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# AFRICA

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*Ivan Karp*  
African Systems  
of Thought

**11** Africa has been perceived by some Westerners as a continent of peoples whose customs and manners are incomprehensible. Others, however, have argued that the thoughts of Africans are intelligible because their world and their perception of it are no different from our own. Most scholars usually try to steer an even course between the twin dangers of assuming that other peoples' beliefs are simply unintelligible to outsiders and that, at some level, all cultures are the same. The topic "African Systems of Thought" is studied by anthropologists, folklorists, historians, and specialists in comparative religions. Their task is not easy. It is somewhat akin to that of the historian who tries to discover what meaning to attribute to the actions and thoughts of the people of another time. A further complication arises because the languages, social organization, history, and environments of Africa are so different from our own. These differences are intensified by prevailing attitudes about other cultures. Westerners tend to think that technological achievements have given them command and control of the world and that all other societies should emulate them. When social scientists write in this way, it is called "modernization theory."

One final obstacle in the path of understanding the belief systems of African cultures is that it is very difficult to make generalizations about the continent. Both the highest and the lowest divorce rates in societies of the world are found there; the forms of political organization range from informal patterns of leadership in hunting and gathering bands to divine kings and bureaucratic states. The country of Tanzania alone has over eighty different languages. African ways of making a living range from hunting and gathering through complex agricultural systems using irrigation to highly specialized craft industries. If such variations can be found in the "objective" circumstances of language, politics, social organization, and modes of livelihood, how different must be the products of the imagination, the ways that

Africans have developed of understanding and thinking about their world and their lives?

This chapter will not try to make specific generalizations about the nature of African systems of thought that can be applied to all or even most African cultures. Instead it will use what has been called the "case study method," which looks at different circumstances and attempts to understand how Africans have tried to make sense out of their experience of nature and its vicissitudes, how the social organizations through which people relate to each other operate, and what kinds of problems societies pose for their members. This will finally lead to an examination of the theories about the world that Africans have developed both to explain their experience of nature and human existence and to express their feelings about that experience. This complex of thought and feeling is referred to as "African systems of thought" because scholars attempt to understand both the practical and the theoretical in African lives, including the recipes Africans have developed for living and the images through which they interpret their lives.

#### Attitudes to the World: What People Have in Common

There is nothing particularly new about trying to understand African systems of thought. The effort is one that the very first explorers made in Africa, often with mixed results. It is important to make that effort, however, because it represents the beginning of a dialogue which involves trying to think the thoughts other people think, and in their own language. Only thus can we begin to speak to each other.

One of the first to try to do this was the famous Scots medical missionary and explorer David Livingstone, who spent his adult life traveling throughout Central Africa. He is popularly known as the subject of Henry Stanley's relief expedition and the object of the famous inquiry, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" He wrote wonderful books and diaries describing his explorations and experiences. In one of them he describes an encounter with what many Westerners might call a "witch doctor," probably of the "Bakwain" people of Malawi, whose task it was to heal the ill and bring the rain. In the most honest and revealing fashion Livingstone exposes his own assumptions about the nature of African systems of thought and tells how his African colleague challenged them.

*Medical Doctor.* Hail, friend! How very many medicines you have about you this morning! Why, you have every medicine in the country here.

*Rain Doctor.* Very true, my friend; and I ought; for the whole country needs the rain which I am making.

*M.D.* So you really believe that you can command the clouds? I think that can be done by God alone.

*R.D.* We both believe the very same thing. It is God that makes the rain, but I pray to him by means of these medicines, and, the rain coming, of course it is then mine. It was I who made it for Bakwains for many years, when they were at Shokuane; through my wisdom, too, their women become fat and shining. Ask them; they will tell you the same as I do.

*M.D.* But we are distinctly told in the parting words of our Savior that we can pray to God acceptably in His name alone, and not by means of medicines.

