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THE KULŨ IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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FIVE years ago I happened to be passing through the Wurkun district of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria and used the opportunity to make some ethnographical inquiries. The people of the district, who are located on the north bank of the Benue River opposite Lau, had been described by Mrs. Temple (in her *Notes on the Tribes of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria*, compiled from official records) under the generic term of 'Wurkum', as though they constituted a homogeneous tribal unit. But from my inquiries it appeared that the term Wurkun (not Wurkum) merely meant 'the people of the hills', and included seven distinct groups of diverse origin, some speaking Bantu languages and some Sudanic. Notes and vocabularies were obtained for each group, but in this paper a short description of one of the groups only, viz. the (Ba-) Kulũ, can be given.

The Kulũ occupy the towns or communes of Balasa, Bambur, Jikono, Kirim, Kwonshi, Darufwai and Bamingun. They speak a classifying language of Bantu type, which is so similar to that of the Jarawa farther east, that they may be regarded as an enclave of Jarawa.

Like the other groups of the Wurkun district the Kulũ were probably in pre-Fulani days (i.e. prior to *c.* A.D. 1810) subject to the Jukun of Pindiga, Kona, and Kororofa, and it was stated by some elders that

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a tax in salt used to be paid to the Jukun chiefs. Others, however, maintained that their relations with the Jukun were purely friendly and never subservient. All admitted that the tribe acknowledged the suzerainty of Yakubu, the Fulani governor of Bauchi *c.* 1820 (i.e. they purchased security by an annual payment of slaves), but denied that they ever had any dealings with the Fulani of Muri (by whom they are now administered) prior to the British occupation. Whatever their past history may have been, the Kulũ succeeded in maintaining their own institutions and individuality.

The political organization of the Kulũ is that of independent villages without any central tribal authority, the villages being governed by elders or headmen who dispose of all minor cases that arise. The village consists of a number of local groups, each of which is an exogamous unit, has its own headman, and its own religious cult, i.e. each local group of a village may be regarded as a small clan. Thus the village (or village-group) of Bambur consists of the following local groups or clans: Bata-Bulo, Kakalabe, Kangəbo, Waram, Kadoi, Kasaɣa, Kagoŋ, Bata-Kiri, Kabaɣa, Babaŋla, Baŋ Konoŋ, and Bangei. No Bata-Bulo man may marry a Bata-Bulo woman and so on, but a Bata-Bulo man may marry a Kakalabe woman or any woman of any other group, provided his own mother did not belong to that group. The rule of exogamy applies, therefore, both to the father's and mother's group. It was said also that a man should avoid marrying into the group of his father's mother, and mother's mother. If therefore a man takes up his residence in his maternal uncle's group, he cannot marry into that group, nor may his children. Under the former system of marriage, which was mainly that of 'exchange', children frequently took up their abode with their maternal uncles, as these uncles had a claim over children of an exchange marriage which had been dissolved (and could also in certain circumstances use female children as exchanges in order to provide wives for themselves or their sons). Moreover, if a man were unable to give a sister or other female relative in exchange for his wife, his children could be claimed by his wife's brother. This system has now been forbidden, and under the new system, which is a mild form of bride-price, all children belong to the father's group. Thus the prohibition of the former mode of contracting marriage has had the effect of modifying the social grouping.

The people, however, though they still maintain that marriage by exchange is the best form of marriage, on the ground that it is more stable (owing to the rule that if a wife runs away her brother must see that she is sent back or else lose his own wife), appear to be perfectly content with the present system, and admitted that in the old days a man frequently sold into slavery a sister who had abandoned her husband.

The maternal uncle still retains that form of authority which is found in most patrilineal tribes, viz. the right of calling on his nephews to assist him occasionally in farm-work, to go on messages, and to render other small services. Inheritance, however, follows the patrilineal rule; but a sister's son usually inherits his uncle's spear, and he may also inherit an uncle's widow as a wife, provided she offers no objection. Elopement with married women is common, but there is no organized system of elopement marriages such as is found among the Kulũ of Zaria Province.

