C. W. Hobley

Bantu Beliefs and Magic

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With particular reference to the Kikuyu and Kamba tribes of Kenya Colony; together with some reflections on East Africa after the war

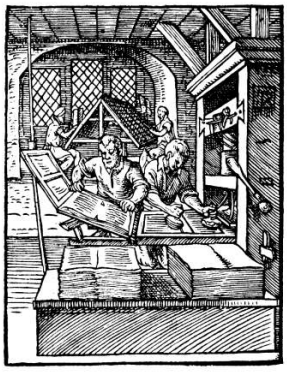

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Table of Contents

PREFACE

Table of Contents

It is often said that the longer one knows the native the less one knows, and the less one understands him. This expression is doubtless comforting to persons who have not the patience to systematically study him and his views on life, but it could with convenience be replaced by a saying to the effect that the more one knows of the native the more one realises how much remains to be learnt.

The spirit of this is in accordance with the true attitude to all other branches of knowledge, for the more one learns, the more the map unfolds, and one gradually realises the vastness of the country to be explored.

During long years of service in East Africa my work has brought me into close contact with the native tribes from Lake Victoria to the coast, and I early realised that their administration could not be intelligently conducted without close inquiry into their social organisation and religious beliefs, and in this connection I would here like to express my indebtedness to the kind advice and stimulating assistance which I have received from Sir W. Ridgeway, Sir J.G. Frazer, Professor Haddon and others. I particularly wish to thank Sir J.G. Frazer for his kindness in consenting to write an introduction to this work.

My first researches in this field were conducted among the tribes of Kavirondo, and when some years later I left the Nyanza province for Ukamba I became interested in the people with whom this work mainly deals. [4]

In 1910 I published a small work styled “The Ethnology of the A-Kamba and Other East African Tribes” which was mainly intended as an *aide memoire* for colleagues working among the people referred to; the study was continued and certain matters were dealt with in papers communicated to the Royal Anthropological Institute and the British Association.

Further research has, however, brought to light a great deal of additional material and has enabled me to piece together the work, and I venture to believe that the light which it attempts to throw upon the inner life of these important tribes may stimulate further inquiry, and help both official and colonist in his relations with them.

It has long been the fashion to look upon such research as being of only academic value; this view, however, is year by year becoming dimmer, and I would ask all those who are interested in Africa to abandon it.

The late war has forcibly demonstrated the importance of understanding the psychology of our enemies, and if that is admitted I would claim that it is quite as important for workers in Africa to endeavour to understand the psychology of the Africans, whose friendship is of vital necessity to all progress in that country.

In presenting this work to the public, I would like to emphasise the belief that the field is by no means exhausted; all that I have been able to do has been done amidst the insistent rush of official duties, and I have often longed for the chance of being able to concentrate my attention for a year or two solely on researches of this nature.

The language difficulty is one of the greatest obstacles with which a European is faced; native languages are numerous and an administrative officer rarely has time to learn one before he is removed to another area and therefore another language. The elders rarely know much Swahili, the language which is the *lingua franca* of East Africa. Interpreters are often a snare, and an investigator has to work with one [5]for some time before being certain that he has fully realised the spirit of the research, especially when dealing with religious beliefs: indeed many interpreters never grasp the spirit of the inquiry. I had working with me for some years a remarkable interpreter—Juma bin Hamis—who became deeply interested in the subject under investigation, and was of the greatest assistance. When any point was obscure he would go off and unearth an elder who was known to have particular information on the point at issue. Unfortunately, however, I have to mourn his loss, for he died at Nairobi in 1911. Such a man is difficult to replace; his speciality was Kikuyu political organisation and customs, and, although a coast native, he was deeply esteemed by all the people of Southern Kikuyu.

I would here like to express my indebtedness to several of my colleagues and friends, particularly the Hon. C. Dundas, G.H. Osborne, and the late S.W.J. Scholefield, who, living for a long time in the native reserves of Kikuyu and Ukamba in close contact with the people, have given me the greatest assistance upon special points. I am also grateful to Miss du Cros for her kind assistance in revising the MSS. of this work.