*R.D.* Truly! but God told *us* differently. He made black men first, and did not love us as he did the white men. He made you beautiful, and gave you clothing, and guns, and gunpowder, and horses, and wagons, and many other things about which we know nothing. But towards us he had no heart. He gave us nothing except the Assegai, and cattle, and rain-making; and he did not give us hearts like yours. We never love each other. Other tribes place medicines about our country to prevent the rain, so that we may be dispersed by hunger, and go to them, and augment their power. We must dissolve their charms by our medicines. God has given us one little thing which you know nothing of. He has given us the knowledge of certain medicines by which we can make rain. We do not despise those things which you possess, though we are ignorant of them. *We* don't understand your book, yet we don't despise it. *You* ought not to despise our little knowledge, though you are ignorant of it.

*M.D.* I don't despise what I am ignorant of; I only think you are mistaken in saying that you have medicines which can influence the rain at all.

*R.D.* That's just the way people speak when they talk on a subject of which they have no knowledge. When we first opened our eyes, we found our forefathers making rain, and we follow in their footsteps. You, who send to Kuruman for corn, and irrigate your garden, may do without rain; *we* cannot manage in that way. If we had not rain, the cattle would have no pasture, the cows give no milk, our children become lean and die, our wives run away to other tribes who do make rain and have corn, and the whole tribe become dispersed and lost; our fire would go out.

*M.D.* I quite agree with you as to the value of the rain; but you cannot charm the clouds by medicines. You wait till you see the clouds come, then you use your medicines, and take the credit which belongs to God only.

*R.D.* I use my medicines, and you employ yours; we are both doctors, and doctors are not deceivers. You give a patient medicine. Sometimes God is pleased to heal him by means of your medicine; sometimes not—he dies. When he is cured, you take the credit of what God does, I do the same. Sometimes God grants us rain, sometimes not. When he does, we take the credit of the charm. When a patient dies, you don't give up trust in your medicine, neither do I when rain fails. If you wish me to leave off my medicines, why continue your own?

*M.D.* I give medicine to living creatures within my reach, and can see the effects, though no cure follows; you pretend to charm the clouds, which are so far above us that your medicines never reach them. The clouds usually lie in one direction, and your smoke goes in another. God alone can command the clouds. Only try and wait patiently; God will give us rain without your medicines.

*R.D.* Mahala-ma-kapa-a-a! Well, I always thought white men were wise till this morning. Who ever thought of making trial of starvation? Is death pleasant, then?

*M.D.* Could you make it rain on one spot and not on another?

*R.D.* I wouldn't think of trying. I like to see the whole country green, and all the people glad; the women clapping their hands, and giving me their ornaments for thankfulness, and lullilooing for joy.

*M.D.* I think you deceive both them and yourself.

*R.D.* Well, then, there is a pair of us (meaning both are rogues).

(Taken from M. Gluckman, Introduction to *The Allocation of Responsibility*) pg. xvii-xix.

What conclusions can be drawn from this exchange about the nature of African systems of thought, about their parallels and differences with our own? The first lesson is that it is necessary to be very careful about how we compare other people with ourselves. It is conventional to think of non-Western societies as lacking in the advanced scientific knowledge that is so characteristic of recent Western intellectual history. But who are we talking about when we make such assertions? Surely most Westerners know as little about the workings of their computers as most Africans know about the forces that control the divination process to which they frequently have recourse. The knowledge of how things work is not something essential to everyday life, it is something we take on faith. All societies have experts who are credited with knowledge and the capacity to alter forces that seem beyond the control of ordinary people. This is the point at which valid comparisons between African systems of thought and Western modes of thinking can be made. What is important is that we understand how specialists and lay people in any society attempt to manage the world when it seems to be careening out of control, when misfortune intervenes adversely to affect expectations and desires.

