

## The Dynamics of Samburu Religion

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Little has been written on the religions of the Nilo-Hamitic tribes. This aspect of these societies has frequently been treated as if of a minor importance to the extent of being separated from the rest of the system which the writers are at pains to present as a structural and functional unity. In sharp contrast, the Samburu have a set of religious beliefs which, far from being background music to the drama of daily existence, force themselves frequently to the fore.

This paper focuses on the belief in and fear of the curse. The curse plays a significant part in the resolution of crises and in socialization, it reflects the structure of the society, and it is interwoven with the norms of behaviour. It thus plays a vital part in social control. As well as discussing all these aspects I shall discuss the nature of the curse in relation to other religious beliefs and practices of the society and to its Ethos.

The Samburu are a Maasai-speaking, cattle owning, nomadic tribe of Northern Kenya. For present purposes it may be assumed that it is sufficiently like the Maasai society to need no lengthy introduction. The moran, though no longer strictly 'warriors', are still in a position ritually separate from the rest of the society and for a period of from twelve to fifteen years, young men, of the age-set most recently formed, observe a number of ritual prohibitions and do not marry until the end of the period when a new age-set is formed. Girls are married at the same age as boys become moran, at about fifteen, and this results in a high proportion of married women to married men, and a high degree of polygamy among retired moran, or elders. Cross-cutting the age-set system is a segmentary clan system, not based on the concept of lineage, but specifically defined nevertheless. This definition of segmentation concerns the ritual and legal norms of behaviour between segments at different levels, and below the level of the clan, which is exogamous, many of these norms are those of the moran. Corporate feeling within the clan is very marked, and an individual tends to be associated with his clan throughout his life. Judging from the literature of other Nilo-Hamitic tribes I would say that the corporateness of the clan among the Samburu is stronger than elsewhere, and that even if this factor serves to weaken the corporateness of the age-set system within the tribe as a whole, it definitely strengthens it inside the clan.

### I.

There are certain objects, actions, and even persons which among the Samburu are capable of bringing some mystical misfortune. If a man drinks milk which has been poured from the right hand into the left, if he tells someone else exactly how many cattle he has, or if these cattle come home at night to a home in which there is no fire, then his herds will diminish. If a particular strut in the framework of the hut breaks or a hide which has been mauled by a hyena remains in the hut, or a donkey enters the hut, then persons of that hut will fall ill or die. A wife who throws

away a particular leather corset before it is too old to wear will not bear any more children and any other woman who picks it up and wears it will suffer the same misfortune. When the planet Mars is seen, a lot of elders invariably die and ritual precautions have to be taken. In the above examples certain objects such as the hyena, the donkey, or Mars, bring misfortune and they may be capable of contaminating certain objects which themselves then become bringers of misfortune. Certain acts are also seen to bring misfortune such as pouring the milk the wrong way, breaking the main strut in the framework of the hut, or telling the exact number of one's cattle.

A human corpse is another example of an object which can bring mystical misfortune and death. It must be removed outside the settlement without delay or its presence will contaminate other people with death. In the case of a moran who has died, this contamination spreads to the hair of all other moran within a defined segment and these all shave off their hair before they themselves die. Recently, when a rhino charged through a settlement at night killing a moran, the contamination was felt to be so great that the settlement moved in the early hours of the morning leaving the body where it had fallen. No-one dared even to touch it.

A human being may bring mystical misfortune, although neither he nor his children suffer. Leilato, as the son of an uncircumcised girl, is ill-begotten and would not normally have been allowed to be born. The attempt at abortion, however, failed and he lived. His mother was a daughter of a man with several wives and many sons. From the moment of this birth, the family began to die out. Leilato is now an old man with two wives and five adult sons. He is the only survivor of this once prosperous line which came to an end because of his existence. It is generally felt that as he has no near relatives left there is little danger of further misfortune. Two other sons of his were killed, one in a tribal raid and one quite recently by an elephant. One of his sons is deaf and was nearly killed by a rhino in March. Despite these misfortunes to his own descendants everyone emphatically denies that these further tragedies have anything to do with Leilato's state, they are purely incidental, both he and his sons are immune from his bringing of misfortune. Had Leilato died as a young man, then at his death the misfortune to the line would have ended.

The comet which appeared in 1957 occurred at the same time as a particularly virulent form of foot-and-mouth among the Samburu cattle, and the obvious inference was drawn that it was the comet which had brought the disease.

Bringers of misfortune are referred to below as unpropitious.

