

## RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF THE KIPSIGIS.

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### INTRODUCTION.

We all know how difficult it must always be to obtain a correct idea of the religious beliefs of others. Even when they are our own countrymen it is not easy. How very difficult then to obtain a true and just idea of the beliefs of an African tribe so different in mentality and tradition from ourselves.

Imagine the various results one would obtain by asking a number of Englishmen of various ages and in different walks of life what are their ideas of God and Spirit. Even so in an African tribe on a smaller scale one will find different views and interpretations of religious practices, especially amongst the young, those who have neither thought nor been taught.

The description I am about to give cannot hope to be completely true for any one individual and may be coloured by my own personality but I hope it is free from the prejudice of a feeling of superiority.

In so short a paper it is difficult to select suitable points from so large a quantity of material, for not only every ceremony but many other things in the life of primitive peoples have a religious connection. I use the word "religious" in this paper to mean appertaining to God or the human Spirit.

I wish to try and show you that the Kipsigis in spite of their primitive mode of life and their uncultivated minds, have religious beliefs of a somewhat higher order than we are accustomed to credit a primitive people with.

The belief in God and the belief in the human Spirit are not so closely related as in what we call the more advanced religions. And here let me say at once, so that we do not start with any false notions, firstly that the spirits I speak of in this paper are not "evil spirits" for the Kipsigis know no devil or evil spirits; and secondly, that "witchcraft" has nothing to do with any of these things—it is a human evil. There is the exception of the notorious orgoyot Akoylegen whose spirit was supposed by many to be ubiquitous at night.

Their belief in God is a simple Monotheism—but they have three names for God viz.

Asista, Chebtalil and Nggolo a rarely synonym for Chebtalil, probably of foreign origin.

Asista is the sun and hence when I was just beginning to know the people I called them Sunworshippers and unfortunately described

them as such in a memorandum which the D.C. asked me to write. And so the erroneous idea has spread to some extent.

They do indeed address their prayers to the name Asista even more often than to the name Chebtalil and again as we shall see a great number of their ceremonies are carried out facing the newly risen sun. But an old man explained this to me very gracefully, quite recently. He had just come back from seeing the Prince of Wales, for he was one of those selected by Government for that event. Each had been given a photograph of the Prince to take home. "Just as when we see that picture," said he "we remember the Prince, so when we see the sun we remember Chebtalil."

And what more splendid and appropriate symbol of God could one have than the glorious equatorial sun at 6,000 or 7,000 feet altitude where living with nature the most thoughtless cannot fail to see how dependent all life is upon the sun.

God, i.e. Chebtalil, often referred to as Asista, is vaguely thought of as the author and controller of the world, but is truly present to them as the protector of mankind—and not only of mankind but of animals also. All prayers are addressed to him as such. He is almost entirely beneficent. This is a very noticeable feature of their belief. Personal ills such as sickness, loss of children or property are not attributed to the anger of God. Only major disasters such as defeat in war, drought, famine, locusts are attributed to God whilst personal suffering and loss is often attributed to spirits who thus call attention to and punish individual moral delinquency. Nevertheless if one is ill they pray to God for one's recovery and do not forget to give thanks for such recovery.

I will cite just one curious old belief illustrating God's control of War. When a halo appeared round the sun (no uncommon thing in this district) during war-time it was considered an omen of victory or otherwise according as the halo opened towards home or towards the enemy.

There were many curious praise-names of God and the halo gave rise to one, viz. "Asista cebo Kipkoyo"—God with the halo.

#### **KAPKOROSIT.**

Until about 1903 there was a great annual public ceremony for the worship of God. But when the British Government arrived and made the road from Lumbwa Station to Kericho turning out all the people from the south side of the road the old people said, "God has forsaken us and we are scattered." So they gave up the great festival and it has never been held since. I will not describe the ceremony except to say that it centred round the Kapkorosit, a huge cone of poles of trees sacred to each clan and tied with special lianas. This

corresponded to an altar and around it was led a pure white he-goat decorated for the ceremony. It is noteworthy that no sacrifice was made, but only prayers offered for blessing on the people, their herds, flocks and fields. (Sun worship and phallic worship, etc., are usually associated with blood sacrifices.)

