

Traditional Religion and Prospects for Economic Progress: A Case Study of the Religious Beliefs of the Basoga People of Uganda

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Culture is well established as a critical factor in explaining differences among nations in their rates of economic development and the means of achieving development. Among cultural influences, religion and family, which are often closely related, dominate. Traditional religions are generally characterized by various features that serve as obstacles to economic development. Such features include a predominant focus on the past; a high degree of family (tribal) loyalty strengthened by ancestor veneration, reliance on irrational (mystical) explanations for events; and a fatalistic worldview that discourages initiative and is essentially anti-progress.

The purpose of this paper is to explore these characterizations within the context of the native religion of the Basoga people of southeastern Uganda. The paper is based on observations and interviews conducted on a study trip to Uganda in the summers of 2000 and 2003.

Introduction

The Basoga people inhabit the Busoga region of Eastern Uganda, an area of 7,100 square miles bordered by Lake Victoria on the south, Lake Kyoga on the north, the Victoria Nile on the west and the Mpologoma River to the east. The Basoga number over 1.7 million people, based on the most recent census in 1991.¹ Busoga is blessed with a climate and soil that supports vast sugarcane plantations, soybeans, and a variety of vegetables including bananas, sweet potatoes, cassava, peanuts, and maize. The largest city is Jinja, with a population of over 70,000. It boasts varied industries including fishing (on Lake Victoria), brewing, and manufacturing of various products including textiles, furniture and cigarettes. It is also the location of a dam and a large hydroelectric plant that supplies power to parts of Uganda and Kenya. Although some Basoga earn wages from the region's industries, most depend for survival wholly or substantially on food grown on private plots.

Busoga is home to the Source of the Nile River, where Lake Victoria overflows to begin its journey northward to the Mediterranean. It is one of Uganda's foremost tourist destinations, offering boat rides on the lake and whitewater rafting on the Nile. The region of Busoga is, botanically, a garden. Despite being very close to the equator, its elevation provides a pleasant climate most of the year. Subsistence farming is relatively easy, and it is possible to experience as many as three growing seasons in a year, although a bit of local humor notes that, as a result, there are three famines each year.

Despite its agricultural potential, most inhabitants of the region languish in grinding poverty. Not that remedies haven't been tried: it is impossible to walk the streets of Jinja without noting the offices of this ministry or that mission, this program or that project, all representing the best, most optimistic intentions of religious and secular organizations, mostly Western, to facilitate the region's development. Their ineffectiveness, and the arrival of a new effort with the departure of a failed one seems to underscore the intractability of poverty's hold on these people.

Poverty is a multi-faceted problem, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to address all issues. However, there is considerable evidence that culture is a significant determinant of prospects for economic, political and social progress. Arguably, religion is a significant element of any culture, a fact clearly evident in Africa. Religious beliefs form the foundation on which cultural values rest², and those values provide the basic framework for defining one's relationship to the world and to others. As examples will demonstrate, religious beliefs and practices play a key role in the daily lives of the Basoga and provides valuable insight to their social and economic behavior.

¹ See the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, Republic of Uganda, The 1991 Population and Housing Census (National Summary), Entebbe, Uganda: 1994, p. 8.

² In the United States, the current argument is not about the Judeo-Christian foundations of its political, economic, and judicial systems, but rather how those foundations ought to be acknowledged in a pluralistic, secular society. Consider, for example, the current emotionally charged discussions about references to God or the Bible in the pledge of Allegiance, on money, and in public places.

The purpose of this paper is, first, to review certain of the literature focused on religion as a significant determinant of economic progress; second, to identify key attributes of African culture based in religious belief and practice that are detrimental to progress; third, to outline the fundamental belief system of the Basoga³ people; and finally, to summarize the implications of that belief system for prospects for economic progress in the region.

Religion as a Determinant of Economic Progress

Sociologist Max Weber was among the first to identify and formally posit religious affiliation as a critical determinant of economic and social progress.