There is a certain amount of local variation as to what actions and objects are unpropitious and what ones are not. Members of one clan, ritually the senior one, are especially adept at telling which things, especially cattle are unpropitious or propitious. This knowledge is acquired as a skill; there is no supernatural revelation as the laibonok have, or intuition. These people say they simply know that a particular cow brings misfortune from looking at it. Members of other clans say they do not want to have this knowledge since a man's herds only suffer once he knows that a particular cow is unpropitious. In a similar way a stranger or a child can unwittingly perform an action which would normally be unpropitious with a certain degree of impunity, but once the stranger or the child has been told that the action is dangerous then he should no longer behave in this manner. If a child is ill-begotten, as through an incestuous union, and is allowed to live, but it is not realised that it was through this particular union that it was conceived, then it will not bring misfortune.

There is a similar belief in propitious objects which bring luck. However, examples are rare and the resultant luck is comparatively mild; there is no belief that this luck will change with or without knowledge. Altogether the preoccupation in this sphere is with the unpropitious. Innumerable small ritual acts bring luck if observed and misfortune if neglected.

God is responsible for all things we normally ascribe to chance, but not for wilful intention on the part of man. Where intentional acts can hardly fail, the hand of God plays no part, but in so far as man is fallible and his intentions do go astray, God is seen to determine the outcome. Thus if a man is cut by a poisoned arrow, there is only one outcome - he will die. But directing an arrow, throwing a spear, administering a lesser poison, taking a medicine, are less certain and God's will may play some part in the outcome. In an inter-clan affray Lenkosokana was speared in seven places and yet still lives. God intended he should live. Being struck by lightning, killed by a wild beast or catching some fatal disease are not in any way directed by the hand of man, and, in such cases, especially, the Samburu search around for some supernatural reason why that particular person should have died in this way.

One reason, we have seen, may be that he has been in contact with some bringer of misfortune. Another may be that he is in a state of sin.

Why was the above moran killed by a rhino charging through the settlement at night? Less than two months previously he had joined with about fifty other moran in a wholesale attack on elders. His own personal part had been to follow up the attack with an assault on the hut of one of the elders and uttering hyena yowls as he wrecked it. The unpropitious status of the hyena has already been mentioned. All the moran taking part were subsequently cursed by the elders. Why was Lekashola killed by a rhino in the bush? He had been cursed by his mother's-brother because he had spitefully cursed his own sister. Why was Kilepi, my small toto, killed in an accident? He had refused to give his parents any of his wages and they had cursed him. Why was Lendinini struck dead by lightning? He had been cursed by another elder for refusing the request of a small gift. Why did Lemurit die young from illness? He was greedy and would demand unreasonable gifts of his affines threatening to curse their wives, his own classificatory sisters, if they did not comply. As a result of his behaviour three of his sisters'-children had died before the curse of his own enraged clansmen had its effect and he himself died.

The above examples introduce us to the idea of the curse and to the gift. It is also significant that in two of these examples the curser is the mother's-brother of the victims. His curse is particularly potent and will be discussed further below. One may already suspect that the idea of the curse is intricately bound up with the social structure.

If a person seriously violates the norms of the society, such as killing another Samburu, committing a particularly close form of incest, or allowing a parent to die in relative poverty, he enters into the state of sin without necessarily being cursed. Such an action I term a major sin, and his ritual state a state of major sin. In each of these cases the sinner can never entirely rid himself of this state and he will be in it until his death. In all other cases of sin, a man has only committed sin if he is cursed following some wrong-doing on his part. Such sins are invariably atonable and I term his ritual state, a state of minor sin.

Actual cursing is very rare, but the threat of the curse is quite common and a person who has been wronged can generally find some way ultimately of revenging himself: Lerumpe accused six

moran of stealing a sheep of his. He did not want to curse them since they were his classificatory mother's-brothers, but nor could he prove his case to the administrative court. Two years after the original event one of these moran, approaching elderhood, wished to marry a girl who was a classificatory sister to him and he vetoed the marriage. Had the girl's father ignored his veto, Lerumpe could have cursed her and her marriage would have been without issue. Ultimately he allowed the match after being promised a heifer by the moran's father. Lerumpe has waited two years for this and has every confidence that he will obtain a heifer from each of the other five moran in time. He has only to wait and to refuse either them or their brothers' marriage with daughters of his own clan, or a ritually affiliated clan, of an age-mate, or even the daughter of a daughter of his own clan or a ritually affiliated clan. This must cover about one half of the girls in the society. In the same way Leseketeti refused to allow Lelekwe to marry a classificatory sister, because Lelekwe's brother had wrongfully accused the old man's moran son of stealing some cattle from a European-owned ranch. Everyone agrees that he will eventually allow the match after being offered a heifer. It is interesting to note that in both these cases tribal methods were used to obtain justice after failure to get satisfaction from the administrative court. Also, in both these examples, elders take the part of their moran sons in discussion, in the one case to avert the curse and in the other to threaten it. Only elders curse and, very occasionally, wives.