In pre-Administration days each local group or clan was an independent unit, its relations with other groups being determined by custom and not by any external personal authority. The sole exception to this rule was that the priest of the senior cult in the village-group could fine any individual for an offence against the cult, such as planting corn before the sowing rites had been performed. Disputes within the clan were settled by the clan-head in consultation with the heads of extended-families, and the clan-head and elders used the local cults to enforce their authority. If a member of one clan charged a member of another with theft, and there was some doubt about the truth of the charge, the matter was settled by arbitrators, with an appeal to an oath; or the two clans might resort to fighting. In a clear case of theft the injured party, backed up by his friends, was allowed to take his own revenge within the limits prescribed by custom. Charges of illness or death caused by witchcraft were settled by ordeal. The medicine used was strophanthus, and was prepared by a medicine-man chosen by divination. It was handed to the accused by his maternal uncle. The accused stripped off his loin-cloth and put on a girdle of locust-bean leaves, so that the effect of the ' medicine ' could be seen by all. If he was seized with diarrhoea he was considered guilty and handed over to his accuser's family who laid him on a rock, tied

him to two logs of wood weighted with stones, covered his body with faggots and burnt him alive. If the accused man vomited the medicine he was considered guiltless and his accuser was burnt to death for bringing a false charge, the accused offering thanks to the gods for his safe delivery. It was said that adulterers were sometimes also burnt to death. As regards the ordeal it was stated that, if the accused happened to belong to a powerful family, his family might demand that the medicine should be administered to chickens representing the accuser and accused. There was an alternative medicine, viz. the pulp of a certain gourd pounded and soaked in water. This also was believed to induce diarrhoea in one who was guilty. In witchcraft cases a number of people, indicated by a diviner or several diviners (*basuŋboni*), might be required to undergo the ordeal in turn.

There were and are two principal methods of divination. In one the medium used was a cat's skin stuffed with grass, a ball of wax studded with red berries being added to represent the head. A ring with iron attachments was passed through the nostril. The diviner, placing his foot on the tail, inserted the dangling iron attachments into a calabash of water, and by an imperceptible movement of the wrist caused them to dance about. The position assumed by the pieces of iron enabled him to give a decision. The medium employed for the second method was the tusk of a wart-hog, in the open end of which the whiskers of some animal were fixed. The tusk was attached to a piece of twisted leather which the diviner held taut, with one end fastened to his big toe. By slight movements of the wrist he caused the whiskers to make impressions on the sandy ground, and these were interpreted according to a stereotyped code. In some important cases the diviner would first consult the apparatus, then withdraw into the shrine of a local deity, and deliver his decision in a falsetto voice, which was presumed to be the voice of the deity.

RELIGION. The supreme deity of the Kulũ is Yamba. If a man falls sick or his corn fails to ripen, or if he has consistently been unfortunate in hunting or other occupations, he will resort to a diviner, who may declare that the man's misfortunes are due to a grandfather who wishes to be brought into closer association with his grandchild. The man accordingly approaches the relatives of his grandfather, paternal

or maternal as the case may be, with offerings of beer and a chicken, and rites are performed before the emblem of the family '*Aku*' (ancestors), whereby friendly relations are restored between the man and his grandfather.

But the diviner may declare that the man's misfortune or chronic sickness is due to pursuit by the ghost of an animal killed during hunting. So the diviner is summoned to the sick man's house, where he fashions two pieces of wood into human form, plants them in an enclosure, pours libations of beer into a pot placed in front of the images, and begs the ghost to desist from following the man. It is believed that the ghost will then take up its abode in the images. If the patient recovers he must continue to make periodic offerings, and when he dies the cult is taken over by his son or a specified friend. On similar principles personal or family cults known as *Ngun Puro* ('the wood of salvation') are established in every Kulũ household.