Analyzing family income levels of Protestants, Catholics and Jews in the German city of Baden in 1904-1905, Weber found that Protestants did substantially better than Catholics, and that Jews did better than either. The analysis led to Weber's masterwork, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which explained why the values and attitudes inculcated by ascetic Calvinism were a more effective motivator of entrepreneurship, capital accumulation, and community responsibility than the values and attitudes inculcated by confessional Roman Catholicism.⁴

Robert Inglehart's study of the relative performance of Protestant and Catholic countries between 1870 and 1938 confirms Weber's assertions.⁵

Weber identified features of ascetic Protestantism⁶ that, in contrast with Roman Catholicism, encouraged behaviors conducive to economic achievement. There were two aspects to this advantage. First, Protestantism set high ethical standards, advocating virtues such as thrift, frugality, honesty, a sense of duty to others, personal responsibility, and a high regard for work. Weber believed that the more flexible Catholic ethic put them at a disadvantage relative to Protestants in this life, since, "A rigorous ethical code is likely to increase levels of trust, so important to political pluralism and economic efficiency. Clearly, the rigor of the ethical code influences and is influenced by the sense of community."⁷

A second aspect of the Protestant advantage was that this rigorous ethic was applied universally. Protestantism, according to Weber, required consistent adherence to high levels of honesty and fairness in dealing with everyone, regardless of familial or tribal associations. In this way, Protestantism fostered trust, the foundation for the development of large institutions such as the modern corporation, with dispersed

³ The Basoga people inhabit the Busoga region; the local language is Lusoga. The predominant tribal group in Uganda are the Baganda, who reside mainly Buganda (thus the origin of the name Uganda) and speak Luganda.

⁴ Harrison, *Who Prospers?*, p. 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶ In fact, the features Weber identified with Protestantism are more correctly applied to the more Puritanical forms, including the Puritans, Anabaptists, and Quakers. The more "liberal" Protestants such as Lutherans and Anglicans would be more like Roman Catholics in certain views of the inevitability of sin, intercession by clergy, individual responsibility for salvation, "flexibility" of morality, and duty to "outsiders."

⁷ Harrison, *The Pan American Dream*, p. 37.

ownership and professional management. Trust as a requisite for social and economic progress is the focus of Francis Fukuyama's *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*.

Weber's research took him to China and India to study Asian culture and, accordingly, Eastern religions. He criticized Confucianism and Hinduism on at least two broad counts. First, with regard to ethical rigor, he noted that these religions propagated a 'non-ethical' set of values (particularly by contrast with Protestant asceticism) set of values and attitudes that got in the way of change. The only ethical sins 'consisted of offenses against traditional authorities, parents, ancestors, and superiors in the hierarchy of office.' Family piety dominated thought and action, and it, coupled with the absence of a broader social ethic, led to dishonesty in dealings outside the family. This, in turn, led to mistrust, a major obstacle to economic activity.⁸

Second, Weber cited the "irrationality" of Eastern religions which, "like traditional religions the world over, explained natural phenomena by supernatural events, by the actions of greater and lesser spirits, by magic."⁹ Likewise, Calvin Beisner lays part of the blame for Asian underdevelopment at the feet of "worldviews [which], seeing reality as disjointed, the gods as capricious, and power and wealth as achievable through luck or magic or karma rather than through hard and wise labor and cooperation, underlie the poverty of the Third World."¹⁰

Lawrence Harrison's several works on Latin American development provide a catalog of cultural traits that inhibit economic and social development, many of which he ties to the legacy of Roman Catholicism in the region. In *The Pan American Dream*, Harrison lists these factors that qualify Latin American culture as "progress-resistant":

1. Time Focus is on the past; the future is in the other world.¹¹
2. Work is a necessary evil, not intended to be meaningful or pleasurable.¹²
3. Frugality and saving are discouraged; instead, ceremonies and fiestas consume savings and serve to redistribute income.¹³
4. Literacy and education are discouraged; the priest is the authority for moral questions. Reading the Bible and thinking for oneself are discouraged.¹⁴
5. Merit takes a backseat to birth and connections; one should be satisfied with where God has placed him.¹⁵
6. The sense of community is limited to a relatively small circle of family and friends, which encourages nepotism, corruption, and weak public institutions.¹⁶

⁸ Harrison, *Underdevelopment is a State of Mind*, p. 23.