Moran do not curse; an outraged moran resorts to his club. However, a curse between age-sets does apply especially to the moran. The age-set next but one above their own, the *ilpiroi* (cf. the Maasai *ilpiron*) do hold a particularly deadly curse over the moran, and it was their curse which killed the moran referred to above. It is not possible to discuss the relationship in its entirety in this paper, but briefly it is the older age-set which ritually and spiritually brings the younger to life, and throughout the period of moranhood of the younger set, the older one acts as its sponsors and as initiators in ritual matters. Through a long series of harangues, the moran are instilled with the norms of the society by these elders, and they undergo a period of extended socialization supplementary to that which they underwent as boys in their nuclear families. As boys they were initiated into moranhood thoroughly unfamiliar with the general structure of their society and not prepared to accept all the ideal norms of behaviour. After a period of twelve to fifteen years they have been constantly instilled with this knowledge and have come to believe in the correctness of certain attitudes and norms of behaviour. They may now become elders having completed a very important step in their socialization. All the time during this period, the ritual prohibitions and the restrained behaviour they observe are due to the fear that they have of this one age-set and ultimately of its power of the curse. However much they jest among themselves concerning secret violation of certain prohibitions, they do come to believe firmly in the correctness of the attitudes and norms of behaviour taught them.

A word must be said about these norms of behaviour. The ideal person is a worthy man: he is the man who is at all times polite and who is generous to the point of self-denial, he respects older men and is hospitable to age-mates and kinsmen. This is more than merely an ideal. A man may give away a goat to a party of guests and go without either milk or meat himself that night. Such gifts are not in any way grudging, and do not give one the impression that the giver is only giving because he fears the curse. But it is quite likely that he is sensitive to public sentiment on the matter. The man who does not give or who gives grudgingly is the mean man, and he is much despised. The man who is greedy and demands too much is called by this term, and so is the man who curses too often. A worthy man should only curse when he has really been wilfully wronged and cannot obtain justice in any other way. A man who has merely been slighted or denied a small

gift or hospitality should not curse, but if he does curse, then this curse will be justified and will have its effect. Implicit in the whole idea of the curse and the gift is reasonableness. If a man demands more than is reasonable, either by demanding too much or by demanding too soon after a similar previous demand, or demands at a time when the other person is very poorly off or has recently given much away, then his demand is unreasonable. If he is a rich man and has no real need for the thing he asks for, then his demand is unreasonable. If his demand is unreasonable then he can justifiably be refused or offered a smaller gift. In this way a rich man is not expected to be so generous that he is no longer rich, nor can a poor man effectively increase his wealth beyond that required for the general subsistence of his family. A curse following a reasonable denial of an unreasonable demand would be ineffective. 'The curse is like poison from the poison-arrow tree' they say, 'if the skin is cut' (i.e. a wrong done) 'then the poison will enter and kill the person; if the skin has not been cut, then the poison has no effect'.

In this society it does not necessarily follow that a man's legal sons are his biological offspring. Exceptions are numerous. Nevertheless, the most deadly curse is of a father against his son, and it is effective, not because of a biological relationship, but because for years the son has drunk the milk and eaten the meat of his father's cattle and he has built up a small herd of his own mainly from these cattle. The father has given the gift and if the son disobeys him then a curse will be effective, though unlikely. The tie within the clan is not based on a belief in common ancestry; on the contrary various segments of one clan may be derived from Rendile, Laikipiak, Boran, Merile, Torobo, Maasai, and from other Samburu clans. The ritual bond and effectiveness of the curse between these segments is the belief that for a number of generations milk and meat has been shared in common. Once a man has drunk the milk of the Samburu, he can no longer kill or be killed with impunity, and once he has associated himself with the society and with one clan in particular for any length of time, he is subject to the same obligations and legal and ritual ties as any other person.