With the Hon. C. Dundas's permission, I have inserted an interesting memorandum by him on Kikuyu dances and certain magical phenomena. He collected the information while in charge of the Kikuyu district.

I also express my gratitude to the many elders who have so fully given me information about many customs and rites which they do not care to discuss with the man in the street. The Kikuyu in particular welcomed my interest in their beliefs. They even urged me to become a recognised elder of the tribe, so that they could impart full information without violation of the rules forbidding the divulging of the ceremonial of their grade to those not initiated to that grade. This election has been of great value, for [6]recognition as an elder in Kikuyu franks one, so to speak, among the Kamba, and the elders of that reticent tribe talked freely to me on their rites and beliefs.

Finally I must express my indebtedness to Professor Robertson Smith's illuminating work on the "Religion of the Semites," and to Campbell Thompson's

book on “Semitic Magic.” I have referred to these from time to time, as they throw light upon the principles underlying many of the African ceremonies which I describe.

Any description of the languages spoken by the tribes under review being outside the scope of this work, it has been considered inadvisable to complicate it by the adoption of the modern system of phonetic symbols in the native names. The use of the symbols, though based on sound principles, unfortunately renders unintelligible to the ordinary reader many native words.

As the war has occurred since the bulk of this work was written, I have considered that it might not be out of place to add a chapter of a general nature dealing with the position of native affairs after the great upheaval, for Africa has not escaped its effects any more than other parts of the world, and the future of the relations of black and white needs most thoughtful consideration.

C.W. H. [7]

[Contents]

INTRODUCTION

Table of Contents

The author of this book, Mr C.W. Hobley, has long been known to anthropologists as one of our best authorities on the native races of British East Africa, or Kenya Colony, as it is now called, where he resided as Provincial Commissioner for many years. The time he could spare from his official duties he wisely devoted to studying the customs and beliefs of the tribes whom he was appointed to govern, and through the knowledge and experience thus acquired he was able to make a valuable series of contributions to ethnography. In the present work he has resumed and largely supplemented his former studies of two important tribes, the Kikuyu and Kamba, enriching his previous accounts with many fresh details and fruitful observations.

The result is a monograph replete with information of great variety and of the highest interest for the student of savage thought and institutions. But the book has a practical as well as a scientific value. Placed in the hands of British officials engaged in the maintenance of order and the administration of justice among the natives, it must prove of real service to them in their task of affording them an insight into the habits and ideas of the people, and thus greatly facilitating the task of government. Indeed, without some such knowledge of the native’s point of view it is impossible to govern him wisely and well. The savage way of thinking is very different to ours, and Mr Hobley is right in insisting that it is by no means simple, but, on the contrary, highly complex, and that, consequently, it cannot be understood without long and patient study. To legislate for savages on European principles of law [8]and morality, even when the legislator is

inspired by none but the most benevolent intentions, is always dangerous, and not seldom disastrous; for it is too often forgotten that native customs have grown up through a long course of experience and adaptation to natural surroundings, that they correspond to notions and beliefs which, whether ill or well founded, are deeply rooted in the native mind, and that the attempt to discard them for others which have been developed under totally different conditions may injure instead of benefiting the people. Even when the new rules and habits, which government seeks to force upon the tribes, are in themselves, abstractly considered, better than the old, they may not be so well adapted to the mental framework of the governed, and the consequence may be that the old moral restraints are abolished without the substitution of any equally effective in their room. To this danger Mr Hobley is fully alive, and he gives a timely warning on the subject to those well-meaning but ill-informed persons at home who would treat the native African in accordance with the latest political shibboleths of democratic Europe. Such treatment, which its ignorant advocates seem to regard as a panacea for all human ills, would almost inevitably produce an effect precisely the opposite of that intended: instead of accelerating the progress of the natives, it would probably precipitate their moral, social, and even physical decline. In practical life few things are so dangerous as abstract ideas, and the indiscriminate application of them to concrete realities is one of the most fatal weapons in the hands of the moral or political revolutionary.