Though this central ceremony is abandoned there still remains that most important thing in their family life, the Mabwayta, which is a small replica of the Kapkorosit. This is the family altar which stands outside every married man's or widow's house. Like the Kapkorosit it consists of a narrow cone of sticks about eight feet high bound together with creepers. They are all special plants sacred to the man's clan. (These sacred plants are called Korosek.) This altar plays a part in almost every ceremony (and they are many) which a person goes through from birth to death.

Here the sun plays a very interesting part. The mabwayta is always on the east of the house. Not only that but every house is so orientated that the door faces neither east nor west so that a line drawn through the doorway divides the house into an eastern and western half known as Njor and Koyma which play an important part not merely in ceremonies but even in behaviour on other occasions. The eastern half or njor is especially associated with all relations either by blood or by marriage. One stage of the process of getting married is called "entering njor, (the eastern half)," i.e. becoming a relation of the bride's family.

There is not space to go into the numerous ceremonies, suffice it to say that many of them take place at the mabwayta shortly after sunrise, the participants all facing the east. Even when a ceremony takes place in the afternoon one still faces the east. In some ceremonies, however, a procession goes round the mabwayta without facing east e.g. in the marriage ceremony which takes place after dark. (But the bridal pair face the east within the house during the ceremony.) On most of these occasions prayers are offered asking blessings.

#### PRAYERS AND BLESSINGS.

There are no priests but at any ceremony the oldest man present or better "Poyot ap Tumdo" the principal old man of the Kokwet (Social unit) chants the prayers. Even at women's ceremonies it is only the 'elder of the ceremonies' who may ask the blessing or failing him some other elderly man and when as is often the case a sheep or goat is sacrificed at the Mabwayta it must be done by a man.

Even when there is no ceremony but merely a beer party one of the elders will usually ask blessings on all those present and their relations, sometimes singling out certain persons for special mention.

The blessing is given in a very attractive way. The old man chants in a very vigorous voice, the assemblage repeating in chorus at intervals a final word, till at the end the elder raises his voice still louder and the chorus ends in a crash on his last words.

It is very noticeable that there is not the fear of God that one finds among so many peoples. One does not speak of Him in a hushed voice but openly and freely though with respect.

On the other hand people are reticent about their private prayers and it requires great intimacy before one even knows of their prayers.

I will end this part of the article on Kipsigis religious belief with a charming little anecdote which I fancy helps one to understand their idea of and attitude to God.

The Kipsigis, especially children, are fond of putting words to the calls or songs of birds. The Guinea Fowl in anecdote is the wisest of birds. When the guinea fowl calls at dusk before going to sleep it says,

“ Yagech ngo? Yagech ngo?  
Ani Nggolo! Ani Chebtalil!”

Who will watch over us? Who will watch over us? Let God, let God look after us!

Even from the little I have been able to say here I think it will be apparent that the Kipsigis have a simple Monotheism and that it is only sun-worship in the sense that one not knowing Christianity might call it cross worship. Unfortunately the younger people nowadays are remembering God less than they used to do.

This seems to be a common feature of present day progress in any stage of civilization.

#### SPIRIT.

Now let us turn to the other part of Kipsigis religious belief viz. the belief in spirits i.e. the belief in the human spirit. I chiefly wish to show how different this is from the belief in and fear of evil spirits which we from our reading have become so accustomed to associate with most African peoples who credit not only animals and plants but inanimate objects with powerful and usually evil spirits.

Amongst the Kipsigis there are practically no such beliefs. One finds perhaps vestiges of them in the following.

#### TOTEMS.

The totem clan name is no more than a name. They know nothing of the idea of being descended from or related to such animals. Neither do they credit these animals with spirits. One does find

however in the case of the leopard for example that a man of the leopard clan may be called upon to take a prominent part in a leopard hunt, if a leopard has been continually causing trouble, killing sheep.

They do not however before killing their totem animal either propitiate or pray to it. A man kills or eats his totem animal without thought about it.

Again though animals are not credited with spirits, when hunting dangerous game such as the elephant or buffalo one does not use the normal name but another nickname.

Evidently this has nothing to do with the animal having a spirit, for the same procedure is followed if one runs a splinter of bracken into one's foot. It is more in the nature of what they call "mongset," a word very difficult to explain.

We ourselves say "absit omen" or "touch wood" to avert some trouble felt to be liable to be caused by something we have said.

It is a similar feeling in Kipsigis that overpraise, expecting that for which one merely hopes, or the mere mention of such things as death or sickness may be unlucky.