The actual begetter of the child also has the power of the curse. An age-set holds the power of the curse over its *ilpiroi* juniors because it has given it life. The word *ilpiroi* also means fire-stick; an age-set comes into being when elders of this age-set ritually generate a fire and give it life. It may be significant that the Samburu words to give birth to and to give are almost indistinguishable.

If a person is in a state of sin, either he will suffer himself, or his cattle, or his wife, or his children, or all four. Through the death of any of the latter he indirectly suffers. The power of the curse of the mother's-brother lies not so much in the fact that he has given his sister's children anything, as that he is a close clansman of their mother and he can curse them through her. His curse is not as strong as that of a clansman, but a man in cursing his own son or brother's son is indirectly penalising himself. The fortunes of patrikinsmen are closely bound up with one another. I feel that it is possible that the high degree of corporateness of the exogamous clan is largely responsible for the relationship between mother's-brother and sister's-son. Men tend to be fond of their sister's-children and to spoil them on occasion, but in the presence of their own children or those of their brothers, the former are almost ignored. A sister's child is someone to spoil mildly at first and to exploit later on. A child of a close clansman is someone to develop a reciprocal relationship with.

Persons who have a strong hold of the curse over another also have an effective blessing. In

practice one meets the blessing constantly and only rarely hears of the curse, but when the Samburu are describing various relationships they constantly refer to the deadliness of the curse. The blessing is the exact converse of the curse, and a justified blessing of one man will do much more than annul an unjustified curse of another.

A small child, a senile person, or an idiot, in fact anyone who knows no better, cannot be cursed with effect for some misdeed. Once again, this is reasonable. The cursed person must have the knowledge that he has acted wrongly for the curse to have effect.

### III.

A brief summary is now given of the states of being unpropitious and of being in sin, and the two are compared.

(1) A person who brings mystical misfortune does so through no fault of his own or wilful intention. He cannot alter his state.

A person who is in a state of sin has achieved this through a misdeed, and can normally revert to a normal state through paying ritual atonement.

(2) A person who brings misfortune does not suffer himself nor do his sons suffer. His patriline or mother's-patriline if he is without a legal father, are affected by his existence, and first his closer kinsmen die off and later those less closely related. Misfortune ends with his own death. A person who is in a state of sin suffers personally, throughout life, and the well-being of his wife and children, his cattle and ultimately himself are threatened. Misfortune to his children ends with his death, and at no time does it spread as far as his grand-children.

An object or action which brings misfortune can be ritually cleansed or avoided, and so can a person who is in a state of minor sin. In extreme cases, a person who brings misfortune or a person who is in a state of major sin, there is no cleansing except with the death of that person.

4) Thus, misfortunes may be attributed to a number of different causes, and informants confirm an impression gained from a study of these: if a person suffers a sudden and unexpected misfortune, and he is not known to be in a state of sin, then his own past behaviour or that of someone closely related to him is examined. If something unusual is found to have happened recently then this is held to be the bringer of misfortune and is avoided by others in future. The happening and its consequence then enter into the realm of folk-lore. It is very noticeable that nearly all my examples are based on recent incidents and not on myth. Conversely, previously held superstitions turn out to be false and become openly scorned. The content of belief itself is subject to fashions, but its basis, as outlined above, remains constant.

A person or object generally brings misfortune only when it is known by others to be in this state, or an action when it is known by the doer to bring this about. A man only enters into a state of sin when he himself knows he has acted wrongly.

Both states have their opposites, and these are the states attained by most people most of the time and much desired. Numerous small ritual acts are performed to avoid misfortune and mutual blessings to avert the state of sin. But it is the undesirable state in each case which is described most vividly by informants. Misfortune may strike suddenly and harshly, good fortune in stock-

keeping and rearing a family depends upon many years without misfortune.

7) A curse brings on a state of minor sin and ultimately misfortune. A man who commits a major sin brings misfortune on himself. The curse and major sin are, in fact, specific cases of actions which bring misfortune, but are less vague than the wider concept. Other actions may bring about misfortune on the doer or some other closely related person without there being any sin. Sin invariably implies a deliberate violation of the norms of behaviour towards other people, and not an irresponsible neglect of correct ritual action which is merely unpropitious.

#### IV.

So much for the two undesirable ritual states. More can be said about the operation of misfortune.

Behind this set of beliefs lies an absolute faith in the infallibility of God. He sees everything and nothing can be done without his knowing. It is he who determines whether a curse is justified or not, and he who delivers severe punishment or gives protection, and it is he who decides what is reasonable. The words of the various curses and blessings make his part in mystical punishment and protection quite explicit.