Among the mass of interesting topics dealt with in Mr Hobley's book it is difficult to single out any for special mention in an introduction. The subjects to which, on the whole, he has paid closest attention are natural religion and magic. In respect of religion the author again and again notes the remarkable similarities which may be traced between East African and [9]Semitic beliefs and rites, and he raises the question how these similarities are to be explained. Are they due to parallel and independent development in the African and the Semitic races? Or are they the consequence of the invasion of Africa either by a Semitic people or at all events by a people imbued with the principles of Semitic religion. In my book "Folk-lore in the Old Testament"1 I had been similarly struck by some of these resemblances, and, while abstaining from speculation on their origin, had remarked that the hypothesis of derivation from a common source was not to be lightly rejected. On the other hand Mr Hobley thinks it safer, in the present state of our knowledge, to assume that the resemblances in question have arisen independently, through parallel development, in the African and Semitic areas. He dismisses as highly improbable the idea that the ancient Semitic beliefs should have originated in East Africa and spread from there to Arabia. Yet recent investigations in this part of Africa, particularly with regard to the native veins of iron and gold, tend in the opinion of some competent inquirers to show that East Central Africa, including the region of the great lakes,

was an extremely ancient seat of a rudimentary civilisation, the seeds of which may have been carried, whether by migration or the contact of peoples, to remote parts of Europe and Asia. In regard to iron, which has been wrought in Central Africa from time immemorial, Mr Hobley quotes Professor Gregory who thinks it probable that the art of forging the metal was invented in tropical Africa at a date before Europe had attained to the discovery and manufacture of bronze; he even suggests that the ingenious smith who first fused tin and copper into bronze may have borrowed the hint from the process of working iron which he had learned in Africa.

Among the many curious superstitions recorded by [10]Mr Hobley none is perhaps more interesting and suggestive than by the name of *thahu* or *thabu*, and which presents points of similarity to the Polynesian taboo. Mr Hobley thinks that the idea involved in it is best expressed by the English term “curse.” But to this it may be objected that a curse implies a personal agent, human or divine, who has called down some evil on the sufferer; whereas in many, indeed in most, of the cases enumerated by Mr Hobley there is no suggestion of such an agent, and the evil which befalls the sufferer is the direct consequence of his own action or of a simple accident. Thus it would seem that “ceremonial uncleanness” answers better to the meaning of *thahu* than “curse.” Be that as it may, deliberate cursing apparently plays a prominent part in the superstition of the Kikuyu and Kamba; but it is significant that they give it a different name (*kirume*, *kiume*) from that which they apply to ceremonial uncleanness. Great faith is put in the effectiveness of curses, especially the curses of dying persons; and as these latter curses often refer to the disposal of the dying man’s property after his death and are intended to prevent the alienation of land from the family, Mr Hobley is led to make the ingenious suggestion that in some curses we may detect the origin of entail and of testamentary dispositions in general.

Not a few of the customs and beliefs described by Mr Hobley remind us of similar practices and ideas in the religion and mythology of classical antiquity. Thus the warriors who, armed with swords and clubs, dance or hop from foot to foot at the time when the *mawele* grain is reaped, are curiously reminiscent of the Roman Salii, the dancing or leaping priests of the war-god Mars, who, similarly accoutred with swords and staves, danced or leaped, while they invoked Saturn, the God of Sowing. Again, the strange sort of madness which from time to time seizes on Kamba women and under the influence of which, wrought up to a state of frenzy, they caper about with cow’s tails suspended from their [11]arms, offers a parallel to the Greek legend of the daughters of Prœtus and the other Argive women, who, oddly enough, were said like their African sisters to have been healed of their infirmity by dances and the sacrifice of cattle.2 The study of such hysterical and infectious manias among primitive peoples opens up an interesting field of inquiry to the psychologist.

Such are a few specimens culled from the rich collection of East African folk-lore and religion which the author has presented to his readers in this volume. The facts recorded by him provide much food for thought and suggest many lines of investigation for inquiries in the future. For, as he reminds us, with equal truth and modesty, the field of inquiry is far from being exhausted. Let us hope that it will yet yield an abundant harvest to others, who will follow in Mr Hobley's footsteps and imitate the example he has set them of patient and open-minded research.