Under consideration here is not the difference between scientific and nonscientific cultures, although a widespread Western belief is that science can solve all problems. Any consideration of such moral issues as the abuse of the environment and the termination of the life support of someone who has undergone brain death shows that science, or technology, always tends to create new unsolvable problems once it solves old ones. Instead, a careful comparison of African and Western cultures shows that they share in common spheres of concern with the limits on the controls people can hold over their social and natural environment and with how they can reassert control or influence their worlds. In both Western cultures and African cultures this set of questions and problems includes technology, morality, and belief. Hence the issues go beyond religion and areas of technology such as medicine and include questions about the nature of knowledge, moral issues such as who is to blame for what has gone wrong, and reflections about the ultimate ends often manifested in religious belief. Thus, the covering term "African systems of thought" is more appropriate for a discussion of such issues than is the more restricted idea of "African religions."

These are the questions and problems that animated the debate between Livingstone and the rain doctor presented above. Both were concerned with healing the ill, or at least consoling them. Both desired a social environment in which people behaved morally to each other and in which they could predict the forces of nature, and *both believed they had their science to help them in their goals.*

Are African systems of thought scientific, and what does it mean to say so? A very distinguished physicist and philosopher of science, Michael Polanyi, once

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compared witchcraft beliefs among the Azande of the Sudan to modern science and arrived at this surprising conclusion: "The process of selecting facts for our attention is indeed the same in science as among the Azande." The process by which the cause for some misfortune is identified among the Azande has its Western parallels in the discovery of causes in science laboratories. The anthropologist who studied the Azande between 1926 and 1930, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, showed the Azande to be very acute at testing hypotheses about the attribution of misfortunes ranging from illness and disease to disasters in the manufacture of crafts. They did this through their oracles, mystical entities that could find out the sources of events which ordinary people could not know. One such entity was the poison oracle, in which poison was administered to a chicken and a question put to it, such as "Why does my child have one illness after another? Is it because so-and-so is bewitching her/him?" If the chicken died the answer was yes, and if it lived the answer was no. Before the question was put, a nonsense question was asked of the poison oracle, such as "Will I fly in the sky today?" The Azande believed that people do not fly in the sky unaided, so if the answer was yes, they know something was wrong with the poison.

Those familiar with high school science will be reminded here of hypothesis testing. This was precisely what the Azande did (and do) about their poison. If it showed itself to be ineffective, then the Azande knew it had been polluted, much as we believe that chemicals or medicines no longer work because of age or contamination. Both the Azande and the scientist usually throw out their contaminated substances and begin all over again. The great conclusion of Evans-Pritchard's pioneering study of this African system of thought was that differences between the Azande and Westerners were not differences in logic or thinking capacity. The Azande and other Africans reason much as people everywhere do. They also govern their lives with a mixture of skepticism and belief, and they have the same ambivalent and helplessly dependent faith in their specialists, their doctors.

#### **Attitudes to the World: How People Differ**

What are the differences, then? Anthropologists and other specialists who study African systems of thought cannot answer this question so easily, for a number of reasons. First, the comparisons that have been made are too often between Western specialists and African lay people. Only recently have whole systems begun to be compared. Second, parts of African systems of thought, such as witchcraft and sorcery or spirit possession, have been studied but not the whole process of how people made sense of and managed their misfortunes. Third, and most important, Western systems of thought and practice are not subjected to the same scrutiny as are African systems, because Western systems have become commonplace to us. African thought, however, seems exotic to Western observers, because it is so different from their own. In the Western world of science and technology it is no longer considered relevant to consult specialists about hidden reasons for such

human disasters as catastrophic illness. In practice Western medical specialists are asked to comfort and explain as well as to heal, but they may not be as effective in these tasks as African practitioners are.