⁹ Harrison, *Underdevelopment is a State of Mind*, p. 23.

¹⁰ Beisner, *Prosperity and Poverty: Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity*, p. 197.

¹¹ Harrison, *The Pan American Dream*, p. 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

7. Lax ethical standards and easy absolution reduce the level of trust that is “so important to political pluralism and economic efficiency.”¹⁷
8. The notion of justice is undermined by a weak ethical framework and a weak sense of obligation to those outside the family.¹⁸
9. Authority is understood and exercised as strongly hierarchical with little tolerance of dissent or criticism, reflecting the authoritarianism of Roman Catholicism.¹⁹
10. Secularism characterizes progressive societies; in Latin America the Roman Catholic church still exercises a great deal of influence in the civic realm.²⁰

Note that Weber’s analysis was not concerned with doctrinal orthodoxy or religious truth, but rather with the economic behavior that the religion induced among adherents. In other words, he does not critique the Roman Catholic influence in Latin America as right or wrong, true or false. Similarly, the aim of this paper is not to evaluate the “errors” of traditional African religion as evidenced in the belief system of the Basoga, but rather to identify critical elements of that belief system which are believed to have significant implications for their economic behavior.

African culture and traditional religion

To speak of “African culture” as if there is an identifiable set of cultural attributes that would typify such a large area seems naïve, and possibly arrogant. There are potentially countless subcultures that span the African continent, whether based on people group, language or dialect, skin color, avowed religious affiliation, outside influences, national identities, and various others. However, when one studies a specific tribal culture, the most striking finding is how closely the specific culture conforms to the general, including religious beliefs and traditions, east to west and from the Sahara to the south. Cameroonian Daniel Etounga-Manguelle writes that, despite apparent differences, . . . [there] is a foundation of shared values, attitudes, and institutions that binds together the nations south of the Sahara, and in many respects those in the north as well. The situation is analogous to that of Great Britain: Despite its Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish subcultures, no one would question the existence of British culture.²¹

The influence of African traditional religion is very strong and persistent even in the face of modernization, with relatively little impact by imported religions, including Islam and Christianity, on the way in which Africans view the world, how it works, and their place in it. Despite conversion to one or the other, their frame of reference is still strongly influenced by traditions. As Etounga-Manguelle notes:

Modern political power has often assumed the characteristics of traditional religious ritual powers; divination and witchcraft have even made their way into

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 37.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 38.

²¹ Etounga-Manguelle, *Does Africa Need a Cultural Adjustment Program?*, Chapter 6 in Harrison and Huntington, p. 67.

courthouses. Everywhere on the continent, the bond between religion and society remains strong. As Felix Houphouet-Boigny, the late president of the Ivory Coast told us (and he, as a Roman Catholic, knew what he was talking about): “From African archbishops to the most insignificant Catholic, from the great witchdoctor to the most insignificant Moslem, from the pastor to the most insignificant Protestant, we all have an animist past.”²²

Among the significant cultural traits that explain the continent’s nagging social and economic problems, Etounga-Manguelle lists six that relate directly or indirectly to the belief system that is typical of the animistic traditions:

(1) Hierarchical distance — “[S]ociety tends to be static and politically centralized. What little national wealth exists is concentrated in the hands of an elite. The generations pass without significant change in mind-set. To the extent that it covers many aspects of a society (e.g., political systems, religious practices, organization of enterprises) hierarchical distance would virtually suffice to explain underdevelopment.”²³

(2) Control over uncertainty — Some societies condition their members to “conquer the future,” and to be aggressive in shaping it, which leads to “institutions oriented toward change and the limitations of risks.” Africans, on the other hand, “are acculturated to “accept uncertainty about the future, taking each day as it comes.”²⁴ Lacking any commitment to changing the future, there is little enthusiasm for endeavors to improve the future such as work, saving, investment, or education. “If Africans immerse themselves in the present and demonstrate a lack of concern for tomorrow, it is less because of the safety of community social structures that envelop them than because of their submission to a ubiquitous and implacable divine will. The African, returning to the roots of religion, believes that only God can modify the logic of a world created for eternity. . . . The African remains enslaved by his environment.”²⁵