J.G. FRAZER. [13]

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1 Vol. II. pp. 4 *et seq.*↑

2 Apollodorus, *The Library*, II. 2, 2, with my notes.↑

PART I

NATURAL RELIGION

Table of Contents

[19]

[Contents]

INTRODUCTORY

Table of Contents

The main objects of this work are to place on record the results of investigations made among the native tribes in British East Africa, particularly among the Kikuyu and Kamba people, and to endeavour, from a study of their ceremonial with regard to sacrifice and taboo, to obtain a better insight into the principles which underlie the outward forms and ceremonies of their ritual.

It has long been customary, partly through narrow-minded prejudice and partly through ignorance, to class as Pagans all native tribes which have not yet embraced one of the great positive religions, such as Christianity or Mohammedanism. But the time has now come when such negative definitions, if seriously applied, will have to be abandoned. It must be admitted that all savages have a natural religion which is a survival of, and is analogous to, a stage of belief which existed among the ancestors of the civilised peoples of the present day. The admission is inevitable, however distasteful to those who are dogmatic in their religious beliefs and loath to admit that religious thought and the conception of a deity have passed through an evolutionary process and, furthermore, a process which has not ceased. For, after all, the development of mental and moral ideas

is a part of the evolution of the living being as much as the development of limbs, cranial shape, or body markings. No positive system of religion descended from heaven as a completely new concept of the deity and with an absolutely novel code. Such a system could never have survived. Any new religious teacher could not fail to be, to a great extent, a [20]creature of his environment and of the age in which he was born. He must necessarily graft his scheme on to what went before. As Robertson Smith so truly says, "a new scheme of faith can only find a hearing by appealing to religious instincts and susceptibilities that already exist in the audience."

In East Africa, various tribes remain in a stage of belief very similar to that which prevailed in Arabia and Assyria from about 1500 B.C. and onward, and which continued till a dogmatic uniformity was forced on the bulk of the people by the teachings of Mahomed about A.D. 650.

Asiatic beliefs were introduced to Abyssinia by the Sabæans or Himyaritic invaders a few centuries before the Christian era, but it is doubtful whether they spread to any extent. For ancient religious influences on Central Africa, we must look more to the channel afforded by the Nile valley which had become a route of exploration as far back as the time of the Pharaohs. Although, however, we know that Egyptian influence was spasmodically exercised for a long distance up the Nile valley, little evidence of any spiritual effect has as yet come to light. This is

natural, for the ancient expeditions were at long intervals and were not missionary enterprises, but were in search of material gain.

The only case of permanent settlement which appears to be beyond doubt is the invasion into Uganda, Unyoro, and Ankole, of a light coloured race, now known as the Ba-Hima or Ba-Huma. Some consider that these people came from the Abyssinian highlands; Sir Harry Johnston, on the other hand, believes them to be descendants of ancient Egyptian settlers; according to Dr Seligman they are probably descendants of what he terms Proto-Egyptians—the latter description being a more concrete definition based upon careful researches in the Nile valley, the result of which was not available when Sir H.H. Johnston made his suggestion.

But whatever the origin of the Ba-Hima, there [21]appears to be no trace of this infusion of northern blood anywhere east of the Rift Valley, except, possibly, among the Masai who are believed to have migrated south-east from the valley of the Upper Nile. The Nandi, the Lako and Savei of Elgon, the Lumbwa and Elgeyo also came from the north-west, but did not cross the Rift.

The Kikuyu absorbed some Masai blood from time to time, and also intermixed to some extent with the aboriginal Oggiek, but they are mainly Bantu in blood and constitution. The Kamba people, whose ancestors flowed into their present habitat from the south and south-west, are believed to be pure Bantu.

We have, therefore, no evidence as to where the ancestors of the Kikuyu or Kamba lived about two thousand years ago, and, further, whether they were affected by Semitic culture in remote times.

It is, moreover, highly improbable that the ancient Semitic beliefs should have originated in East Africa. We must, therefore, decide whether such similarity as we find to-day is merely a case of parallel and unconnected development, or the result of an ancient invasion of a Semitic race or possibly of a race which had adopted Semitic beliefs. In the present state of knowledge it will be safer to assume that this similarity is due to parallel development, many examples of which may be found in other parts of the world.

