Religious or Sacred Plants of Basutoland

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[65] The history of the various religions is connected with many other sciences. In order to have a thorough knowledge of the religious ideas of a nation, it is often necessary to consult the geography, the history, the ethnology and even the botany of that nation’s country. It is indeed surprising to note how plants have played a considerable part in the religious and magical customs of primitive people.

The ancient Slavonic people worshipped the oak tree because the lightning used to strike it with remarkable frequency. The Gauls and their Druids worshipped the mistletoe on account of wonderful properties it was said to possess.

According to a French author, Michaud, the historian of the Crusades, a Persian sect or tribe, the Hashishim by name, venerated the hashish or Indian hemp (cannabis sativa), which they used to excite their religious fanaticism when they were commanded to destroy some enemy. It is from the name hashishim that we derive the English word assassinate.

The vine, whose produce has the quality of rejoicing the hearts of men, was sacred to the Greeks and the Romans, who set over it the gods Dyonisius and Bacchus as its protectors.

According to an article which appeared last June in a European review, there are now in Siberia some tribes which venerate a kind of mushroom, (the amanita phalloides), a fungus also found in South Africa and famous for producing a drunken state accompanied by fantastic dreamings. The same article also mentions that in Mexico some Indian tribes worship a small cactus called echinocactus williamsii, which is used in the same way as the above-mentioned fungus.

The Basuto of South Africa, apart from smoking the hemp, or dagga, as it is commonly called, (the smoking of which has no connection with any religious ceremony), also make use of certain plants for producing a state of intoxication during heathen ceremonies.

At the commencement of the initiation period, Basuto boys are given a mess of porridge which makes them drunk. It acts like a strong dose of alcohol on some natures, while on others it has a sickening or stupefying effect. For a long time the writer of this article has suspected that the plant used for this purpose was the plant called buphane toxicaria, but of this he was not certain, because the Native witch-doctors exercise [66] great care in not divulging their secrets, especially to White people. It was only recently, by the use of diplomacy and the help of a financial grant given by the Bantu Research Committee of the University of the Witwatersrand, that the writer was able to ascertain the real name of this
secret medicine.

The buphane, called leshoma by the Basuto, is usually found on the hill slopes, and prefers the sunny northern side to a spot less congenial and warm. It has a large bulb growing partly above the ground and partly below, weighing from eight to twelve pounds. Towards the middle of October every year, it shoots forth a bundle of leaves which grow and spread out fanwise. At the same time a stalk also grows, which bears at its apex an umbel of pinkish flowers having some similarity to those of the nerine, but of a colour less bright than that bloom. In honour of the buphane the Basuto have named the month of October mphalane ea leshoma, "the stalk of the buphane".

According to the writer's informants (two Native witch-doctors who gave their information separately) the bulb is very poisonous, and when mixed with the food of the initiates at the circumcision lodge, it must first be carefully measured. The taste is not bitter, and the boys do not object to its flavour. In this instance, the buphane is not used alone, but mixed with several ingredients of other plants and remedies, including the preserved flesh of enemies killed in war.

The initiates are taught that such a remedy will imbue them with the qualities of their ancestors and will tend to make men of them. When the signs of intoxication produced by the mixture are apparent, they are accepted as a token that the spirit of manhood has entered the youth's body.1

This custom is not peculiar to the Basuto nation only. It appears that in many tribes the use of a similar remedy is an essential part in the initiation rites. Mgr. Leroy, in his book The Religion of the Primitives, says that the people of Sette Cama, in Central Africa, give to the initiates a decoction from the bark of a tree known to the botanists under the name of Strychnos Ikaja, and that the person who takes this mixture, or remedy, becomes unconscious for a stretch of about three days. A peculiar property of the buphane is that under special circumstances it is not poisonous.

[67] The Basuto herdboys sometimes take two or three of its outer leaves and use them as a cup or receptacle for milking goats. When the cup or receptacle is ready and filled with milk, it is put over a fire, and the milk, without boiling, very soon thickens; this is probably through an emanation from the leaves, which themselves do not burn, their corners only becoming slightly charred. The herdboys relish this form of thick-milk and it produces no ill effect on them.

For the initiation of the witch-doctors and its accompanying ceremonies, another species of native plant is used. The concoction made there from is said to be non-poisonous, though Natives attribute to it great powers of acting on the brain and developing the mental faculties, especially the memory. This plant is a species of South African forget-me-not or myosotis having white flowers. The Basuto call it sethuthu and the Matebele or Zulus call it lephukhuphuku.

It is supposed to aid the medicine man in remembering with ease the names and properties of the various plants, and also the facts and circumstances which will help him to carry on his work in a successful manner. It is a known fact that many of these doctors are really clever fellows and possess keen intellects, but whether they owe their cleverness to the use of this plant or not, is another question. The same plant is also used for sick
persons undergoing a partial or temporary initiation.