(3) The Tyranny of Time — In traditional African society, which exalts the glorious past of ancestors through tales and fables, nothing is done to prepare for the future. The African, anchored in his ancestral culture, is so convinced that the past can only repeat itself that he worries only superficially about the future. . . . [W]ithout a dynamic perception of the future, there is no planning, no foresight, no scenario building; in other words, no policy to affect the course of events.”²⁶

(4) Indivisible Power and Authority — “In Africa, the force of religion continues to weigh both on individual and collective destiny. It is common for African leaders to claim magical powers. It is difficult to explain African passivity other than by the fear inspired by a God hidden in the folds of the clothes of every African chief.”²⁷ This does

²² Ibid, p. 67.

²³ Ibid., p. 68.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 68.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 69.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 69.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 70.

not mean that political figures can disregard the spirits, for they too are subject to their influence. Mathieu Kerekou, Benin's former president and a born-again Christian, learned this "when he omitted a reference to ancestors in taking the oath of office [in 1996]. When two citizens complained to the country's constitutional court, the court forced [him] to retake his oath of office, swearing to respect the constitution before God, the spirits of the ancestors [*italics added*], the nation, and before the people . . ."²⁸

(5) The Community Dominates the Individual — Of all characteristics of African culture, the "subordination of the individual to the community would certainly be the reference point to remember. African thought rejects the view of the individual as an autonomous and responsible being. The African is vertically rooted in his family in the vital ancestor, if not in God; horizontally he is linked to his group, to society, to the cosmos." The African oral tradition helps ensure that the culture transmitted from one generation to the next is acceptable to the tribe, suppressing individualism and skepticism, and "the established belief system remains absolute: As soon as ancestral beliefs are threatened, the only possible choice is between the established order and chaos."²⁹

(6) The High Costs of Irrationalism — "A society in which magic and witchcraft flourish is a sick society ruled by tension, fear, and moral disorder. Sorcery is a costly mechanism for managing conflict and *preserving the status quo, which is, importantly, what African culture is all about* [*italics added*]." Appeals to witchcraft are not isolated to the villages or to the uneducated. Sorcery is openly used by government officials, football teams, and businesspeople, as well as ordinary villagers.

Traditional Religion of the Basoga³⁰

Many African scholars would argue that the term "religion" is inadequate to describe the traditional belief system. In Busoga, for instance, there is no parallel word in the local language for religion, and the word usually translated "religion" is *ediini*, a Kiswahili term referring exclusively to the major imported faiths, Islam and Christianity. Second, The world of the Basoga is not so easily divisible into the sacred and the secular as has been accomplished (or attempted) in the West. To the Basoga, as throughout animistic Africa, spirit activity is a reality, not an abstraction, one that significantly affects everyday life.³¹ Therefore, it may be more appropriate to speak of the "belief system" of the Basoga since "religion" is a too-restrictive and misleading term.

²⁸ *Washington Post*, April 7, 1996, quoted in Richmond and Gestrin, p. 36.

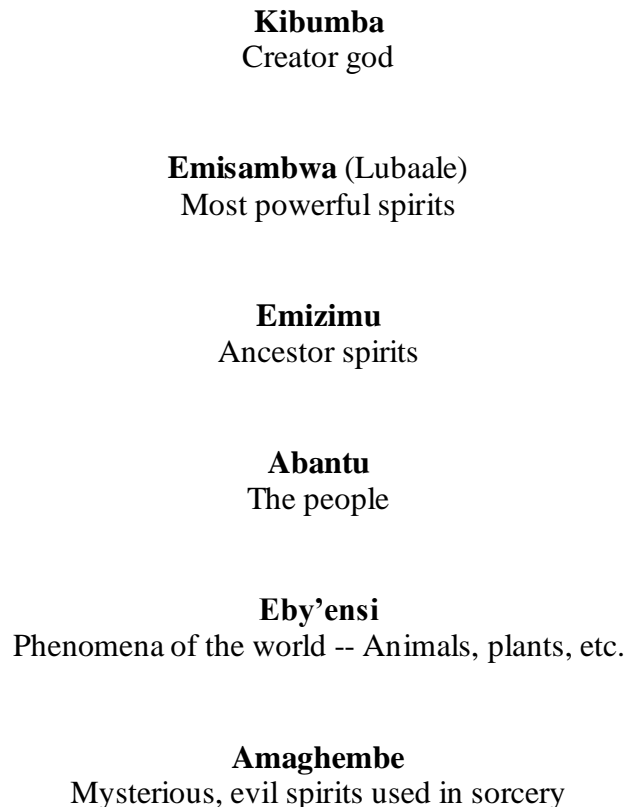
²⁹ Etounga-Manguelle, *Does Africa Need a Cultural Adjustment Program?*, Chapter 6 in Harrison and Huntington, p. 71.