It is, however, necessary to make it clear that if there should have been any Semitic influence it cannot have been derived from the Arab settlements on the East Coast of Africa, founded during the last few hundred years. Their political hold of the country never extended much beyond the tidal waters, and their only social influence was the slight one exercised at intermittent intervals by a slave raiding or ivory trading expedition. No ancient trace of Mohammedanism can be found among the people under consideration, and their present stage of culture is pre-Islamic in point of time. [22]

The religious beliefs of the tribes of Kikuyu and Ukamba generally consist of a rudimentary conception of a high god, corresponding more or less

to the old Hebrew concept of Jahveh. To the bulk of the peasantry this idea is naturally very vague and practically subconscious. But the elders of what may be termed the "high place" are believed to have a clear conception of it, and their deity is apparently of the kind which can be influenced and appeased by material attentions. The belief in ancestral spirits—*ngoma* or *aiimu*—is the predominating spiritual factor in the minds of the great majority of the people. These are ever present, and the relations between men and spirits are in accordance with the actual patriarchal state of society. The spirits must not be ignored, for are they not of the blood kin? If neglected, they will be angry and punish their children. But naturally no rancour is felt when such punishments are inflicted. There is a total absence of religious intolerance about this cult; failure to worship or failure to contribute to a sacrifice brings its own retribution, and the spirits are swift in detecting a delinquent.

These spirits are not necessarily evil, but there is little doubt that the character of the spirit is believed to reflect to some extent the character of the person from whom it came, and the power of the spirit is intimately connected with the position of the person in the tribe. This explains to some extent why an ordinary person is cast out at death, whereas an elder, qualified to take part in sacrificial ceremonies, receives burial. The burial is probably pleasing to the spirit, and the spirit of an elder possesses more

power than that of an uninitiated common person. All spirits, however, appear to be relentless and malignant when neglected, and remain so until they are appeased. At times they are said to assist their clients, and, through a suitable medium, to warn the people of an impending raid.

In old Semitic records the evil spirits or *jinn* loom very large; they are usually referred to as devils in the [23]Old Testament. They have no continuous or fixed personal relations with mankind, but have their own particular haunts in desert places, caves, and so forth. They are, so to speak, outlaws; they appear to man either in human or animal form, and if one is killed, a solid carcase is believed to remain. Among the ancient Semites, the belief became very elaborate and survives to this day in out-of-the-way places. These unwholesome creatures were even classified more or less definitely as *jinni*, *ghouls*, *mared*, *lilith*, *sedim*, and so forth.

Among our African tribes this cult, however, has fortunately not developed to any great extent. It may, of course, have been forgotten, or it may have disappeared, but there are still a few traces of it left. A Kamba story, for instance, tells of two girls who took shelter in a cave during a storm. A centipede came in while they were there and the girls threw it outside. But the centipede was an evil spirit and revenged itself by closing up the entrance to the cave, so that the girls were starved to death. This story might have come straight from Central Arabia

and be that of a *jinni*, the *sedim* of the Talmud, who were supposed to assume any form they wished. The deity or the ancestral spirit is appeased by means of sacrifice or libations, carried out either privately or communally according to the circumstances. A considerable amount of detailed information concerning these has been collected, which it may be interesting to compare with similar practices described in the Old Testament and other ancient literature.

The *aiimu ya Kitombo* referred to in "Ethnology of the A-Kamba" (p. 89), and the unnatural creature said to be seen at Manyani (p. 87, *op. cit.*), should also very probably be placed in this class.

The widespread prevalence of "taboo" among these tribes is very surprising, as it is a subject which is rarely mentioned and certainly never openly discussed. It has, nevertheless, reached a pitch of considerable [24]elaboration. The reason for many of the prohibitions is obvious, but that of others is extremely obscure.