Would it be naive to suggest that this ideal of God is no more than an extension of the child's own image of his father? It would hardly be original. The father is the perfect patriarchal figure, and his position, authority, infallibility, dignity, distance, and yet personal concern in the welfare of each individual inside the compound family are all very similar to the position, authority, infallibility, distance, etc. of God within the society as a whole.

The father is also the person who punishes his sons for misbehaviour and who demands absolute loyalty and obedience. The sons are instilled with a fear of the father as of all elders. The power of the curse lies mainly in the hands of the elders.

Let us look more closely at the anatomy of the belief in God, and the operation of the curse. As I have presented him he is a single being who lives, so the Samburu say, somewhere in the sky, but who is aware of every happening on earth. Some informants see him just as this, and influence from Christian missions is quite possible. My older informants, however, are nearly all unanimous on the subject. There is not one God, they say, but a collection of guardian spirits. Each man, each beast, each hill, each tree, each article which has some degree of permanence and independence has its guardian spirit. The words for guardian spirit, collection of guardian spirits, and God are all the same. In different contexts God varies from being an entity, which may also be translated as a collection of guardian spirits corporate in their opinions and actions, to a single guardian spirit acting and thinking individually. Each person stands in a peculiar relationship to his spirit. This protects him and extends protection to any other person whom his ward blesses. Conversely, his guardian spirit punishes those whom the ward curses justifiably. Being a part of God, the guardian spirit is fully aware of all that has happened concerning his ward, and it knows whether the curse is justified or not. When his ward enters a state of sin he merely withdraws his protection and the mortal man is at the mercy of the elements and of the spirit of the man who has cursed him. Sometimes the spirits do not agree as to the correct outcome of a situation and there is quarrelling. The Samburu see the black clouds and hear the distant thunder and say 'God is angry, the spirits are quarrelling'. There are medicines to combat diseases, there are spears for protection against

unexpected wild beasts, but a man killed by lightning has no forewarning or chance of escape. To the Samburu there is no clearer manifestation of God's omnipotence and his mercilessness in anger. The laws of chance are the will of God.

A man's guardian spirit, then, may normally act in one of four ways. He may protect his ward, he may extend his protection to any person whom his ward blesses, he may punish any person whom his ward justifiably curses, and he may withdraw his protection from his ward when the latter is justifiably cursed

The logic underlying the misfortune following an unpropitious act is less clearly defined. It is generally maintained that such misfortune can only result from the will of God, and so the spirit of the actor or of the object of the action must for some reason be the inflictor. And one might almost, though dangerously, term the unpropitious act, the 'forbidden' act. In a similar way, the unpropitious person can only act through his spirit, and it is this spirit, and not the person, which is malignant. The Samburu can be no more explicit on the operation of mystical misfortune than this. Pre-occupation with the unpropitious is with ritual to avoid or to avert it, and not in the theory underlying it.

If it can be said that reasonableness underlies whether a curse is justified or not, it can hardly be said that the curse is reasonable in its outcome. That Kilepi should have been killed because he refused to give his parents his wages or Lekashola should have died merely because he spitefully cursed his own sister seems to be highly irrational according to our own notions of justice. Again, it is hardly reasonable that a man should suffer because of the sin of his living father, or because he or some other person has acted unpropitiously, with no sin involved. The fortune of a man is intimately bound up with his wife, his sons, and his cattle, and a misfortune befalling any of these is a tragedy for himself. There is no injustice to the Samburu mind in a son's suffering for his father's sins: the son, after all, owes all he has and is to his father, and the father is himself punished by the event, whether it be severe reduction of stock through disease, the birth of a crippled child, or the death of a son. The worst fate that can befall a man is to leave no descendent line. It does not matter if he is not the biological founder of the line. It does not matter if he is himself forgotten as a personality. His cattle have been handed down to a legally direct descendent and he has given him life through these. For his cattle to be inherited by a brother means nihilism for himself, although neither he nor his brother expect any form of existence after death. On the matter of life after death local missionaries have made no impression on the minds of the Samburu.

V.

A sin implicates two forms of punishment. The first is that of positive infliction on the part of the spirit of the curser. Such a spirit acts in anger .... The second is that of negative abandonment by the spirit of the sinner, following the curse or a major sin. He acts in disgust.

The blessing and the ritually correct form of behaviour are not performed with a view to placating an ever angry collection of guardian spirits. They aim far more at maintaining the protection given by these spirits. They concern the possibility of abandonment rather than of positive punishment which can only follow a deliberate violation of norms or of ritual behaviour.

