Both magic and religion open up escapes from such situations and such impasses as offer no empirical way out except by ritual and belief into the domain of the supernatural.’⁹

However, this is perhaps to neglect the remarkable synergy there has always been between spiritual perceptions and technical and technological breakthroughs. Whether or not one accepts the claims of many peoples that their technical knowledge was directly supplied to them from the spirit world, their perception of a dimension beyond the visible has undoubtedly been of practical use, allowing them to surmount what often seemed like impossible barriers.

The gods in harness

The first societies were driven by a thirst to understand. A host of things appeared mysterious. What was the nature of the unseen forces people believed they sensed? Why were there sometimes animals to hunt, sometimes none? Why did the rains sometimes come, while in other years the crops failed? Today we might class

some of those questions as technical, others as spiritual. Then, they were all part of an imperative to attain knowledge, upon which man's very survival depended. Like everything else, people no sooner conceived of powerful unseen forces, than they also sought to influence or harness them to further their own aims. So effective were the solutions they came up with, that they still operate more or less intact among people living in similar tribal and basic agricultural structures today.

The way they draw up the boundaries between the visible and unseen worlds opens up possibilities that would otherwise be unavailable. The Kalahari Bushmen, for instance, do not make fixed divisions between the animal and human, spirit and human worlds. Animals and humans are spiritually interchangeable: animals are looked upon as men in another state of existence. While in a particular state of sensitivity, the Bushmen believe they can tap into a level where this connection exists. They use dances to bring the spirit of the animal being hunted in contact with that of the hunter. This spiritual identification, they believe, links the hunter with the hunted in a practical way. He is able to chase his prey until it is exhausted, never losing track of it.

The Bushmen also believe that it is possible to gain practical knowledge from contact with other forms of existence. The medicine man may say that the Supreme Being shows him during his sleep where to hunt or to find food. Kalahari Bushmen also believe in what we would call telepathy, saying 'the wind tells me.' In their worldview, they take for granted that there exists:

'... a direct contact between the super-beings and people, between people and people and between animals and people.'¹⁰

Hunter-gathering peoples across the world share the belief that the process of the hunt may be put into some kind of mystical connection with the spiritual realm. They maintain that this way of thinking about the world is quite inextricable from their undoubted technical skills in tracking, hunting and foraging. This process makes a ritual out of the hunt itself. It is a belief which appears to have existed since prehistoric times.

Our ancestors developed their religion even further – seeking not only to improve their chances of capturing and killing their prey, but also to ensure ready supplies for the future. In an important

discovery in 1912, explorers reached an inaccessible chamber of a cave known as the Tuc d'Audoubert in the Pyrenees. They came across models of a mating male and female bison, important prey of Stone Age man. Nearby were heel marks, leading to the conclusion that fertility dances were carried out, to make the species more prolific.¹¹ Ancient Hebrew laws, which insist that the bones of sacrificial animals should not be broken, probably reflect the prehistoric belief that hunted animals may be resurrected from their bones.¹² Prehistoric deposits of bear bones have been found which are reminiscent of the Eskimo practice of sacrificing the unbroken bones and skull to ensure the future of the hunt.

Today, virtually all hunter-gatherer communities have practical ideas of animal conservation and proliferation woven into their belief system, to such an extent that arguably neither could exist without the other. Since humans and animals are so identified with each other, the Bushmen would not kill an animal simply for the sake of killing. The Chenchu nomads of Andhra Pradesh in India, for instance, maintain that the goddess of the hunt, Garelamaisama, objects to the killing of female animals.¹³ Many clans today claim descent from animal ancestors, who have become their 'totems', giving the rationale for a range of restrictions or taboos upon what animals may be eaten and when.