³⁰ Unless specifically referenced, the information in this section was obtained through interviews conducted personally and via email. Most of the interviews were conducted on two separate visits to the region, the first in the summer of 2000 and the second in the summer of 2003. It should be noted that, while one might be able to obtain an understanding of the traditional religious beliefs of the Basoga today, it is not possible to understand what those beliefs were generations ago or how they have been influenced by outside influences, which surely have been. Like most of sub-Saharan Africa, the oral traditions of the Basoga do not provide reliable historical records.

³¹ Barton, *Causality in Modern Africa and the Postmodern West: A Case Study of Cultural Similarities with Special Reference to the Worldview of the Basoga of Uganda and the Proposals of the Vatican Observatory/CTNS Project*, p. 233.

Whichever the words chosen, it is correct to describe the traditional belief system or religion of the Basoga as animistic--spirits are believed to pervade the world and to actively influence day-to-day affairs. Understanding spirit activity and the place of the Basoga people in a world of heavy spirit activity is explained by John Barton in terms of a "hierarchy of power or being."³² The spirits vary in roles and in power, but are understood to form a hierarchy as explained in the following paragraphs. A table of the hierarchy is shown as Figure 1.

Figure 1: Basoga "Hierarchy of Power or Being"



The Supreme Being, the creator god, is *Kibumba*³³. Remote and shrouded in mystery, very little is known about him and there is very little interaction between *Kibumba* and the people. His work appears to have been accomplished by establishing the order of the world, but present spirit activity is accomplished through others.

Lubaale is considered the chief spirit within the category of most powerful spirits known as the *emisambwa*. These powerful and active spirits are generally identified with long-dead ancestors who have attained the position of mythical hero. Typically, the

³² Barton, p. 230.

³³ Or *Katonda*, a Baganda name that has been adopted in parts of Busoga. The meaning of *Kibumba* is "the one who molds" or "the potter."

emisambwa are named forces or spirits identified with some geographical feature such as a waterfall, mountain, rock formation, or spring; or with some general phenomenon such as thunder or lightning, death or a certain disease.

Emisambwa are always present and have a wide area of influence. As such, they are deemed to be responsible for or powerful with regard to environmental and climatic conditions or problems such as floods, crop yields, and drought, as well as for problems that beset the general population such as the AIDS epidemic, political oppression, and even the fortunes of the local or national sports teams. Although the *emisambwa* are everywhere, they are removed from the average person, and it is common for the Basoga to invoke them via a spiritual medium, termed a *muswezi* (the plural is *baswezi*).³⁴ Besides representing the desires of the people to the *emisambwa*, the *muswezi* can represent the spirit's interests to the outside world.³⁵ The *muswezi* is often accompanied by an entourage of assistants who reinforce his authority and help accomplish his work.³⁶

Although the *emisambwa* are powerful and their activities wide-ranging, the Basoga interact most frequently with the *emizimu*, the spirits of recently-deceased ancestors. Tradition holds that, when one dies the spirit remains in its lifetime surroundings, observing and interacting with the living. This state is maintained as long as the spirit remains in the memory of the living. Once forgotten, the spirit is extinguished. This existence as a spirit being is not the most desirable state; the greatest desire of a spirit is to be reborn as a human being, and the spirit must remain in human memory until that occurs.³⁷ The spirits achieve this by "reminding" the living of one's existence by haunting or harassing the living on an ongoing basis.³⁸ The *emizimu* are therefore the level of spirits with which the Basoga interact most often, and they engage in a variety of behaviors to influence the spirits in their favor or at least to block the spirits' harmful efforts. The *emizimu* are deemed responsible for domestic events including sicknesses and domestic problems. Because they are intimate spirits, they are usually appeased without the intervention of a *muswezi* through private observances. Many families have a small hut constructed on their property as a symbolic residence for the *emizimu*, and they may even open a small hole in the family's main hut so that the ancestor spirits may