The saying of such things which may bring trouble is "mongset." It is very similar to speaking of the animal one hopes to kill, etc.

(If I say "I envy so and so, he is never ill"—that is mongset—he probably will be ill).

Of course there are many fairy tales of animals in which they behave as human beings. But then there are also in European folk lore. European children according to age and temperament give these tales varying amounts of belief. Adult Europeans will believe in supernatural, miraculous occurrences provided they happened sufficiently long ago.

In the same way the Kipsigis accord these tales varying amounts of belief. Some of the tales are regarded merely as stories for children. Of others they will say "Well perhaps such things did happen long ago."

The hyaena particularly however is associated with spirits, i.e. human spirits of course. There is the tale of (1) raising from the dead by the chief of the hyaenas. (2) The man who wounded a hyaena and followed him down his hole to the nether world where he found him as a man with his family. There still remains to-day some hazy idea that when a man dies and the hyaenas come for the corpse they have something to do with the spirit, for the deceased's spirit is supposed to stay about the place of his death for some few days. The existence of this belief is indicated in some of the Kurenet names. If a child born just after the death of his father or uncle, say, receives that spirit, he will have such a name as Kimoru Kamngetuny, meaning 'he did not sleep at Kamngetuny' the place where he died—i.e. the spirit did not stay long there, but was reincarnated at once.

There being no evil spirits then, there is naturally no fear of spirits. As evidence of this one may cite the fact that all Kipsigis including tiny children wander about at night without a light without fear.

Spirits to them are not evil spirits but human beings retaining the character they had when embodied as human beings. The only spirits a man may have to deal with are those of his own family (extended family) and relations by marriage.

I have seen people go to meet (as they put it) the spirit of their dead father with suppressed joy (all feelings are suppressed amongst adult Kipsigis) to carry out a small ceremony which they understood he desired.

The basis of this belief in spirits is the immortality of the human spirit. But this immortality is not quite the same as that of the major religions of the world which suppose a heaven of eternal bliss according to the particular ideas of happiness of their adherents. There is indeed for the Kipsigis a spirit world "below," which according to their ancient tales is very like the mortal life they know. But the actual immortality is achieved by the continual reincarnation of the spirit in succeeding members of the family.

The story of how immortality was obtained is worth relating for it contains the idea of a great sacrifice to obtain immortality for the race.

#### CHEBYOSOK EN BORE.

Long, long ago man was very long lived, for when one was getting old one cast one's skin like a snake and became younger again. But finally when death came it was permanent. The body was buried in the dung heap or thrown out to the hyaenas and that was the end. So that children were born without spirits just like the animals.

So the old people said, "Why do we die for ever and not return again." "Even the moon dies but is born again, why should man be lost eternally. Let us go and beg for death in Bore, at the river at the bottom of the precipice so that our children may have spirits which will return and be born again and again for ever."

So the old women ground flour and each took some in a small basket at dawn and walked slowly, singing, to the precipice. Then standing with their backs to the gulf and facing the rising sun they cried, "The moon dies and returns again but man dies for ever." And so hurling their baskets of flour over their shoulders they fell with them backwards "Siel!" So that now no spirit dies but returns always and lives in the children again and again for ever.

When a person dies the spirit returns to the nether world awaiting reincarnation. The people's ideas of that world are naturally indefinite and variable, as are our own.

When a child is born the first ceremony is the ascertaining of what spirit he has. This is called the "Kurenet" and he receives a name referring to the spirit. The stem of this word means "to call" but whether this refers to the child being "called" after the spirit or to the calling of the spirit I do not know. Certainly they speak of calling the spirit but yet the human participants in the ceremony have no influence on which spirit comes. That is decided by the spirit itself. In fact dissension may arise amongst the spirits themselves as to which is to come for all spirits whether embodied or not are desirous of reincarnation.

A man usually has a character similar to that of his spirit or kurenet. Naturally, for this is usually a grand-parent, uncle, great-uncle or some such near relation.

Some curious difficulties arise here, which however cause the primitive people no trouble.

For example, (1) the spirit of one Grand-parent may enter into more than one grand-child. (2) Occasionally a child may have more than one kurenet, one male and the other female. (3) Also a boy sometimes has only a female spirit as is indicated for example in the case of the name "Chebkwany" (from kwando, plural kwanyik, woman).