The tribes under review have a very definite idea of prayer. Their appeals to the deity take place regularly at the sacred place, either on the occasion of sacrifice or when pouring out libations to the spirits. Examples of these are given later. This form of supplication is probably much more common than we are inclined to think. But it is no easy matter to induce people to give a definite enumeration of minor rites which they perform constantly and as a

matter of course. The A-Kamba, for instance, when on a journey, and when leaving a spot where they have camped, throw a firebrand on their path and pray that the party should reach its destination in safety and proceed together in amity. This is done by the head of the party, the next man throwing a few leaves on the firebrand and stepping on it. It is a pretty custom, although a European of the present day might consider it a somewhat strenuous method of expressing gratitude! But when people are constantly travelling through parts of a country infested with lions, and when their only protection from wild animals is a small camp fire, one can perhaps understand that they should think it advisable to keep on the right side of the deity.

At Kikuyu, a man was once seized with a sudden fit. When he recovered consciousness, he was given a little water. Before drinking it, he promptly poured a few drops in front of him, then on his right side, then on his left. This was meant as a kind of silent prayer of thanksgiving for recovery. He stated that it was his *muungu* who had attacked him thus.

Charms are also very common. Many of them are in the nature of sympathetic magic, whilst others are merely a form of perpetual prayer, or rather, of materialised prayers. A German missionary, named Brutzer, gives a good example, and describes the charms worn by a Kamba friend; one was worn round his neck to [25]protect him against witchcraft in general; on his wrist was a bracelet containing a

charm which would warn him should there be poison in any beer which might be offered to him; if his hand shook on raising the gourd to his lips, it would be a sign of poison. From his elbow two pieces of wood were suspended to protect him from snake bites. And hanging from his waist was a chain to ensure riches.

There are also charms against infection; these are carried by a man when visiting a sick friend. There are charms worn when going to war, charms worn when love-making, to ensure the return of affection. The charms usually consist of powdered wood, roots and herbs. The advice of a medicine man is sought and he recommends a certain plant or tree. Grain is taken to the plant or tree indicated, and six times a single grain is thrown at the tree, the remainder of the grain being thrown the seventh time only. This possibly signifies a sacrifice to the spirit of the tree. The plant is then dug up, or a piece of wood cut off the root of the tree and dried and powdered. Sometimes a firebrand and water are taken to the tree; in this case, the water is placed on the ground, and the supplicant, closing his eyes, walks six times round the tree, then stands under it, facing east, and prays, with eyes still closed: "Tree, I have a favour to ask—I have a sick child or wife or brother"—as the case may be—"and know not the origin of his sickness, as he has no trouble with anyone. I come to ask a favour. I come to you, O Tree, to treat him for it that he may be cured."

According to some of the missionaries, the natives believe that the fate of each individual from birth to death is decided beforehand; they believe, in fact, in predestination. I myself have discovered no trace of this. A native will sometimes say of a bad character, "Oh, he was born a bad lot," but this seems to me too vague a statement to serve as the basis of a theory. Conscience does not loom very large as a rule. The [26]Reverend Hoffman, who lived for many years in Kitui, however, quotes a saying which undoubtedly shows that the natives have some faint notion of the meaning of it: "*Aka nwa Engai*" or "God will find him." Thus do the Kamba refer to an evil-doer.

The Kamba account of creation is very vague. The first man is said to have been produced by the high god *Engai* out of an ant-hill by the sea, and from him all men are descended. He is referred to as *imuuma ndi* (he who came out of the earth).

According to the Reverend Hoffman, there is a saying that "the bird was created on the fifth day, and the *imundu mwei* on the sixth day." No further explanation of this curious saying is given. The ordinary meaning of *mundu mwei* is "man of power or wisdom," and it is used of the medicine man. But in the saying above quoted, it probably refers to mankind generically as opposed to other animals.

Generally speaking, the tribes under consideration attribute the existence of the world and of its inhabitants to creation by *Engai*. Very little abstract

spirituality is to be found in their religion. Almost everything is concrete, and, according to their point of view, strictly logical. The same is probably true of all religions appertaining to human beings on a similar plane of culture.