One of the very few myths concerning the origin of mankind introduces a black man, an



elephant, a cow and God - on this occasion appearing as a single entity, a guardian of all the others. All live together on the earth. After the elephant has fouled the water-hole dug by the black man, the latter complains to God. God tells the elephant to leave the water-hole alone and the black man to leave the elephant alone. After the elephant has fouled the water-hole two more times, the black man kills him. That night, when the black man is asleep, God creeps secretly into the sky, heaven, and leaves the black man on earth with the cow. Here one has abandonment, following a positive disobedience, and the black man must fend for himself. Original sin, then, is not completely foreign to Samburu religious belief.

The extreme curse of the *ilpiroi* over the *moran* is a form of abandonment. In breaking a stick which symbolized the fire-stick with which they originally brought the age-set into being, they are extinguishing its life. Following the ritual dissolution of the age-set, the *moran* would die out in a series of catastrophes.

The man who is in a state of sin is to an extent abandoned by his fellows. 'His herd may multiply' they say, 'and his children may grow to be strong and healthy, green grass may grow around his home and the rain may fall wherever he goes, but every man knows that he is in a state of sin and that either he or his children will ultimately suffer. No man will follow him and he will live alone'. The ritual atonement is based upon killing a beast, ranging from a goat to an ox, and distributing the meat among the local elders. The sinner provides the beast and he is subsequently blessed by all the elders including the original curser. In this way, such a man, cut off from his fellows and his guardian spirit, is ritually reincorporated into the society through commensality.

Those few people I have met who have been in a state of sin do not admit to extreme feelings of shame or guilt or remorse, although they are in general fairly anxious that atonement should be made quickly. Whatever their true feelings, these are inaccessible to an outsider such as myself. It might be worthwhile comparing the irrationality of the belief in the curse with the irrationality of feelings of shame and guilt as presented by psycho-analysts, always bearing in mind that most psycho-analytic ideas are derived from the study of one culture and may not be generally applicable. The irrationality in each case is the same in so far as extreme punishments are feared for very minor wrongs.

Piers and Singer point out that shame occurs when a goal is not being reached whereas guilt is generated whenever a boundary is touched or transgressed [Piers, G. and Singer, M.B., 1953, *Shame and Guilt: a psychoanalytic and a cultural study*]. This is not very helpful, since unlike other societies, such as the United States, Samburu cannot be described as a competitive society and the goal of the majority of men is to achieve a high degree of conformity and be generally accepted as worthy men. It might be possible to alter the definition slightly to say that a man is shamed when he fails to achieve the norm, but again it is not justifiable to describe his inner feelings as those of shame. Most persons who fail to achieve these norms may be criticised to their face, but do not appear to alter their future behaviour as a result. The idea of guilt being generated whenever a boundary is touched or transgressed is more pertinent. The boundary in this case is not always the original act, which may merely be a shame-producing failure to achieve the norm, but a specifically defined action, on the part of the major sinner or of the curser, through which the wrong-doer enters a state of sin.

The writers go on to say that the unconscious, irrational threat implied in shame anxiety is

abandonment and not mutilation as in guilt, that guilt generates restitution (sacrifice, propitiation, atonement). What can one say about this? A man who is in a state of minor sin is both threatened with abandonment (by his own guardian spirit) and with mutilation (by that of the curser). Thus, according to this argument, both feelings of shame and of guilt are present.

The major sin is in quite a different category to the minor sin. It is very rare and represents a violation of a norm which is too implicit in society to merit constant discussion. On the plane of analysis, punishment operates in a different and more drastic way. One cannot speak of shame, just as one cannot speak of failure to achieve the norm in this case. The constant pre-occupation of the Samburu is with the curse and the state of minor sin which this leads to. The curse, and the norms of the society are everyday events. None of my informants had personally experience the state of major sin and could only show their horror at the idea. Murder and incest are cases of extreme social disruption, and as such they result in extreme threats of punishment. But exactly what threats is obscure.

Piers and Singer relate feelings of guilt to the relationship between the Ego and the Super-Ego and feelings of shame to the relationship between the Ego and the Ego-Ideal. Thus one aspect of God, God the punishing agent, appears to be closely related to the Super-Ego of the individual and to his feelings of guilt, and another aspect, God, the guardian spirit, who withdraws his protection when there has been a sin appears to be closely related to the Ego-Ideal of the individual and to his feelings of shame.