³⁴ A *muswezi* is purportedly chosen or possessed by the *emisambwa*. The *baswezi* dress in elaborate costumes of barkcloth, feathers, and charms. They live in similarly-constructed huts, from which they, for a fee, provide consultation, make charms and potions, make offerings, and engage in rituals on behalf of their clients. In general, the *baswezi* use fear and intimidation to influence the people and most of the people both fear and hate them.

³⁵ In 2000-2001, a proposed dam-building project on the Nile river was delayed for months while a large Italian construction company negotiated with the *muswezi* of Bujagali Falls, a series of rapids that would be inundated by the dam. Eventually a settlement was reached that left the *muswezi* in a much-improved financial condition, although the project has since been abandoned for other reasons.

³⁶ I use the term "him" because most, but not all, *baswezi* are male. All *emisambwa* are male.

³⁷ The manner in which this is believed to occur varies. One tradition holds that, when a child is born, a couple of ancestors are identified as prospective spirits. Two chickens are placed on the roof of the house, one identified with each spirit. When the first chicken flies down to the ground, the spirit of that ancestor is believed to come into the child.

³⁸ Although the *emizimu* are held to bless as well as to curse, most describe their activity negative terms. When asked to draw pictures of the spirits, people invariably draw scary, fearsome faces. When asked to describe the spirits, words such as "fierce, lies, fear" are common.

come and go freely, a sign of welcoming. Offerings of food, drink, blood or articles express respect for the ancestors and help keep them from doing harm to the family.

Below the *emizimu* are the people themselves, the *abantu*, followed by the phenomena of the world (animals, plants, objects), the *eby'ensi*. Although humans are regarded as above these things, the lines are blurred. It would be correct to note that the lines “between man and nature, living and dead, divine and human, nature and supernature”³⁹ are far less distinct for the Basoga than they are in modern Western schemes.

The lowest level of beings is one of abstract spirits forces known as the *amaghembe*. The *amaghembe* are mysterious, powerful spirits that are actively involved in the daily affairs of the Basoga. They are greatly feared for several reasons. First, they are generally believed to be evil and often used in sorcerous attacks on people. Second, they can be used by anyone, not just the *baswezi* who might be considered more “measured” in their use of spirit power. Third, the “ritualistic demands of these spirits are often severe. Their power is tapped at great risk and at a high price, and it is not uncommon for *amaghembe* to be associated with gruesome human sacrifices.”⁴⁰

Implications for Economic Progress

The foregoing is far from a comprehensive exposition of the belief system of the Basoga, but it is a starting place for understanding how the Basoga view the world and how they would be expected to behave if guided by these beliefs. This discussion will be limited to implications for economic progress is based on three observations:

(1) Spirit activity is the overriding explanation for life's events and circumstances among the Basoga. Basoga *causation* therefore attributes most of life's events, and certainly the problems and misfortunes, to circumstances outside human control. The results are

(a) Attitudes toward the future characterized by helplessness, submission, and fatalism rather than commitment to betterment of self and community.

(b) Irrational and irresponsible responses to problems and events. The perceived link between one's actions and their consequences (more broadly, between cause and effect) are severely weakened, which has consequences that touch on all areas of life:

If one's fortunes in life are determined by the capricious whims of the spirits, why work hard? Hard work is tiresome and provides no guarantee of return, and slacking provides no significant prospect of failure.

Why pursue further education in one's line of business if it is unlikely to make a difference?