This aspect of religion is a great snare to the European student. Being the product of a far more complex environment and having been brought up under the influence of religions of a higher type, he finds it extremely difficult to avoid either reading more into a ceremony than actually exists, or, on the other hand, he is apt to overlook some apparently trivial point which may be of deep significance to the worshipper. [27]

[Contents]

CHAPTER I

SPIRIT BELIEFS

Table of Contents

***Ancestral Spirits.*—The belief in the vitality of the ancestral spirits is very strong among both the Kikuyu and the Kamba peoples; the former call them *Ngoma* and the latter *Aiimu* (singular *Imu*). The A-Kamba declare that the life breath *ngo* becomes the *Imu*. Curiously enough, the disembodied spirit was called *Edimmu* by the ancient Assyrians (according to R.C. Thompson in "Semitic Magic"), and they also believed that the soul could return to earth and that ghosts were responsible for many body ills.**

Under ordinary circumstances, when a person died and was duly buried his soul entered the underworld, "the house of darkness, the seat of the god *Irkalla*, the house from which none come forth again." This would seem to correspond to the Sheol of the Hebrews.

The Assyrian word *Edimmu* (the root of which is *immu*) is practically identical with the Kamba word for the same conception, but there is no evidence to show that the identity is anything but accidental.

The belief in the ancestral spirit is merely a form of the belief in a soul, with the difference that the present-day religions of the civilised world would not admit that the spirits of the departed could interfere with the life of man. We still find traces of this belief

in Europe in the Feast of All Souls, and in curious ceremonies which take place in some countries on St John's Eve. [28]

The Yezidis of Mesopotamia believe that the spirits of the good inhabit the air, whilst the Kikuyu believe that the ancestral spirits live underground, and the Kamba that they inhabit certain sacred fig trees. This latter belief would seem to be particularly widespread. It is prevalent all over India, and examples of it are to be found at most places along the east coast of Africa.

The Kikuyu will tell you that there is only one *ngoma* or spirit for each person, and that women as well as men possess it. Cattle are said to have no *ngoma*, but sometimes they may become possessed with that of human beings, and an evil spirit will now and again enter their body in the hope of destroying the poor beast. An animal so possessed is easily recognised by its peculiar behaviour; it goes about shaking its head, and tears stream from its eyes. This spirit may be of the same nature as the evil demons of Semitic mythology. The Kikuyu declare that it can be driven out by getting the possessed animal to sniff the smoke of a fire made of the dry fruit of the tree known as *Kigelia musa*. They believe that the high god *Engai* can control the actions of the *ngoma*, and they sometimes go to a sacred fig tree, *mugumu*, and beseech *Engai* to protect the people from evil spirits.

It is said that the *ngoma* of a murdered man flies straight back to his father's village and, as a rule, hovers around it; but, should the murderer run away and hide, the *ngoma* of his victim will often pursue and haunt him or else influence events in such a way that the guilty one will be discovered and handed over to the authorities, who will deal with him according to tribal law.

I endeavoured to find out from the elders whether the spirit or soul was supposed to be present in the body during life. But they declared that all they knew was that *ngere*, the life breath, was present during life, and between this and the soul they seemed to make no [29]difference. They believe, however, that it is dangerous to wake a man suddenly, as his *ngere* is away, and, in this semi-conscious condition, he is very apt to strike you if he should happen to have a weapon at hand.

They have quite a clear conception of the *ngoma* or spirit of the departed, the character of which is said to be similar to that of the person during his or her lifetime.

Unlike the people of Kavirondo, they have no fear of treading on a man's shadow.

There are no particular customs connected with suicide, although suicide is certainly not unknown among them. When people hang or stab or drown themselves they are supposed to have been possessed by a malevolent spirit.

The general attitude of the people towards the ancestral spirits has been described in the introductory chapter, and many concrete examples will be found in the accounts of the various ceremonies given later. The influence of these spirit beliefs among the Kamba people has been very clearly set forth by the Hon. C. Dundas in his paper on Kitui, *R.A.I.J.*, Vol. xliii, 1913, page 534 *et seq.*

A quotation from an Assyrian tablet some three thousand years old, which R.C. Thompson refers to in his "Semitic Magic," shows how slowly man changes:

"The Gods which seize (upon man)
Have come forth from the grave.
The evil wind gusts
Have come forth from the grave
To demand the payment of rites and pouring of libations.
They have come forth from the grave,
Have come like a whirlwind."