There are some differences which seem to emerge from a comparison, however, and these help to demonstrate how African systems of thought vary from place to place. Certainly one significant difference is a matter of emphasis. In African societies the causes of misfortune are often and usually related to personal circumstances and less to such impersonal agencies as "chance." This does not demonstrate that Africans have no idea of natural causation, as was so often asserted by early visitors and observers. Again, the Azande provide a good example. Evans-Pritchard explains that the Azande are skilled potters, famed for the elaborate pottery they make. When an Azande potter discovers that a series of pots have broken when fired in his kiln, an effort is made to find out what has gone wrong with the technological process. For example, perhaps stones have been mixed with the clay. Only when no natural cause is readily discernible will the potter think about supernatural and personal causes, such as the actions of witches. Thus, while we might attribute misfortune in the absence of natural causes to such impersonal causes as "chance" or "bad luck," the Azande look to the actions of other, malevolent humans. These malevolent humans are motivated by greed and have within them, the Azande believe, witchcraft substance, called *mangu*, which allows them to act supernaturally on other humans.

Of course, many people in the modern world believe in witches as well, but for the Azande all deaths are attributed to the actions of witches, or of sorcerers, who have no *mangu* but can manipulate poisons. The Azande consult their oracles to find out who these malevolent creatures are and what remedies exist against their actions. Not all societies of Africa are witch-ridden, however, and other personal causes of misfortune can be found in different African cultures at different times. Historians and anthropologists have only recently shown, for example, that beliefs in the power of witches can change within a society. Just as there have been witch crazes in Europe, so there are witch-hunts in African societies. At some points in time people believed that witches were rife among them, while at other points they thought that, while witches might exist, they were far more prevalent in other places. A major task for the historian or the anthropologist interested in African systems of thought is to find ways of understanding and explaining this variation.

Anthropologists and historians also describe the varieties of supernatural phenomena which are part of the unseen world of African cultures, such as witches and sorcerers, ghosts and shades of the dead, ancestral and nature spirits. They attempt to explain how these entities relate to one another and how Africans interpret their experience of the supernatural world and their place in it. Since this mix can vary from time to time and place to place, it is not really possible to generalize. What may be true for East African pastoralists may not apply to peoples such as the Yoruba, who live in large towns and have complex forms of political organization such as sacred kingship.

Another major contrast is the degree to which Western systems of thought emphasize technology. In recent history, belief in an all-powerful technology has been central to Western optimism and to the idea of progress. This attitude persists, although questions are now being raised as to whether technology does in fact affect our environment for the better. African systems of thought, on the other hand, tend to show a concern for the control of people, not the environment; there is a personalistic quality about African ways of imagining the world. Anthropologist Mary Douglas asserts that for Africans, it is a "practical interest in living and not an academic interest in metaphysics which has produced these beliefs." "Technological problems," she tells us, "have been more or less settled for generations past."<sup>2</sup> This should not be taken to mean that Africans are unconcerned with the very conditions of their existence. They do have ideas of natural causation. Anyone who knows about the periodic and increasingly severe droughts that plague Africa will realize that it would be sheer madness to believe that Africans are unconcerned with controlling their environment. The dialogue between Dr. Livingstone and the rain doctor shows a real interest in regularizing the natural forces through which people gain their living and reproduce their societies. The failure of rains can lead to starvation and death for people who are immediately dependent on the produce of the land and on herds of animals.

Africans do not expect to alter the conditions of their lives by changing the environment through technological change. They have a real and immediate sense of the effect that the environment can bring about. African rituals and beliefs are filled with images of natural forces. For example, African divine kings are intimately associated with the course of nature. The Shilluk of the Sudan assert that their king must die if he becomes imperfect or becomes senile. While no one knows for sure whether the Shilluk have ever killed their king, it is clear that they believe that his failing health dramatically affects the course of nature in the most unfortunate way.<sup>3</sup>