At this point, the line between religious and magical belief is very fine, and scholars have been to some pains to distinguish between the two. The consensus tends towards an opinion that magic deals with the manipulation of impersonal forces, which yield standard results. Religion may solicit the help of unseen powers, but it is up to those powers whether or not they comply:

'We may say that in magic we are imposing our will; in religion we are seeking to conform to the ultimate.'¹⁴

If we assume that magic seeks to control something, and religion to be worthy of something, we can detect elements of both types of thinking in the practices under discussion. However, both magical and religious streams of thought encompass a parallel tradition – the desire to extend one's understanding. People after people insist that they have gained direct, practical knowledge from the spiritual realm. The Kurnai tribe of Australia believe the Supreme Being taught them how to make boats, weapons and tools; the Yuin tribe

attribute their technology to a similar figure, and so on.

At the very least, we can profitably argue that the concentration which they bestowed upon their spiritual ideas led men to new ways of thinking which broadened their outlook in other directions. And from early on, this spiritual quest drove people to Herculean efforts which in turn expanded the frontiers of technical possibility at the time. For instance, by the late Stone Age, people in Britain were building immense barrows over burial chambers, such as the mound at Silbury Hill in Wiltshire. This has a base diameter of 165 metres. Archaeologists have estimated that 35 million baskets of chalk were needed to build it – the labour of 500 men for thirty years.¹⁵ Without their gods to drive them on, it is unlikely that men would have considered, let alone undertaken, such a vast achievement of engineering.

When mankind moved into agriculture, his preoccupations, circumstances and problems changed. He was less concerned with reaching identity with spiritual forces inherent in wild animals, much more preoccupied with improving his crop:

‘The factors that contributed to growth of the crops – sun, rain, wind, soil – were of prime importance to the Neolithic peasant; to influence these factors favourably was the foremost aim of his offerings and his magic.’¹⁶

The places he looked for spirits and gods changed in line with his new preoccupations:

‘The frequent manifestation of spirits of plants and corn, the intimate relationship existing between the people and the communal deities, the close ties binding the divinities with things of nature, all this indicates the life of an agricultural people settled down in close communities.’¹⁷

Again, it is impossible to distinguish between what we are accustomed to viewing as practical problems and matters we now believe belong on a more rarefied plane. Technological and spiritual challenges went hand in hand. A Mayan myth encapsulates the relationship between man’s obtaining technical knowledge, and the element which still lies outside human control:

The gods were unhappy. Man had everything he needed and therefore he did not make sacrifices to them. So they hid the spirit of

the maize under a stone. The maize died and all people and birds went hungry. The birds found the stone where the maize spirit was hidden, but they couldn't peck it out. A bird was going to eat an ant, and in exchange for his life, the ant promised the birds all the maize they could eat. The next day, the ants had fetched out piles of maize. The gods were furious. They rushed and picked up the maize before the birds could eat it. They gave it to man, and divulged the secrets of how he could sow it to grow more. But they warned him always to remember to praise and sacrifice to them.¹⁸

Alongside their early technological struggles, people were preoccupied with the question of how to raise and handle the spiritual forces they believed held the keys to knowledge and power.

The widespread use of ritual, including dances, special clothing and food taboos, suggest that they felt this unseen world was somehow linked with certain heightened, or at least, emotional, states. The very myths about this realm of being were possessed of power. Some Indian tribes, the Bhils, Santals and Baigas, recite their creation myths when they are trying to cure illness, and at ceremonies of birth, marriage and death.

However, the forces that they sought to harness also raised fears. If they were powerful enough to help them, might they not harm them too? This Zulu cautionary tale, about fire, could also be one about the power of a spiritual force that mankind wishes to obtain, but does not understand:

A hunter came across fire burning in the forest. He approached it respectfully and the spirit of the fire welcomed him to warm himself. It showed the man how to feed it with branches. Then it invited him to cook his meat upon it, and to lie down and sleep in its warmth. It told him he was welcome to come back at any time – but that it would be dangerous for him to carry fire away. The man spent more and more time with the fire, but his wife became jealous. She persuaded a friend to follow the man. He saw the fire, and stole some of it on a branch. But the branch burned his hand, and he dropped it. A huge fire chased him across the savannah. It devoured villages on the way. The villagers who survived found their clay pots had been baked and their food had been roasted. The man woke up beside the original fire. It told him what had happened, and explained that its job was destruction but that treated with care and respect, it could be used positively.¹⁹

The chemistry between technical progress and primal religion works in both directions. The mythology concerning iron, for instance, developed alongside its technology. During the Iron Age, it was scarce and came mainly from meteorological sources. The Sumerian word for iron, *anbar*, was written with the signs for ‘sky’ and ‘fire’. It was seen as a mysterious substance, originating in the sky. Before smelting was discovered, it was used mainly in rituals.