The Basali cult, which is the principal cult of the Kulũ, appears to be mainly ancestral, for when a man dies his soul is formally escorted from the grave to the shrine of the Basali. Three days after death the father, brother, or son of the deceased, or the head of the clan, takes a chicken to the grave, and then proceeds to the hut of Basali where he asks the spirits and ghosts to receive the dead relative. The chicken is killed and eaten *in situ* by the relatives. The conception that the ghost of the deceased mounts the chicken and is taken to his relatives is one which is found among some of the Jukun-speaking peoples. The Basali rites, which are observed in July, are primarily a commemoration of the dead. Every hamlet which has lost one of its senior members during the year carries out its own Basali rites, members of the other hamlets attending. On the other hand, the Basali cult is not wholly ancestor-worship; it is the cult of all the unseen forces which affect the life of men. And so, though each hamlet has its own Basali cult, there is one hamlet (Babangla) whose chief is the president of all the Basali cults. No one may harvest the corn until the Babangla priest has given the word. Before the corn is fully ripe the priest of Babangla orders a brew of beer to be set by all householders. He and his brethren then proceed to their farms and pluck a few heads of corn. These he rubs in his hands, and casts the grain into some of the beer. He then repairs to the hut of Basali and, with a

prayer for the health of the people, and that the new corn may give strength to all, he pours a libation on the monolith or boulder which is the symbol of the cult. After these rites the heads of households cut a little of the new corn, and each household eats a meal ceremonially, the head of the house first saying, ' Here is the new corn, let us eat it with gratitude and may it give us health.' Basali is the main cult for general magico-religious purposes. Each clan or ward has its own—a circle of stones with a grass hut in the centre. Hither the men of the clan constantly take their petitions with gifts of food and beer. The cult plays an important part in the social life of the people, being at once a drinking club for all grown-up males, and the instrument by which social offences are publicly rebuked. At the annual festival the women of the clan carry beer to the shrine of Basali and there the men are assembled. They then withdraw to a distance of some twenty yards and listen to the harangue of the priest, which is directed first against individual males for slackness in attending to the cults or for other breaches of etiquette, and then against the women, rebuking those whose conduct had been unseemly, who had quarrelled with their husbands, become paramours of other men, or had broken any of the numerous social taboos. (There are numerous taboos the breach of any of which is punishable by fines paid to the priest, often extending over a period of several months. It is taboo, for example, to strike any one on the back of the shoulders, as spirits take up their abode on the shoulders of certain individuals; it is taboo for a man to help a woman to lay down her load, and so on.) When the priest has concluded his harangue he deposits offerings of beer, food, tobacco etc., for the spirits—these offerings being subsequently removed and used by the priest and the members of his household. Thereafter one of the priest's relatives, who is concealed behind a mat inside the shrine, proceeds to utter sounds in a falsetto voice which are believed by the women to be the cries of spirits and ghosts, particularly the ghosts of the latest deceased old men. The sounds are produced either by placing the hollowed hands in front of the mouth or by speaking through a tube.

As has been indicated, the Basali cult was the policeman of the community. Any one convicted of adultery had to atone for his offence by going personally to the shrine, asking for forgiveness, with the gift of

a goat, which was killed *in situ* and eaten by all present. The person convicted of adultery would, it is said, never again repeat the offence; for the punishment for a repetition was much more severe and might perhaps cost him his life. Thieves who refused to return stolen property were killed by Basali, as well as those who had spoken disrespectfully of the cult. It was even said that the priest of the cult would himself be slain by Basali for wanton disregard of his duties. Though the men regard the cult as a means of humbugging women, it does not follow that they regard it themselves as nothing but humbug. It is their chief means of giving expression to feelings of religious awe and emotion as well as of obtaining material and physical advantages.

The Gila cult is of a different character. Gila is a corn spirit or tutelary genius, personated by a masker who appears publicly at intervals. On his appearance women are compelled to remain in their huts, and any woman who was convicted of an attempt to see the masker at close quarters was put to death. If corn is sufficient, a feast is held in August in honour of Gila, and on the conclusion of this the spirit is believed to retire from the upper earth until the end of the harvest, when first-fruit rites are performed (as in the case of Basali). Most clans or local groups have a 'Gila', but the president of the cult is again the priestly head of the Babangla clan.

Bulo is the war symbol of the tribe; it is a wooden staff kept by the Batabulo clan. The rain-making cult is also in the hands of the Babangla clan. I have no details about the cult except that the symbol is a neolithic axe, and no one may go near the place in which it is kept under pain of a heavy fine.