The author goes on to say: "Now if the attentions of its friends on earth should cease and the soul should find nothing to eat and drink, then it was driven by force of hunger to come back to earth to demand its due." This psalm-like utterance might equally well [30]have been made by a Kikuyu or a Kamba of the present day.

The intense desire of Africans for offspring is probably due to the fact that children are expected to sacrifice to the spirits of their dead parents, and the ghost of one who has left no posterity is

therefore in a piteous plight. The spirits generally manifest themselves through certain women who, falling into a trance, give utterance to the message with which they are charged ("Ethnology of the A-Kamba," p. 86). This reminds one of Saul going to Endor to visit a woman with a familiar spirit (Sam. xxviii. 7).

Spirits are also said to manifest themselves and give messages to men in dreams.

The Kitui people say that sometimes when a snake, crawling outside a hut, is attacked, it will suddenly vanish, and they then know that it was the *imu* of a deceased person which had either assumed the form of a snake or entered the body of a snake. A few days afterwards, a woman will become possessed and fall into a state of semi-trance, and the *imu* will speak through her mouth and say: "I came into the village the other day, and So-and-so wanted to strike me." Whereupon the people think it just as well to sacrifice a goat to sooth the feelings of the injured spirit.

The Kamba people, unlike the Kikuyu, do not believe that spirits enter into *kimbu* or caterpillars.

When a hyæna comes and howls near a village, it is looked upon as an evil omen and as a token of death, and the beast is generally driven away and killed, if possible. They very probably believe that an evil demon has assumed the shape of a hyæna. In the Assyrian tablets mention is made of a spirit called

Alu **which slinks through the streets at night like a pariah dog and harms people.**

There is a curious custom in Ukamba which throws some light on the spiritual beliefs of the people. If a young unmarried man is killed away from his village, his *imu* or spirit will return there and speak to the people [31]through the medium of an old woman in a dance (see p. 86, author's work on the A-Kamba), and say, "I am So-and-so speaking, and I want a wife." The youth's father will then make arrangements to buy a girl from another village and bring her to his, and she will be mentioned as the wife of the deceased, speaking of him by name. She will presently be married to a brother of the deceased, but she must continue to live in the village where the deceased had his home.

If at any time the corporeal husband beats or ill-treats her, and she in consequence runs away to her father, the *imu* of the deceased will come and pester the people of the village and they will have bad luck; it will probably ask, through the usual medium, why his wife has been ill-treated and driven away. The head of the family will then take steps to induce the girl to return for fear of the wrath of the spirit of his deceased son.

To those who wish to obtain full insight into the sociology of these people, it is of the utmost importance to have a clear understanding of the native's point of view, and to bear in mind that the

ancestral spirits are a very real and vital thing to him and have a very deep influence upon his life.

The leaders of psychical research allege that the survival of human personality after death has been scientifically proved, and that, under favourable circumstances, communications from the dead have been received. If this be so, might it not be said that races on a lower plane of culture are possibly more sensitive to such influences and that their belief in the activity of the ancestral spirits is therefore not wholly unreasonable? The evidence for this, however, is at present quite insufficient to satisfy most, although we think that the question is one which deserves further consideration.

***Tree Spirits.*—When clearing a forest to make a cultivated field, the Kikuyu people generally leave a large and conspicuous tree in the clearing. Such a [32]tree is called *murema kiriti* and is believed to collect the spirits from all other trees which have been cut down in the vicinity. We have here an interesting example of animism, the spirits so collected being most emphatically declared to be tree, and not human spirits. Now if this tree shows signs of decay and is liable to be blown down, they decide to fell it. Before taking this step, however, they sacrifice a red ram at the foot of the tree, the ram being, as usual, killed by suffocation. The tree is then cut down, and when this is done, the elders take branches from two sacred bushes, *mukenya* and *muthakwa*, and plant them on each side of the stump**