Why save or invest, for the spirits may take it away if they wish; on the other hand, they give you someone else's wealth if they wish. Whatever the outcome, it

³⁹ Barton, p. 234.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 236. It is not unusual to read accounts in the national newspapers, *The Monitor* and *The New Vision*, of the disappearance of someone, often a child, and later the discovery of his remains, the apparent victim of a sacrifice. Several people I interviewed had observed the remains of sacrificed humans in the different villages.

is beyond your control and your preparation is not likely to make much difference.

Why boil drinking water or wash your hands after visiting the latrine, because one may follow all the “rules” outlined out by health aid workers and still become sick.

In general, what is the point of planning or preparing for the future? It is outside one’s control. It is in the hands of the capricious, mischievous spirits which can only be “handled” by spiritual means, that is, magic.

(c) Expenditure of scarce resources on measures that do not work. The Basoga do, as a matter of course, attempt to win the goodwill of the spirits, or at least to block their harmful efforts. Many children wear a charm, attached to a belt worn around the neck or waist, to protect against illness or other harm. One who is sick will visit a *muswezi* to obtain a charm or spell. To “cover all bases,” the sick person may also visit a modern medical practitioner, thus incurring additional cost. Acknowledging the spirits is accomplished in a number of ways, through formal rituals and through incidental behaviors. For example, someone opening a bottle of soda might pour onto the ground a small amount of the beverage as an offering. As noted elsewhere, the blessing of a new enterprise usually requires significant offerings, sometimes involving human sacrifice.⁴¹

The pervading influence of assumed spirit activity on daily life may be impossible for most secular Westerners to comprehend.⁴² It is not that the Basoga lack an understanding of cause and effect. There is a proverb in Lusoga that is translated, “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire.” However, the world of cause and effect for the Basoga is frequently and unpredictably confounded by spirit activity, from the broad influence of the *emisambwa* to the more personal harassment of the *emizimu*, to the greatly feared fierce personal attacks by the *amaghembe*.

All activities are observed and judged by the spirits, and their displeasure may be expressed in a number of ways: personal and family problems such as illness, accident, or death; inability to have children or marital infidelity; loss or destruction of property; failure to obtain a job or entrance to university; difficulties or failure in school or in business—in other words, virtually any difficulty life poses is attributed to magic. By and large the relationship to the unpredictable and fickle spirits is one of fear and trepidation. The implications for economic progress are pessimistic. The belief system is largely detrimental to economic development since it undermines personal responsibility;

⁴¹ One interviewee noted that significant enterprises, such as a large construction project, will involve human sacrifice. It may involve a street person or orphan, whose body will be buried somewhere on the site, but major endeavors may require that a family member be sacrificed. One young girl I met had been brought to Jinja, with her father’s permission, to be a babysitter for a Ugandan family. Certain of her family demanded that she be returned to her village, believing her father had sold her to be sacrificed.

⁴² The employees of a café in Jinja frequented by Westerners one day found a small doll near the front door. Assuming it to be a charm intended to do harm to the restaurant’s business, its employees, or its customers, they stood speculating about who would curse the café. Later it was determined that the doll was actually left by an American visitor. He had purchased a souvenir spear at a nearby gift shop, and the small doll was attached to it but he had no interest in the doll and left it for a child to find and keep as a toy.

it discourages planning and other rational responses to life's opportunities and problems; and it results in the waste of resources on ineffective remedies. In the world of the Basoga, magic--not necessarily work, saving, education, risk/return calculation or cost/benefit assessment--is the most assured way to obtain desired ends.

(2) Spirits may also be invoked to do harm to others by the use of charms or spells, which has significance to the nature of interpersonal relationships, especially with regard to those outside the immediate family. The Basoga have a saying: Every death has its witch," meaning that misfortune is caused by some spirit or by some person invoking a spirit to do harm. Given the conclusion that survival and success are best realized through "handling" the spirits via witchcraft, some are inclined to attribute another person's good fortune to his use of magic. In a climate of envy and suspicion, one person's ill fortune may be attributed to another's use of witchcraft against him.