The arm-slashing cult of 'Mam', which is found among the Wurbo and numerous tribes as far east as Jen, is of comparatively recent introduction (about 20 years ago) among the Kulũ to whom it is known as Gabra (Gəbra). The symbol of the cult is an iron rod surmounted by bells and feathers. Novices who are being initiated spend the previous night in the hut, a good deal of beer being consumed. On the following morning the head of the cult takes some of the washed and dried seeds of the *azakami* plant, chews them in his mouth and spits the juice into the nostrils of the novices (who are males only). Having had no food but beer for a considerable time the novices soon become excited by the drumming and dancing, and when those who

have previously been initiated are seized by the hysteria of dissociation, the novices, or many of them at least, are similarly seized. Snatching hold of the iron spear of the cult they plunge it through the muscles of the upper arm. The spear head may have to be cut out with a knife. The young men continue to throw themselves about in an ecstasy, slashing their arms with knives. They become as it were different beings, possessed, they believe, by the spirit of Mam. They abandon their own language and ejaculate phrases of Kona Jukun. Their behaviour accords with their assumed character, for they no longer recognize their friends and may be insolent to their elders. In some cases, however, the symptoms of dissociation are feigned. It may be added that no one may step over the legs of an initiate when he is reclining on the ground. If he were to do so he would be assailed by the spirit and run about in a crazy way, biting people.

One of the practical uses to which the cult is put is the treatment of the sick, who are carried to the hut of Mam and sleep there for the night, surrounded by members of the cult. If a cure is effected the patient is expected to make an offering of a goat. People who have been bitten by a poisonous snake are often taken to the hut of Mam where they undergo a drastic form of treatment. An official of the cult heats a potsherd until it is red hot, smears his hand in oil, places it on the potsherd and then applies it to the affected part. This treatment may be carried on for three days and nights by relays of relatives, and the patient suffers intensely from burns. If he recovers a relative places some leaves in water and bathes the affected part, this being regarded as a purificatory rite. The introduction of the cult of Mam into new areas is generally opposed by the older men, particularly the priests of other cults. At Jen, some years ago, a good deal of disturbance was caused by the efforts of the elders to get rid of the cult of Mam which, they said, was a foreign importation and likely, therefore, to bring disaster in its train.

There is no general public initiation into the other cults. But each year, when one or two boys of a clan are old enough for initiation, they are taken to the shrines of Basali and Aku and are shown how the weird cries of the deities and ghosts are produced (by a man concealed behind a mat). They are warned never to tell lies, never to disobey their seniors, and never to speak to women about the cults.

They are then beaten by seniors and other members of the clan who have already been initiated. After that they are taken to the shrine of Gila and shown the mask and horns of Zuki. They are given a few more strokes with a whip, and are then entertained to a good square meal. They remain in the shrine all day, returning home in the dark. For three days they are kept away from women, and may not even dance with young girls. No woman may touch the boys, as the spirits are believed to be immanent in their persons, and if a woman were to put her hands on a boy's head she would go mad. On the conclusion of the three days the boys are again taken to the shrines and 'redeemed' from the spirits or ghosts by a gift of porridge, the priest saying, 'Here is the boy whom we brought in order to show to him the sacred things.' The relatives then turn to the boy and say, 'We have shown you the secrets of the cults; if you go and tell the women that we eat porridge in the shrine of Basali then we shall slay you and eat you instead.' It appears that the cults are largely a means of obtaining bounteous supplies of food from the women without argument. They are also a form of club. The men have meals in the hut of Basali several times a week, the women believing that they are engaged in offering sacrifice.

The Kulũ believe in certain evil spirits known as '*Gilo*'. A person may suddenly see and be assaulted by a *Gilo* and will cry out loudly for help. On hearing this cry men jump up, seize their weapons, and rush to his assistance, led by those endowed with second-sight. They all surround the spirit and stab it with spears or knives. The spirit may suddenly leap through the circle of people, and rush up into the rocks, pursued by all. It may seek shelter in a cave, and one of the pursuers who is bolder than the others may enter the cave and finish it off, bringing out some object which is believed to be the *Gilo's* dead body. The object is finally burnt. A *Gilo* may be believed to have come from a neighbouring town, and is driven back to that town. This frequently leads to fighting between two villages.