This view of the world does not include the ability to alter nature. The best that may be hoped for is to influence the effects of nature in particular instances. With regard to African systems of thought, there are two important conclusions to be drawn from the attitudes about nature and technology that they manifest. First, there is an acute awareness of the effects of the environment on people. In most African societies, as in much of the world where medical care is unavailable, the rate of infant mortality in the first year can approach 50 percent. The Iteso of Kenya have special naming systems for children born to a mother after an infant has died. These children have special rituals associated with them and they are named after the intrusive animals and plants of the forest and plains who invade Iteso homes and destroy their crops and animals. Thus children can be called *etyang* ("animal"), or *emoto* ("hyena"), or *emodo* ("striga weed"), a weed that is impossible to eradicate and which destroys fields of grain. More than half of all Iteso have names like these. People can tell you that they name their children this

way in order to ward off the very destructive forces that killed their other children and endanger their livelihood and lives.'

This does not indicate, however, that the Iteso or other Africans think they can change nature itself. To think so would be foolish in light of the limited means at their disposal for controlling their environment. They do believe, however, that they can influence how the environment affects them, because they believe that the effect of the environment on particular lives is conditioned by the actions of other people, particularly evil people such as witches and sorcerers. Thus, Africans see their problems as deriving from their failure to control not technology but other people. Such control involves an attempt to identify other peoples' intentions and dispositions. What is it about them or their world that makes them do the things to others that they do? This is a dual issue. It is a problem of indigenous psychology, the theory held by the people of a society of what motivates and moves people. It is also a problem of moral and ethical judgments; it addresses questions of good and evil. Africans are involved in the task of identifying people who are unredeemable as well as the features that make them so.

Finally, this world view also addresses questions of fate, seeking answers to the question of "why me?" This is the stuff out of which Africans fashion their systems of thought. The remainder of this chapter will consider different solutions from very different settings. The emphasis throughout will be on African ideas of how the environment can be controlled through the control of people.

#### How People Try to Control Their Social Environments

The Tallensi of Ghana are an agricultural people who earn their living through growing, and sometimes selling, foodstuffs. The major inputs in their agricultural production are land and labor. They live in local communities organized around a core of members of the same patrilineage. The people who compose the lineage hold their land jointly, not individually, support one another in everyday life, and provide essential personnel for the performance of the rituals that occur during life crises as well as in worship for their ancestors. Tallensi households are organized around a household head, his married sons and their wives and children, and his unmarried children. In Tallensi society men are defined as jural minors so long as their fathers remain alive. Thus a man may be a middle-aged adult with growing children and still be a child in the eyes of the larger society. What does this state of affairs actually entail? What does it mean to be a jural minor?

For the Tallensi it indicates a number of things. Lineages, not individuals, own land. Rights to use this land are allocated through the senior living male of a lineage segment. For a middle-aged Tallensi, this person could easily be his father or, if his father is dead, his father's younger brother. Since the Tallensi can have polygynous marriages, it is possible that the father's younger brother can be younger than the son. Thus seniority is a matter of kinship position and not relative age.

Only after all the males of the father's generation have passed away are the men of the next generation allowed to assume their full place in society.

Among the Tallensi, fathers age and sons grow impatient waiting to be full members of society and to realize their full potential. Sometimes the sons align themselves with other groups in the society to realize their goal of independence. When this happens illness or some other form of misfortune can strike. The case of Pu-Eng-Yii, described by Meyer Fortes, the ethnographer of the Tallensi, illustrates this point. Pu-Eng-Yii was succeeding financially by associating himself with another lineage when he was hit by a truck in an accident. When diviners were consulted, it was discovered that the ancestors of his lineage were angry at his failure to perform rituals for them, and he was forced to give up what Fortes calls his "commercial advantage" and return to live under the control of his lineage kin. This case illustrates the implications of the lack of full jural status in Tallensi society. To be a jural minor means being unable to perform rituals for the ancestors and having to have someone else intercede with them on your behalf. In the case of Pu-Eng-Yii, the senior members of the lineage whose demands he was ignoring were the only persons who could intercede on his behalf with the ancestors.<sup>5</sup>

