Notes and News

Divine Kings in Africa.

CERTAIN ceremonies practised by the ancient Egyptians in connexion with the cult of Osiris, ' the dying god ', point to the probability that in pre-dynastic Egypt, the ageing king, following the example of Osiris, inflicted upon himself the supreme sacrifice of taking his own life in order to secure the well-being of his people and their land.

The same or a similar custom is found in East Africa, and even as far away as parts of West Africa. The Negro African side of this rite is discussed by C. G. Seligman in his book *Egypt and Negro Africa*, a study in divine kingship (London: Routledge, 3*s*. 6*d*.).

The underlying idea of this killing of the king is that he has power over nature, his person is a safeguard for the well-being of his people and the fertility of domestic animals and of the soil. His powers far exceed those of ordinary men: he is godlike, a ' Divine King '. But the reverse of this belief is that a decrease in his powers means a decreasing strength of the land and its products and thus a danger for his subjects. Therefore, when, on account of old age, his powers begin to fail him he has to commit suicide or is killed. In some tribes this supreme sacrifice is expected of him after he has been reigning a fixed number of years, irrespective of his age. In connexion with the rite, other ceremonies are found which aim at rejuvenating the ruler and thus maintaining or prolonging his fitness for his office. Since the fertility of the soil and the growing of grain seem to stand in the foreground the custom should primarily be expected among agricultural tribes, but it is also met with among cattle-breeders.

Professor Seligman points out that besides these ' divine kings ' who are to be killed there are others who are likewise responsible for the welfare of the community, and in particular for the growing of the crops, who nevertheless are not killed or got rid of in any other ceremonial manner when they grow old. These he proposes to call ' priest-kings '. The term is, however, not yet sufficiently defined. The belief that the tribal leader, be he called rain-maker, chief, or king, is held responsible for the success of the fields is widely spread in Africa. When, among the Ewe, the rains do not set in in due time, the elders will go to the chief and remind him of his duties by asking him what he is prepared to do in order to provide rain, ' and then he will do what is required to bring down rain and to keep the land in order '. But apart from this one act the chief has very few religious duties, he is a real political ruler, and it is doubtful whether it would be justifiable to call him a ' priest-king '.

' Divine rulers ' are those of several Nilotic tribes, such as the Shilluk,

Dinka and Nuer. The belief in the necessity of the self-sacrifice of the ruler is so deep-rooted that even to-day the practice has not died out, though it may be carried out in a surreptitious way and no longer be surrounded with the full ceremonial of former times. Seligman relates (p. 21) a personal experience with the Bor Dinka, whose rain-maker (who takes the place of the ruler) had died. 'It appeared that after he had several times requested that he might be killed his couch was at last placed in the midst of a cattle hearth, i.e. upon a mass of dried and burnt dung, and his people danced round him until so much dust was raised that in a few hours the old man—a chronic bronchitic—was dead. He is said to take the food of the community into the grave, so when the next season arrives a hole is dug at the side of the byre (where the rain-maker is buried) so that the food may come out again. This will ensure good crops, abundance of termites and other food.' Concerning the Malwal Dinka, Captain J. M. Stubbs gives the following laconic report: 'When the death of the rainmaker is determined, he is laid on a bier in a roofed-in cell built in the grave, and his elbows and knees are broken; he is then strangled with a cow-rope.'

Again we find the divine king in the purest form with the Konde, a Bantu tribe at the south end of Lake Nyasa. The health of the Chungu (chief) 'and the welfare of the whole community were inseparably bound up together. A Chungu in health and vigour meant a land yielding its fruits, rain coming in its season, evil averted. But a weak and ailing Chungu meant disasters of many kinds' (p. 28, quoted from D. R. Mackenzie, *The Spirit-Ridden Konde*).

And in West Africa 'The King of the Jukun is able to control the rain and winds. A succession of droughts or bad harvests is ascribed to his negligence or to the waning of his strength, and he is accordingly secretly strangled' (p. 38, quoted from C. K. Meek, *A Sudanese Kingdom*).

Much farther west, in the French territory Haut Sénégal et Niger, Tauxier reports an old custom which demanded that the king should live only as long as he was healthy and strong. When he began to age, it was said: 'the herb is becoming white', and this dictum had a sinister meaning for the king (p. 50).

The act of rejuvenating the powers of the divine king, which seems to have its prototype in the Egyptian *sed* festival, is likewise practised in a number of African tribes, though the original meaning of the ceremony may perhaps no longer be known to the natives. One feature of the Egyptian ceremony is the discharge by the Pharaoh of arrows towards the four cardinal points. Now the king of Kitara in Unyoro at his coronation performed a rite described as 'shooting the nations', whereby he shot four arrows, one towards each of the four quarters of the globe, saying: 'I shoot the nations to overcome them.' Among the Ganda, shortly after his accession to the throne, the king ceremonially speared men, in order 'to invigorate himself'; and three years later the son of a chief was killed and the tendons from the body were made

into anklets for the king, again with the purpose of strengthening the king's powers.

From West Africa Seligman gives an example of the Wuba in Northern Nigeria (p. 56): two years after the appointment of a new chief it was customary to slay an enemy, whose head was deposited in the skull-hut which stood outside the chief's compound.

To these illustrations the following features from other parts of West Africa may be added: (1) in some of the Ewe tribes the newly elected king is carried about publicly in his royal palanquin, holding his ceremonial sword in his hand and pointing it to the four quarters of the globe, ' thereby expressing the desire that other tribes may also come to serve him '. (2) In the current volume of *Africa* (pp. 218–22) a report by R. W. Macklin on the kings of Niumi in the Gambia has been published. Here it is said that the new king, after his confinement in a hut, had to seize a sword and to chase a slave in an endeavour to cut him down before he could reach a hut and dash through it into safety, for beyond the hut the king might not follow. (3) The king of the Glidyi Ewe in Togoland is not allowed to enter the grave-hut of ' Asiogbo Redsnake ', the famous warrior ancestor of the tribe, before he has killed an adversary and has his skull deposited in the grave-hut. The skull may also be provided by one of his warriors.[1]

In spite of the amazing resemblances of the Egyptian rites with those of Negro Africa, Seligman is of opinion that chronological reasons forbid us to believe that the divine kings of the Sudan and of West Africa are directly due to Egyptian influence, rather must we regard them as examples of an old and widespread belief of the Hamites. The proto-Egyptians belong to the Hamitic stock, and Hamitic groups or their influences have permeated almost the whole of Africa. On the other hand, according to Frobenius (*Erythräa*, pp. 325 ff.) the divine king and his self-sacrifice is an institution which is also found in almost all the Asiatic coastlands of the Indian Ocean and which he thinks has come from there to Africa in connexion with what he calls the Erythrean culture-circle. The two assumptions would not necessarily contradict each other, for it is generally accepted that the Hamites in Africa are Asiatic immigrants, but the term Hamites itself is somewhat vague and has not been clearly defined by anthropologists.

Speech-melody and Primitive Music.

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In occidental vocal music we take for granted a co-ordination between the rhythm of music and that of speech, which includes both accent and syllabic length. But, despite an influence which in certain periods of our musical

[1] See also the article by M. D. W. Jeffreys in this number which provides valuable new material on the subject from Southern Nigeria.