When a leopard is killed there is much ceremony. The honour is claimed by him whose arrow first struck and remained in the leopard's flesh (if it falls out he loses his claim). The dead leopard is carried home, and as the hunters approach the village they begin yodelling and blowing a horn, a sign which all the villagers understand. The

men seize their weapons and rush to meet the triumphant hunters, and all join in a mimic battle. The testicles of the leopard are immediately removed and handed to the slayer, who also later receives the liver and heart. No animal (or man) is considered to have been thoroughly killed until the testicles have been removed. The slayer subsequently cooks and eats the testicles, either as a delicacy or because they are believed to give him unusual strength. The scrotum is made into a much prized purse. The priest of the Basali cult then makes an oration over the dead leopard, and its corpse is treated contemptuously —its face being smeared over with earth and its body beaten. The priest makes the first incision in the skin with a knife, after the removal of the animal's head and whiskers. The right paw goes to the man who first laid hands on the animal after it had been killed. The skin is given as a trophy to the slayer, who hands it over formally to Basali, by hanging it up on a tree. Before the head is cut off a curious rite is performed. A piece of palm fibre is split in two, and one piece is placed on the wrist of the slayer and the other tied round the head of the leopard. The priest then smears some red earth on the pieces of fibre. He rubs his finger in some black pigment and smears the black pigment over the red. When this is done the fibre is removed and thrown away. After the removal of the skin the priest takes his knife and with the flat side strikes the leopard a blow on the flanks and then pierces the stomach. The entrails are removed, washed, and subsequently eaten. The body is left until the next day when it is taken to the Basali hut and ceremonially eaten by the old men, the skull being hung up on a tree. The leopard slayer is carried round the village on the shoulders of a friend, and later in the year a dance is held, the slayer being again carried round clothed in the leopard's skin.

Death Ceremonial. On the occurrence of death the female relatives of the deceased begin to wail, and some of those related to the deceased on the mother's side proceed to wash the body. The knees and arms are massaged to prevent stiffening. The grave, which is of the decanter-type (described in my *Tribal Studies*, vol. ii, p. 196), is prepared by elderly men, young men being forbidden to be present (a common taboo in Nigeria). The body is buried absolutely nude except for a narrow strip of cloth tied round the abdomen, with the

object, it is said, of staying the pangs of hunger. If the dead man had killed a leopard, or a human being in war, a garland of locust-bean leaves is tied round the head. The body is carried round the grave twice and then deposited in a crouched position. The loose earth is thrown in and beaten down hard with stones. A calabash of beer is finally smashed over the grave. Six utensils of the deceased, filled with water and samples of all the crops he had been accustomed to farm, are smashed at the door of his hut by his widow or some old woman. The head of the clan also deposits a new calabash upside down beneath the dead man's bed, for a purpose which will be described later. All who had touched the corpse purify themselves from the taint of death by washing in a concoction of mahogany bark and shaving their heads.

Next day friends meet at the deceased's house in order to pay their respects to his relatives. They sit there with their hands under their chins or holding the back of the head, and descant on the good qualities of their late friend. Soon they fall to discussing the cause of his death, some saying that it was due to witchcraft and others that it was merely the will of God (*Yamba*).

Early in the morning of the fourth day the women are assembled in a hut, the door of which is sealed with matting. The head of the clan, accompanied by an official of the Basali cult who personates the deity, enters the dead man's hut, takes the new calabash and passes it through the matting of the women's hut to be filled with food. He then addresses the ghost of the dead man saying, ' To-day I am going to conduct you to your father. Give us health and protect us from evil, as your father did before you.' The Basali official then shouts out in a falsetto voice ' Oho ', this being intended to represent the dead man's consent. The head of the clan, accompanied by the official, now sets out for the shrine of Basali, carrying with him the calabash of food and a chicken which is thought to serve as a vehicle for the deceased's soul. On arrival at the shrine, where he is met by all grown-up males of the kindred with numerous calabashes of food, he says, ' To-day we have brought you to your forefathers. Abide with them in peace.' He deposits three times a fragment of porridge taken from the calabash on the stone-symbol of the cult, and then kills the chicken, pouring the blood over the stone. They then repair to the dead man's grave and set a flat stone on the summit, the head of the clan saying, ' To-day

we have come to set your grave in order. Give us prosperity and health.' An offering of light porridge is laid on the grave and all then return to the hut of Basali and partake of the viands provided.