Herein is the paradox of Tallensi society. It is a social world in which privilege is given to seniority, as is common throughout Africa. At the same time, the seniors are dependent on their juniors. They need them to do the agricultural and household tasks which they can no longer perform. Even though Tallensi society has no formal legal sanctions for senior members of lineages to invoke when they are in need, they do have the backing of the cult of the ancestors to help them recruit and control junior members of their lineage. Not only is access to capital goods controlled by the lineage, but Tallensi beliefs about and efforts to control misfortune in the world put all Tallensi under the control of their ancestors. Among the Tallensi the ancestors, rather than witches, are generally regarded as the agents of misfortune. The Tallensi believe in witches, but are one of those African societies who think of them as unimportant in their lives.

What must be stressed here is the element of social control. In societies small in scale, such as the Tallensi, social relations are "multiplex," that is they tend to have many strands to them. The adult male's father is not only his father, he is also the head of the household in which the adult son lives, the manager of the family estate through which the son makes a living, and, finally, head of the cult of the ancestors. All of these strands thus come together in a single relationship. The result is that senior Tallensi are able to exercise considerable control over their juniors. The autonomy available to many Tallensi is limited by the complex and intense nature of their social relationships. This is the very model of the small-scale society and perhaps responsible for the tensions that are so characteristic of it.

The Barotse (or Lozi) of Zambia have a song that expresses the paradox of social relations in a small-scale society:

He who kills me, who will it be but my kinsman?  
He who succours me, who will it be but my kinsman?"

The people with whom an individual comes into conflict are the same people who are bound by ties of kinship to offer aid in a crisis. These conflicting strands are characteristic of social relations in small-scale societies. Ideas about good and evil usually develop around these sources of tension and control. It is not surprising, therefore, that in many African societies the person most often identified as a witch is also kin. Senior elders do not always escape accusation. Among the Gisu of Uganda, the elder is most often thought to be a witch. Gisu society is short of land and has a very high population density. Although somewhat like the Tallensi in social structure, the Gisu's cult of the ancestors is not used to control the actions of younger men. Instead, young men are often accused of theft and disrespect. Among the Gisu that is a very bad crime, which shows that the person who commits it is a "bad lot," not fit to live in society. Chronic thieves are often killed on the grounds that their character is so flawed that they are unredeemably evil. But it is senior men who get the young accused of thievery. After a life of doing so much damage to others, these men tend to be accused of witchcraft. Among the Gisu the same emotional quality (*lirima*) that marks the character of a thief makes a witch as well. The Gisu see both witches and thieves as having such an excess of this disposition that they are ultimately uncontrollable. Hence, ideas about the makeup of persons are also part of African systems of thought and can differ from our own. In the case of the Gisu there is no distinction, as might be drawn by Westerners, between secular and supernatural crimes. Paradoxically, a career of controlling others can put that person into the category of being so evil as to be uncontrollable.<sup>7</sup> This is also true for the Tiv of Nigeria, who have periodic witch-hunts, in which elders are accused of being witches and of killing off their juniors. These witch-hunts have been called "extra-processual events" because they opened up positions of authority in a nonstandardized manner.<sup>8</sup>

The absence of autonomy in small-scale societies is not always or entirely a disadvantage. The opposite of the multiplex rural relationship is the "simplex" urban one in which two people have no knowledge of each other. This type of relationship has a great deal of autonomy associated with it. A characteristic feature of such a relationship is that the parties to it have no expectation of future interaction nor any knowledge of the other person. Under such circumstances people can do what they like to each other without much fear of retaliation, especially when their actions are unobserved and there is no means of tracing an offender. Thus "simplex" behavior is often uncontrolled. The problem is that when autonomy is associated with no control at all it can also carry with it fear. This is one of the reasons that urban environments are often believed to be so frightening. The persons one meets are unknown and unknowable, hence uncontrollable. What happens in situations such as these is that people develop ways of explaining and predicting their urban experience. In America this has been related to the emphasis on ethnic characterizations. To label people "Jews," "Blacks," or "Anglos" is to

give them characters and personalities and to stereotype them in the absence of any direct personal knowledge. American society is characterized by a high rate of social and spatial mobility, by relatively unimportant kinship relations, and by the expectation that many friendships will not last. As a result many social relationships tend to be simplex and are defined in stereotypic terms.