Later on, technology was discovered to make use of this substance – by heating and hardening it. As new sources of iron under the earth became known, a second mythology grew up – of a substance that ‘grows in the bosom of the earth’. Interestingly, iron lost none of its mystique. Early miners observed complicated rites involving self-purification, fasting and so on, before they risked ‘entering a domain that does not rightfully belong to man.’²⁰ It is as if linking this new technology with the mysterious world of the spirit gave them the courage and imagination to push on into the depths of the earth and penetrate the secrets of the unknown.

The link between spiritual belief and the search for knowledge has not always proved beneficial. The Mayas had a legend that the gods were jealous of the first four humans, and felt they had grown too wise. Accordingly, they breathed clouds over the eyes of men, so they would no longer see clearly:

‘The gods took away their wisdom and their perception of secret things, leaving them with only a distant sense of the mysteries of life. Otherwise, they felt, the four men too would become gods.’²¹

Perhaps in an attempt to reclaim this lost sight, the Mayas – along with the other great Central American civilization, the Aztecs – were preoccupied with fortune-telling based on divination. They constructed not one but two calendar cycles, which enabled them to predict celestial movements with astonishing accuracy. This alone was a technological revolution of its day.

The Mayas and the Aztecs used this new tool to address what they saw as their central problem: to discover omens and to predict the future. For the Aztecs, at least, this had tragic consequences. When the Spanish Conquistadors under Cortez landed in 1519, the Aztecs decided that the date and description exactly fitted the predicted return of the god Quetzalcoatl from over the seas. The

Aztec army put up no resistance. By the time they realized their mistake it was too late.

The nature of gods and men

The Yoruba people of Nigeria have this beautiful story to explain the relationship between the divine force, and the multitude of lesser deities and spirits:

At first there was only Orisha, the divine spirit. He had a slave called Eshu. Although Eshu cooked and cleaned for Orisha, he was also the god of fate. He hated having to serve another being, and he decided to get rid of him. So he climbed to the top of a cliff and pushed a boulder on top of Orisha. Orisha was crushed, and scattered in all directions. But since he was a god, his spirit could not be killed. That's why fragments of the divine spirit can be found everywhere – in all living beings, and even in the winds and rivers.²²

The Maoris have a tradition that some gods may take on a material form, known as an *Aria*. Interestingly, this happens only to inferior gods; thus lizards, birds, the mantis, dogs, stars and meteors are all viewed as the material forms of minor deities.²³

Most polytheistic peoples believe in some form of 'high god.' In many traditions, it is considered impious to seek to bribe or bully the divine force itself. Not so the multitude of other gods and spirits; another example of the tension between the 'religious' mind which tries to behold the divine, and the 'magical' part of the human brain, which tries to use it to achieve what the human being happens to consider his or her most pressing need of the moment.

Thus the Akan people of Ghana take liberties with their minor deities that they would never attempt with the High God, Onyame:

'Minor gods are artificial means to the bounty of Onyame ... the institution of minor deities thus appears as an attempt to make sure of God's succour and even influence it.'²⁴

The Akan have no rites for the supreme god; it would be impious to claim to possess magical rites aimed at influencing him. Onyame is invoked only as a last resort. He has no altar and to address him, you speak to the wind.