The Super-Ego is formed early on in life, certainly well before a boy is circumcised, and could be argued to be a projection of the original image of his father. At this stage the boy is taught to submit to the authority of older men to the point of fear and one is tempted to correlate this with the fear of God as a punishing being, retained at a later stage of development. As a moran, later on, he is introduced to a new principle, that of corporateness with his peers and of conformity with certain ideals of behaviour. These norms have already been related to the concept of shame and to the Ego-Ideal, and the inference is that belief in God as a protective or abandoning being is connected in some way with the iIpiroi elders who have much the same sort of relationship with the age-set of moran.

If this argument is valid, it might also be significant that in the case of sin, God, the angry punishing Super-Ego, derived from the earlier father, is the more distant, i.e. the spirit of some other wronged person, and God, the contemptuous abandoning Ego-Ideal, derived from the more recent iIpiroi elders, is the closer, i.e. the spirit of the sinner himself.

## VI.

To end this paper, a word must be said about the general Ethos of the society and the relation of the above discussion to structure. I have described it as a society in which the accent is on obedience and conformity and this automatically limits competitive behaviour. Organized children's games are almost totally absent from the society, and these at least might be expected to generate a spirit of competition. Singing is an activity performed by age-grades and not by individuals, and thus there is no competition for partners. My impression is that the Samburu are bad losers and dislike having to compete for serious stakes, such as wives.

Competition might be expected to arise during the division of cattle between the inheritors of a

dead man. The pattern of inheritance, however, is strictly defined and there can be no free interpretation of the rules. Great inequalities in such a division do not lead to outward bitterness; the spirit of competition for the herds of the father simply does not exist in the first place.

Again, the competition might be expected to have arisen formerly over the division of stock, captured as the spoils of war. Normally, the division was made by an accepted leader whose qualities included fairness in judgement and any challenge would be generally condemned. If two moran quarrelled subsequently over a particular beast, other moran would kill it on the spot and there would be no basis for further argument. Only exceptionally would a dispute go beyond this state. The Njamus, a Samburu tribe who practiced irrigation by Lake Baringo, appear to have had similar methods to avoid disputes over the control of water.

The accent is on conformity, and this draws individuals together, especially within the clan. The mean man, who is asserting himself against the norms of the society, shows signs of giving his own personal interests too much priority. His economic disadvantage is only slight, since he would not be refused a reasonable request, and an unreasonable one would only be modified within reason. He would tend to find, however, that if he wishes to accompany other people in their nomadism he would have to follow their lead, rather than find that they were prepared to follow his. In a discussion, his opinion would have less weight. He would be the last person to hear of some recent news, or to be invited to a meat feast, but he would never be openly snubbed or denied an equal share.

Such a person is a non-conformer; he is 'out of the swim'. He is such a person that he is liable to curse more often than others. He is also liable to be cursed, not so much because he behaves meanly to one particularly vicious person, but because there is a growing resentment against his behaviour. Thus a man who is half ostracised by his fellows stands to be just that one who is liable to be abandoned by his guardian spirit. A man may commit a series of mean acts, but it is the threshold at which someone is actually prepared to curse him that he enters into the state of sin.

For the remainder of the society, one gets the impression of a deep trust they have for one another and of an overall feeling of security and confidence; this is the converse of ostracism. The almost complete absence of suicide and the open disbelief in a life after death are surely corollaries of this high degree of security. In ritual, every act is strictly defined, the position and order of each participant -even of one hundred moran in a single clan ceremony - is defined, and no person should abstain. Within the family there are strict rules of ritual priority and of order of inheritance. As nomads, they are free to wander where they please, irrespective of their brothers, but they can never free themselves of this basic constraint, and they always give the impression of greater confidence in a hazardous environment. Individuals follow majority opinion rather than form original ideas. If they do express an opinion, it is based on precedent and reasserts the norms of the society. Such a society does not produce great or progressive leaders, but its members are amenable to authority. The father, the ilpiroi elders, God, and, today, the colonial administration, form figures of authority which are feared and unquestionably accepted.