The plurality of spirit is a common belief amongst primitive peoples and seems to appear even in the Monotheistic Trinity of Christianity. It in no way detracts from the individuality of the spirit in the ordinary sense of that word.

It is curious that the spirit of a woman is not credited with this capability of sub-division, whilst the ascertaining of what spirit has come to a child is done by women only, as also nearly all communication with spirits by means of visions.

In Kipsigis thought (or perhaps we should say feeling) the spirit is much more important than the body, which is regarded rather as a temporary dwelling place of a permanent spirit.

Even their mode of expression in ordinary speech indicates this e.g. If one wishes to enquire after someone's health one says "Kagosop porto? Has the body recovered?"

I remember when I was continually ill expressing regret for being so much trouble. I was told "It is not you who is troublesome, it is your body" and so on.

It is therefore very important that each family be carried on and to die without issue is a catastrophe (chemukto).

Under these circumstances it is natural that the spirits of deceased members of a family should continue to take an interest in the human family which is only a temporary state of the real spirit family.

Thus of course spirits in Kipsigis belief are not evil spirits, but simply continue to show an interest in human affairs especially those of his family.

One of their chief roles is however to protest against the ill behaviour of any member of the family or to protect one of their family against ill treatment by members of the family with which they have married. They may express their displeasure and call attention to moral ill-behaviour by causing sickness for example in such offenders or their stock. It is then that a sheep or goat is sacrificed to the righteously angry spirit. This we are often enough told of by European observers but we are not told that the sacrifice alone is useless unless the behaviour of the offender is amended. Whether this is so amongst other tribes I cannot say, but it is the essential in Kipsigis practice as I know very well indeed.

These sacrifices are usually referred to in books as "appeasing the spirits" a description which I find quite inappropriate to the many cases I have experience of.

No doubt there is the idea of pleasing the spirit but in many cases the sacrifice is actually asked for or ordered by the spirit as a token of the intention of the evil doer to mend his conduct.

Sometimes they definitely "go to meet" a spirit from motives of affection and sacrifice a sheep. That this is so even though I did not know it from personal experience is indicated by the word they use for "go to meet" on such occasions viz. "Ketoroch" which is the word for going half way to welcome or help a friend.

Naturally a spirit of a family does not wish as a rule to ill-treat members of his own family unless he were when embodied a bad character himself. Such cases do occur but they are not usual.

A spirit may occasionally even wish to recall a member of his family from the world either on account of the ill-behaviour of his relative or to save one from continual ill-treatment. I have known examples of both cases.

This of course means death and the threat is sometimes used against a person who is continually guilty of unkindness to another.

When two or three children in a family die in succession, as is by no means uncommon, it is often supposed that the spirit was ill-treated during life and is thus demonstrating his anger—getting his own back—by "returning" as they put it time after time thus causing sorrow to the person or the son or daughter of the person who ill-treated them when alive. When this has happened the next child whether boy or girl is called "Kitur" (he repeated).

You may wonder how such feelings and doings of the dead are known. It is through certain people who in visions meet or believe they meet and talk with spirits of the dead.

Whether these are realities or merely figments of the imagination, it is a most extraordinary and interesting phenomenon. For some of these are strictly honest people who do not doubt for a moment the reality of their experiences in these visions. And further I have often observed that they do at times ascertain purely mundane facts which they could not know by what we call usual means.

This spirit belief of the Kipsigis appears to be very useful as a moral control, especially as they know no spirit of evil, Satan or what not which in many nations has been so efficient in that role.

Further it is a very pleasing belief carrying as it does the respect for age, on which they lay so much stress in life, beyond the grave and taking the sting out of death whether of the one who goes or the one who remains in the flesh.

The Kipsigis, I fear, like the rest of the world in contact with modern ideas of "progress" are paying less attention to God and to religious beliefs in general.

Should we not be very careful in our anxiety to banish what we call superstitions, that we do not either replace one set of superstitions by another, or on the other hand destroy beneficent useful beliefs.

A superstition is not necessarily bad because we call it a superstition. What is a superstition to one is truth to another. The adherents of any religion are inclined to call all other religious beliefs superstitions whilst those who have no religion would call all religious beliefs superstitions.

Let us, then, be broad-minded and see the good in all religious beliefs and not destroy it.

Whilst we attempt to destroy such vicious beliefs as witchcraft and such religious beliefs as may cause immorality or fear, let us be careful not to destroy the good merely because it is not exactly our own belief.