The possible number of minor deities appears to match the desires of men. So, for example, 1240 gods of the Ifugaos, who live

in the hills of Luzon in the Philippines, have been collected – there are many more. Each deity has a specialized function, and no two overlap. The Ifugaos believe that some gods taught them their ritual and gave them the equipment for their ingenious systems of irrigation and rice-terrace fields. Others are gods of deception and sorcery; still others govern omens, reproduction, disease and so on. Unsurprisingly, people spend a great deal of time, effort and wealth making offerings to the appropriate divinity any time they want something to turn out right. In elaborate ceremonies priests invoke messenger deities to summon the specific deities whose services are required. The relationship can barely be described as worship. It is more akin to bargaining: a process of give and take to achieve an end. While contact with the supernatural is sought, there is no element of reverence for the gods, which are not believed to come attached to any form of morality.

The type of thinking which seeks to derive benefit out of what it does not understand comes at a cost: the greater the anticipation, the greater the risk. As spirits proliferate, so do superstitions aimed at warding off their potential ill effects. The world of the spirit can break through at any moment, as in this example of ghosts among the Akan:

‘Quite impolitely they sometimes invite themselves to meals, a sure sign of their activity being the too-rapid disappearance of the food and drink ... stools are often tilted when not in use to prevent stray and tired ghosts from sitting on them; and should a person sit on one before a ghost can get away, he contracts pains in the waist.’²⁵

Ancestors may remain closely involved with your family or tribe long after they have joined the spirit world. They can protect – but their needs must be attended to as well. Similarly, in a world where every aspect of nature possesses a spirit, even the simple act of cutting down a tree must be accompanied by the correct rituals, or the house it is built into may burn down. Millions of people live this way today. One myth current in a central Vietnamese village explains how a local altar was built after a farmer recently cut down some bamboo poles and leant them against a tree. That night he had a sharp pain, and dreamed of a voice complaining that he had disturbed its resting place. He sent for a sorceress, who lay near the tree and went into a trance. She said ‘I am Ba Hoa. This is my tree.’ The man was extremely worried because Ba Hoa is a female fire

spirit – and very dangerous. He built a straw hut and altar near the tree to appease her with sacrifices.²⁶

The gods are seldom morally weighted. So, for example, the sun may have a double role – it creates life, but it also causes drought and death. Yet this duality does not represent good and evil, but different aspects of a cyclical world. At its best, this reflects an acceptance of the world as it is:

‘We must understand the taking powers in life in order to obtain the benefit of the giving powers. This cyclical pattern is most noticeable in communities which live close to the land, be they hunters or farmers.’²⁷

The higher the stakes – say, the success of the harvest and thus the life of the whole community – the larger the sacrifice the gods are likely to demand. The Celts seemed to view sacrifice almost as a system of exchange:

‘The interpretation of human sacrifice suggested by Caesar is that the power of the gods could only be neutralised or controlled if one human life were exchanged for another. Thus, if Gauls were threatened by illness or battle, then the Druids organised human sacrifice; if criminals were not available then the innocent would have to supply that life for a life.’²⁸

Perhaps there is no more notorious example of human sacrifices than that of the Incas and Aztecs. Uncounted victims were slaughtered. For the Aztec Spring festival of the god Tezcaplipoca, a single youth was sacrificed. He was, from that moment, treated as the embodiment of the god himself. He was taught to play the flute, dressed as a chief and given four beautiful women to be his wives. After days of feasting and dancing, he went with his wives to the temple. They deserted him before they got there. He broke a flute on each of the four steps to the temple altar. Priests killed him with a single blow from a stone knife and presented his heart to the sun. A new youth was chosen to take his place, to be honoured as the reborn god the next year.

In the case of the Aztecs, the person sacrificed was probably originally a willing victim (although later on, they took to waging regulated wars, as a means of acquiring prisoners to sacrifice). Rites and festivals, sacrifices and ceremonies – even death itself – are seen by disparate peoples as opportunities to cross the threshold into the unseen world.

We are accustomed, almost without registering it, to consider the belief in multitudes of deities as more primitive than and inferior to that of monotheistic cultures. Yet, these structures seem able to inspire a matter-of-fact certainty of a human spiritual destiny. The Celts conceived of the Otherworld as a place as definite and tangible as the world we live in, and they went so far as to equip their graves with the articles they considered necessary for the journey there. Nor was this Otherworld a prize for ethical behaviour: the dead resided there as part of the natural order of things.