In the very close context of life in the village (mud huts with open windows and grass roofs, everyone's coming and going easily observed, and families closely connected by blood), secrets are difficult to keep and changes in circumstance or fortune are easily observed. In the context of a subsistence economy, even very small differences in these give rise to envy and set the stage for a social environment characterized by suspicion and retaliation for offenses, real or imagined. The tendency to place blame in this way prevails in Busoga, as in sub-Saharan Africa in general. When bad fortune occurs, the predominant question is not, "What happened?" but, "Who did this?" When a business fails, when yet another child dies, when a snake bites someone, when someone has a motorcycle accident, the first question is: "Who did this?" The assumption that spirit activity is involved may occur even when there is no identifiable victim, no one wronged—if another person's fortunes are exceptional, that person surely used magic. And if that person's good fortune coincides with another's misfortune—and someone is always experiencing misfortune—then one can assume that the fortunate person benefited at the expense of the unfortunate.

The feeling of envy and mistrust is pervasive, and an observation made openly by the Basoga, not just by outside critics. As noted earlier, mistrust discourages cooperation, which is required to build the large and long-lived institutions, private and public, that characterize a successful modern economy. It is uncertain how the possible "penalty" for standing out might discourage excellent behavior, but it is safe to say that the notoriety one receives for exceptional performance in Western culture--and that represents part of the reward for achievement--are not so appealing among the Basoga. How much this serves, in marginal terms, to discourage effort and risk-taking should be significant.

(3) The Basoga are bound to the past by traditional religion, as Etounga-Manguelle has noted concerning Africa at large. Unable to shape the future in any reliable terms, and their present circumstances dependent on maintaining the goodwill of the ancestor spirits, the Basoga look to the past. Barring some inconceivable change, tomorrow will be much like today, which is essentially the same as yesterday.

Ancestor veneration ties the Basoga to the way things were, necessarily drawing their attention to the past. Respect for ancestors implies doing things as they did, maintaining what has worked in the past, and resisting change. A farmer who wishes to adopt new ways of farming may find himself facing two challenges: by changing the way he farms from that followed by the ancestors, he risks offending them and producing a poor crop. On the other hand, if his crop yield is superior, he may be accused by jealous neighbors of using magic to cause his crops to be better than theirs. Naturally, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy: failure to plan for the future means that one becomes victimized by unanticipated events, which fuels the skepticism about being able to plan.

As may be apparent, all three points are interrelated and stem from the basic belief system. At the mercy of active, mostly malevolent spirits, the Basoga focus on magical responses to life's problems and uncertainties, neglecting the more rational behaviors that are critical to economic progress: work, saving, education, organization, and planning, to name a few. The spirits may be induced by others to do harm, so unfortunate events may be assumed to have been brought about by an enemy, which undermines the trust needed to develop the broad associations required for success in a modern economy. Third, seeking to appease the spirits requires a constant focus on the past, discouraging forward thinking, organization and planning.

Conclusion

If the problems of the Basoga are indeed a matter of culture, the implications are pessimistic. Changing one person's belief system is difficult, and changing the belief system of an entire region is a mind-boggling prospect. However, it appears that there are no shortcuts. The dozen of programs and millions (billions?) of dollars invested in failed programs just in recent decades should provide a clear signal that the problems of underdevelopment in Busoga, as in sub-Saharan Africa and the Third World in general, are beyond the reach of a few institutional changes here and the attraction of a few industries there. Daniel Etounga-Manguelle, among others, realize that the greatest problems are within the people, whose belief system is grounded in harmful traditions.

Sweeping reform in institutions such as government and education are needed, but even more important are efforts to transform the minds of the Basoga. I am familiar with such programs offered through church and charitable organizations, and they are changing the lives of some Basoga, a few at a time. While touring a model farm in Busoga, I was told by a missionary that the farmer, Charles, was a Christian whose life had changed dramatically in many ways since his conversion. Besides adopting new ways of farming and exhibiting a more rigorous work ethic, the man had also changed the way he related to his wife and children. He now allowed his wife to sleep in the bed with him rather than on the floor beside the bed as is customary among the Basoga (and Uganda in general). His life had changed for the better in other ways as well. The missionary noted that, when a man makes a true change in regard to his religious life, he is open to many changes in other areas of his life. Changing the belief system is critical to improving the behavior.

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