Little has been said here about social structure, but its existence is implicit throughout. The relation between the mother's-brother and his sister's son or between a moran and an ilpiroi elder is well defined in the expected norms of behaviour between the two, and a violation would result

in a deadly curse. The religious belief in sin reflects the social structure in the underlying theory. The religious belief in unpropitious objects and acts reflects the social structure in the realm of ritual action only. The clan ceremonies referred to above, in which the action of each individual is defined along structural lines, have not always got a well defined purpose, but to omit them would be unpropitious. Such a ceremony may be performed on a number of occasions, and one of these recently followed the death of a number of moran of one clan. It was argued that for some reason the moran of this clan were in an unpropitious state and only such a ceremony could rectify this. An identical ceremony used to be performed following a serious defeat. On the other hand, several months after the above affray between moran and elders, the moran were ceremonial blessed to free them of their state of sin. Here there was no intricate enactment of the social structure. The affray concerned two age-grades, and focussed on the blessing of one age-grade by the other, and not on the segmentary divisions within the clan, although elements of this were present.

One is left with the impression that in general, sin is related to the social structure in its underlying theory and no further action is necessary for redemption than the general spirit of forgiveness on the part of the curser and of the local elders, and contrition on the part of the sinner. Should a man suffer severe misfortune while still in a state of sin, then this misfortune is at least partly explicable.

Inexplicable misfortune, on the other hand, does nothing to reinforce belief in the correctness of certain norms of behaviour or the potency of the curse, of the absolute nature of the social structure. It does not maintain faith in these things. It tends rather to destroy faith, to shatter the individual's feelings of security. It is the inexplicable misfortune which cannot be explained in theory. It leads to ritual behaviour which reflects the social structure at every point, and in doing so rebuilds faith and security.

Among the Samburu, then, theory and ritual, in so far as they reinforce social structure, are not concurrent, but rather complementary. They belong to a philosophy which forty years of administration and the abolition of intertribal warfare have done little to alter.

#### Addendum.

In preparing this paper in 1959, I toyed with the notion of treating the belief in the curse and an all-powerful God as a projection of childhood experience. However, with little supporting evidence, I took the more prudent course of putting this possibility to one side. I had enough to say without it.

My thoughts along these lines were prompted by a visit in 1958 to the Elmolo (Nomads in Alliance, pp. 213-18). There, the death of a child led to an angry display of panic among other children. They started wailing, dogs started barking, and one or two boys started to throw stones at them. Then other children, boys especially, vented their rage by throwing stones at the dogs who retreated into the bush, howling with their tails between their legs. During the next day or so as the dogs began to re-emerge, children threw further stones at them.

In contrast to this display, death among the Samburu was a muted affair among children as well as adults. This led me to ask about the impact of death among Samburu children, especially as the death of a sibling or close peer must have been a common experience. Given the warmth of community life and the general indulgence of children, one could understand the notion of an

indulgent protective God. But God was portrayed as an altogether more ambiguous figure, capable of inflicting death for quite trivial reasons. Could it be, perhaps, that children were exposed to this ambiguity with the fact of death among their peers ('there but for the grace of God ...') and were aware of the fragility of the protective indulgence of their parents and village? Could they wonder if the elders at large, if not their parents in particular, had a hidden agenda, inflicting punishment for petty misbehaviour through their curse? Could the notion of an ambiguous God in adult life be reinforced by earlier traumatic experiences in childhood?

Trying to discuss this with Samburu led nowhere. They would not admit that their indulgence of small children could be compromised in any sense by the need to discipline them. No father would curse his own son, I was told (*The Samburu*, pp. 41, 83, 150). I overlooked the instance of Kilepi (above) whose father was said by some to have cursed him — while other elders were either incredulous or criticized the father, and I was too shocked by Kilepi's death to recognize this as a test case (he had worked for me previously). I wrote the paper on Samburu religion as my report on an aspect of my ongoing research and avoided speculation. I later searched libraries for psychoanalytic theories of child-rearing, and could only find tracts on weaning, toilet-training, disciplining, etc, but nothing on the emotional impact of death among siblings.

It was only when I undertook research among the Matapato Maasai, nearly 20 years later, that I was presented with a very different but equally adamant point of view. An angry father should tie a knot in his clothing to prevent this anger having the effect of a curse on his child. Some parents - wives as well as elders — insisted that children have to learn to behave, and that the death of one child from the father's curse should serve as a warning to its siblings (*The Maasai of Matapato*, p. 48). Exasperated mothers, I was told, could threaten disobedient children that they would tell the father to use his curse, and fathers could play up to this. They might not always intend their threat seriously, but others saw it as a dangerous gamble with supernatural forces. An implicit hunch when I was with the Samburu was reawakened by an explicit point of view by some Maasai. The evidence for ambivalence among Samburu children now appeared rather stronger, and this led me to reconsider the argument in *Time, Space, and the Unknown* (pp. 78-83).