The earliest peoples we can trace appear to have believed in a human destiny after death. Graves from the early Paleolithic period – more than thirty thousand years ago – suggest very similar beliefs in an afterlife where physical objects might come in handy. For instance, the skeleton of a young man found at Le Moustier, in the Dordogne, had been carefully placed on its right side, and was accompanied by tools including a fine hand-axe and a flint scraper.

The belief of the earliest people in life after death appears to be connected with a virtually universal conviction that human beings themselves possess an element belonging to the spiritual realm. The Maoris traditionally believed in a whole range of human ‘souls’, perhaps better described as spiritual connections. A central concept was that of *tapu*, a kind of holy quality. *Tapu* was considered to be catching; almost anything could acquire *tapu*, if it came into contact with the supernatural order. On the other hand, if your *tapu* became polluted, it was necessary to conciliate the gods without delay. When that happens:

‘You become spiritually blind, defenceless to powers of evil, gods stand aside, the abyss of death yawns beneath you.’²⁹

Elsdon Best points out that when the Maori were coerced into embracing Christianity, they had to deliberately defile their *tapu*, which cut them off from spirituality altogether:

‘Many effected it by washing their heads, the most *tapu* part of the body, in water warmed in a cooking vessel. No European can conceive what a terrible trial this act was to the Maori ... He feels that he has lost caste, that he has become a common, graceless being, like unto the slaves of old, and that he will never regain his old-time physical, intellectual and spiritual vigour.’³⁰

According to the Maori, one form of soul could leave the body in sleep, but died with the body, others would outlast it. The soul took time to detach from the body and special rituals were needed to send it on its way. Bushmen believe that people possess a spiritual quality which leaves the body during dreams. When the body dies, this spirit leaves the body.

As this human spirit is itself 'other', it may be equated with the divine impulse itself, as in this subtle doctrine of the Akan people:

'As men, that is to say, as accidents, we owed our existence to god; as spirits, that is to say in our essence, we were uncreated. For this reason, even as men, we were said to be not God's creatures, but his messengers.'³¹

The Akans also believed:

'A human being was ... an encapsulated spirit, and not an animated body, as the Genesis story has it ... living men too were essentially spirit, even if encased in flesh for a time.'³²

As to why people die – or appear to do so – perhaps the last word should go to a story which, in various forms, has currency among many peoples across Africa. This is a Bushman version:

Once there was a centipede – he is a person who lives and then dies. There was Moon – he is a person who dies but grows again. Moon called chameleon and said: 'Tell the people of the world that as I die and then grow again, so shall they all live after death.'

Centipede called mongoose and said: 'Tell the people that like me they shall die, never to live again.'

Now chameleon set off, but he found a bush of lovely wild raisins and tarried awhile. Mongoose ran and ran – and gave his message first.

So when chameleon brought his message people laughed at him, and said: 'We already got the message from centipede – and that is the one we will believe.'³³

Conclusion

Man's earliest, and what we like to call his most primitive, ideas about the world can appear to us like a collection of peculiar beliefs. Yet these very ancient ways of viewing the world are not only coherent in their own terms, they are also suited to the

environment in which they were developed. They contain revolutionary concepts, which are still with us in many forms today. For instance, where moralistic faiths hammer home ethical values, the spirit religions stress the links and the possibility of connection with the spiritual force believed to underlie the universe.

Human ideas, particularly religious and magical ideas, have been employed as attempted solutions to myriad problems. Things we see as separate come under one rubric: the spiritual and the technological, the sublime and the superstitious. It is as though the concept of the Unseen World created a limitless pool to be dipped into – allowing many different sorts of fish to be pulled out.

Often these solutions survive long after the original need for them has passed. Sometimes they find another home or role, perhaps as part of another solution. At other times, they become problems themselves.

As the problems and challenges facing humankind have changed, so have these religious and ideological solutions. We live among the wreckage of once-potent solutions. If we neglect them, they may become barriers to thought and action. If we understand them, they are a treasure house for all of us to share.

Notes

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