In African urban settings ideas about the causes of misfortune are changing. In urban Zambia, for example, misfortune is now less often attributed to the action of witches than it would be in the rural setting from which the people come. Recourse to witchcraft as an explanation implies that the evildoer can be reached and is known.<sup>9</sup> Personal agents are no longer found to be the cause of illness. Thus African ideas about the nature of their fate are also related to the social setting in which people find themselves.

This is not only true of occult beliefs such as witchcraft. Many of the entities often described as "tribes" are the creation of the colonial period. Many of the societies who now call themselves by one name did not previously exist. The Abaluyia people of Kenya, for example, were a mixture of ethnic groups speaking mutually unintelligible languages, having origins from different parts of East Africa, and with many different customs. After the establishment of the "Kenya colony" Christian missionaries among these people decided to use only one of their languages as a standard. As the Abaluyia moved to the European-owned farms of the Kenya highlands as labor migrants or to live in cities, they found themselves associating on the basis of common origins and beginning to think of themselves as one people. This became the basis for a colonial political party, the Kenya African Democratic Union. Now there is an Abaluyia literature, an Abaluyia culture, and in many urban and national settings, an Abaluyia sense of identity.

Kenya is in fact now composed of many peoples whose collective identity is recent. They think of themselves as one people in some settings and as a different people in others. Thus in a western Kenya setting in which Abaluyia identity is irrelevant, those Abaluyia who also call themselves Babukusu regard themselves as very different from the Abaluyia who call themselves Wanga. The development of new forms of identity has also had a parallel in the development of new ideas about the nature of persons called "Abaluyia," "Kikuyu," "Swahili," and so on. A young man in Nairobi recently described to the author all the character traits of the Kenyan "tribes" to which he did not belong. His stereotyping included such unattractive features as "cowardice," "dishonesty," and "unreliability." In this respect some aspects of African systems of thought, especially in an urban context, are becoming increasingly like those found in Western society.

### Conclusion

What this overview has attempted to show is that African systems of thought are intimately related to how Africans experience their world and to the means they formulate to understand and control it. In this sense African systems of thought

are both theoretical and practical. The systems of belief and of knowledge found in African societies are not based on metaphysical speculations divorced from everyday life. Yet African knowledge cannot be reduced to the codification of common sense. African systems of thought include a speculative element in their practical orientation; they explain *and* provide recipes for action. Nor are African systems of thought irrelevant for people living beyond their local communities. In universities and in black townships, in local cult groups, in churches, and in departments of philosophy, Africans are often engaged in the task of making sense of their current position and future predicaments. If they do not find their inherited wisdom adequate for managing the complexities of the contemporary scene, they have also found that the wisdom of the West posits solutions that fit badly with the problems they face.

Individuals such as spiritual leaders, artists specializing in the knowledge of oral traditions, and community elders have always been the repositories and the formulators of African systems of thought. In addition, new figures, such as novelists, scholars, and political leaders, will add their contribution. A major change has been the emergence of a body of specialists who see themselves as the self-conscious critics and formulators of African systems of thought. The social role of African intellectuals and artists is now of importance both at home and in an international setting. Perhaps a major change in African systems of thought is the degree to which they may become part of the continuing dialogue between Africans and the West.

## NOTES

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9. J. Clyde Mitchell, "The meaning of misfortune for urban Africans," in M. Fortes and G. Dieterlen, eds., *African Systems of Thoughts* (London: International African Institute, 1967).

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