Among the Natives of South Africa there are many cases of hysteria, and the complainants suffering from this mysterious disease speak of various sicknesses which exist only in their imagination. For such illnesses European doctors usually prescribe a general and mental treatment. Now, when such a case is brought to the notice of the witch-doctor, he throws down his lotaola or divining-bones and chants: Motho eo o na le moea, "This person has the spirit." By special permission from his or her relatives, the person ailing goes for a period to live at the home or near the home of the witch-doctor in order to be under his personal supervision.

A special medicine is then prepared for him, of which the main ingredient is the sethuthu, while the other plants are usually the morara o moholo, a kind of polygonum, the plant bolao ba maqekha, the charm of the witch-doctors, a kind of polygala, and the plant seharane, or galium witbergense. Some witch-doctors mix the sethuthu with the plant leta la phofu, the eland's saliva or agapanthus umbellatus. The roots of these plants are cooked together, and when the decoction is stirred, it produces a great amount of foam, which is caused mainly by the sethuthu.

When the patient has taken this foam or medicine, he is supposed to think and dream of other plants and remedies, which he collects early the following morning. After one or two months he is considered cured. His or her relatives then get ready for a feast and a great deal of beer is prepared. They also sacrifice an ox, of which the patient has also dreamed and which has been designated by him. On an appointed day a dance is held, the witch-doctors of the neighbourhood taking part in full dress, and often proceeding to jump and dance till complete exhaustion sets in. After the feast a head of cattle is presented to the witch-doctor as a fee, and the person formerly under his care returns to his home to attend to his duties once more. Many persons seem to be cured by this treatment when other remedies have failed.

Can it be possible that in these plants rests an ingredient which has beneficial effects on the brain and on the nervous system? It is the work of the doctors, and more especially of the analyst, to elucidate the question. Let us only note that, according to Profs. Watt and Brandwijk ("Bantu Studies" of July 1927) a plant closely allied to the sethuthu, the cynoglossum officinale, "contains an alkaloid with a curare-like action." We must also note that the sethuthu is the main ingredient of a charm, a kind of balm used by the Basuto for anointing the body of a young bride after the marriage ceremony and before she goes to her husband.

Another important remedy, or charm, used by the Basuto during their religious ceremonies, is the medicine kept in cast-off cattle horns, a composition of roots, parts of birds and other animals, and sometimes the flesh of slain enemies, the whole concoction being first charred and mixed with fat.

The composition of these manaka (horns) is not always the same. It varies according to the different purposes for which it is used. During the rites of initiation, a special kind of horn-medicine is used in connection with the intoxicating food already mentioned. It is then called sehoere by the Basuto. According to one informant the sehoere is made from the following ingredients: Mothokho, or ipomoea oblongata, Mothoto, or cyperus fastigiatus, qoboi or the root of the phragmites communis, morara o moholo, a kind of
polygonum, setima mollo, or pentanisia variabilis, leshokhoa or xysmalobium undulatum, mafifi matso or phygelius capensis, motsitla or the rush typha latifolia, human flesh, and the flesh of the secretary bird, (the leshokhoa). One of these plants is slightly toxic, and sometimes the Basuto women take advantage of this property for making their beer more intoxicating. The beer is then called joala ba hiki.

[69]It would be incomplete to write about the sacred plants of Basutoland without mentioning a very common one used in the course of everyday life and also in the religious ceremonies. This plant is the kaffir corn, used by the Natives for making bread and porridge, and also their beer, joala, which is the cause of much drunkenness along them. When the Basuto thresh their kaffir corn, or sorghum, they dig a hole in the ground, right in the centre of the thrshing floor. All the grain which falls into this central hollow is made into a beer called joala ha leoa, meaning "the beer of the fall." This beer is offered to the spirits of the Basuto ancestors, and a few drops are sprinkled into the fireplace in their honour. At the burial ceremonies, the Basutos used formerly to throw into the grave some grains of kaffir corn, to he sown, as they believed, by the departed spirit in the land in which it will live.

This useful plant is not without special merit, and therefore praises are sung in its honour. Here are the praises, or lithoko, of the kaffir corn:

Ghoetsi ea malapa ohle,
Khunoana ralithlaku thabisa lihoho,
Thabisa ha hlolang ba koatile.
The daughter in law of every house,
The brown one which with its many grains rejoices the hearts,
Rejoices even those who are always sulky.

Notes

1) This remedy is also considered as a cup or draught of inspiration for the initiates at the circumcision lodge. During the initiation period, every boy has to compose a piece of poetry or praises, which he will recite publicly when he is liberated and the medicine which is given to them is supposed to communicate the gifts of poetry and eloquence.