The rites of Basali and Aku, held annually in July or August, are a commemoration or pacification of the dead. The men enter the hut of Basali, and rites similar to those described above are performed, the head of the clan saying, ' You, so-and-so, who died last year, we are conducting you to-day to your ancestors and leaving you finally. May you remain in peace with them and give us peace also.' The head of the clan then drinks some beer and gives some also to the deceased's youngest son.

On the conclusion of these annual rites, if any male of the clan has had ill-luck and a diviner has informed him that his ill-luck is due to a well-beloved relative who has recently died and wishes to be remembered, the unlucky person prepares beer and food and, accompanied by all the malę members of his household, goes to the hut of Basali and there makes an offering to his dead relative saying, ' You, my forefather, have declared that you love me and desire me to hold a dance in your honour. To-day we have come to carry out your behests, and here is the food and drink which I have brought for you. Accept it and give us health and an abundant harvest.' After making the ritual offering all present eat and dance and then pay a visit to each household of the clan, dancing and receiving gifts of pounded beans and beer. In the evening they return to the hut of Basali and the man again addresses his dead forefather saying, ' We have held the dance and now offer you the gifts we have collected.' He pours a libation of beer over the cultus-symbol, kills two chickens, parches them over a fire, removes the liver and gizzard and places them on the cultus-symbol. The chickens and other viands are then eaten. During these rites the women of the clan remain indoors, but they are afterwards given the remains of the feast. If the man's ill-luck leaves him he may repeat these rites at intervals. But he would not do so otherwise.

At the village of Balasa there appears to be a sun cult, the symbol being a stone in the middle of the town. I had no opportunity of obtaining accurate information on the subject of this cult, but it was stated that the cult was largely used as a medium for swearing oaths. If a man swears an oath and remains unharmed for a fixed period he

must return thanks by presenting a white chicken to the priest of the cult, who sacrifices the chicken, and pouring the blood over the stone, says, ' So-and-so has sworn by you, the Sun, and has lived. He therefore wishes to offer his thanks to you. May he and all of us have health.' The chicken is eaten by the priest, the man, and his friends. Similarly, if a man swears an oath and dies soon afterwards, his relatives have to propitiate the deity with a gift, apologizing for the conduct of their dead kinsman.

As regards material culture the only notes I made were that the women, whose clothing consists of leaves worn in front and behind, pierce their noses in five places, like the Mumuye[1] but do not insert any disks or other ornaments. They carry their babies in leather satchels on the back. The ears of the older men are pierced, in the old Jukun fashion, but disks are not inserted nowadays. Circumcision is not a tribal custom, but many young parents now circumcise their male children, as a result of Muslim influence. As among the Bura tribe, every young married woman keeps a large stack of firewood outside her hut.[2]

Bedsteads are of three types: (*a*) planks laid directly on the ground and covered with mats, (*b*) planks laid across mud pillars and covered with mats, and (*c*) mud platforms. A mud wall is often built between the bedstead and the door, to secure privacy and keep off draughts. The pottery was of the usual type found in these regions (and described in my *A Sudanese Kingdom*). A common musical instrument is a hollow piece of pottery, shaped like a dumb-bell and having an opening at each end. It is beaten with the palm of the hand and produces a low muffled note. I have seen this instrument used among the Gwari to simulate the voices of ancestral ghosts. Bows are usually of bamboo, the leather bow-string being fixed by a loop to a raised knob at the thick end of the bow, and kept in position at the pointed end by the increasing thickness of the wood, i.e. the bow has no eyelet.

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[1] See my *Tribal Studies*, vol. i, pp. 446–73.

[2] Ibid., vol. i, chap. III.