

# LUGBARA RELIGION

RITUAL AND AUTHORITY AMONG  
AN EAST AFRICAN PEOPLE

JOHN MIDDLETON

FOREWORD BY IVAN KARP



A woman pours millet beer for a senior guest at a sacrifice in her husband's homestead. He is the younger brother of an elder, so that she is the wife of one of the more important hosts.

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## FOREWORD

This book does not seek to present Lugbara religion as a system of theology, but to make a sociological analysis of the place of ritual and belief in Lugbara social life" is the modest beginning (see Preface) of this pioneering study of ritual and political practices in an African society.

John Middleton's *Lugbara Religion* is rightly acknowledged as a classic in the interpretation of the role of belief and ritual in social and political conduct. Among its many strengths are the author's innovative use of case studies and of Lugbara explanations of their own actions.

In major ways this book goes against the grain of our expectations. Religion should be, we tend to think, more a matter of systematically formulated beliefs about ultimate concerns—theology—than about political practice. Yet *Lugbara Religion* refuses to accept that religious practices can be understood solely as an enactment of belief. The analytic stance of *Lugbara Religion* is thoroughly agnostic. It refuses to treat cosmology as either the primary content of action or its dominating cause. As a result, a significant achievement of Middleton's analysis is that it implicitly challenges our usually unexamined definition of religion as a dogma associated with an institution, such as a church defined in the Durkheimian sense of a specific group with a ritual purpose.

In what must surely be one of the most contentious assertions in social anthropology, the author begins chapter 2 by stating that the "Lugbara have no set of interconsistent beliefs as to the nature of man and the world" (p. 25).

As a graduate student first reading this work twenty years ago, I penciled in the margin, "Really!" My doubt had been raised by more conventional works that sought to describe the beliefs of non-Western peoples as systematic and coherent with respect to their actions.

Yet I had been trained in the social anthropological analysis of religion. I knew that belief and ritual are implicated in the social and political lives of many peoples in a manner that contradicts the

contemporary Western experience of religion as being set apart. I was prepared from previous reading to accept that religion both affected and was affected by political organization. What I found shocking to my orthodoxy was the methodological assertion that religion could not be set apart from and understood *except* in the context of social and political life. I was unprepared to accept an account of another people that refused to draw a radical separation between political action and religious system. I have since moved closer to Middleton's position, as has the form of social and cultural anthropology coming to call itself "practice theory" (Ortner 1984).

By challenging conventional definitions John Middleton in *Lugbara Religion* does more than describe the political implications of religious belief. He alters our image of both religion and politics. This book is neither about organizational politics nor religious systems. What is revealed in this study is a politics of the self in which the actors struggle to influence their fate as much as they struggle to control people and resources.

Fashions in disciplines move quickly. Since my graduate-school days, social anthropology has become both more skeptical about the beliefs of other cultures and less so. At the same time that studies of cosmology have become increasingly popular, we have begun to realize that describing beliefs as "interconsistent" may tell us more about the assumptions we bring to interpretations about non-Western formations and about personhood than it does about the formations themselves.

In an important article Ernest Gellner shows how the assumption of coherence, termed the "principle of contextual charity," leads to fitting items of belief to contexts selected to demonstrate the assumptions of the observer (1973). He rightly points out that we often assume coherence in other cultures where we refuse to find it among ourselves. A literary scholar once described anthropology to me as the discipline that defines other cultures in holistic terms and describes the search for wholes among ourselves as Utopian thinking. *Lugbara Religion* avoids those errors of translation. It shows the Lugbara through the fullness of their contradictory assertions, the conflicts they both create and try to contain, and the difficulties they strive to manage.

I do not wish to leave the impression that Middleton's splendid study treats the Lugbara as disorderly and irrational. He amends his assertion about the absence of ideological order in Lugbara belief

when he states, "Their beliefs are significant in given situations and their consistency lies in the way in which they are used in ritual action" (p. 25). Hence Middleton seeks to discover an order to Lugbara religion that lies not so much in the content of belief as in the contexts in which beliefs are invoked and the uses to which the Lugbara put their beliefs. The analysis seeks to exhibit the order of Lugbara religion by describing three spheres of Lugbara life: social and political practices, rituals, and the Lugbara experiences that are embodied in the extraordinary texts through which the Lugbara themselves describe and explain their actions and rituals.

This study examines Lugbara religion in the context of the multiple interests of the Lugbara as they use religion to lead their lives and the conditions under which they produce their actions. Described this way *Lugbara Religion* might seem to take the form of transactional analysis in anthropology.

It would be naive to relegate *Lugbara Religion* to the category of transactional analysis. Middleton does show that interests affect the way that Lugbara invoke their beliefs, but the Lugbara are not portrayed as cynical or thoughtless entrepreneurs in Middleton's account of them. They are people who combine striving for power with the desperation of the afflicted.

If the Lugbara are not utilitarian entrepreneurs, neither are they the metaphysicians described in the French tradition of African ethnography. Their religion is overwhelmingly pragmatic. The appeals they address to ancestors, their invocations of ghosts, and the accusations of witchcraft so meticulously described in this book are made by people attempting to take some small measure of control over their lives. The Lugbara attempt to understand their fate when that fate seems to surpass understanding. The central theme of Lugbara religious practice is the attempt made by Lugbara to control the evil they see in the world around them. This is surely one of the major conclusions of the splendid final chapter of the book, which explores the Lugbara idiom of evil that is displayed in what Middleton terms "inversion."

The same Lugbara who accuse their ritual elders of witchcraft also appeal to them to intercede with the ancestors to alleviate illness and suffering. One possible description of the Lugbara attitude toward their religion is that it combines skepticism in some contexts with a profound underlying attitude of faith. Malinowski early on described religions in this manner (1962). Yet I think this formulation

misses the mark. Middleton certainly portrays the Lugbara as inconsistent, but his analysis of their assertions and actions is more subtle than a picture of mixed faith and skepticism provides. The Lugbara are believers, but at the same time they are also deeply uncertain about their own interpretations and the future course of their lives.

*Lugbara Religion* portrays people whose actions are ordered by conflicting goals that they combine with strenuous attempts to influence the forces they perceive as affecting their lives. Hence they move in rapid succession from political accusation to healing rite to supplication at the cult of the ancestors.

Portraying the Lugbara in terms of the perspectives and interests of their lives is achieved through the case studies and texts for which this book is celebrated. Middleton's great achievement is that he honestly examines how the multiple and conflicting interests of the Lugbara are related to the inconsistency with which they articulate their beliefs. At the same time, he shows that the kaleidoscopic image of Lugbara ideology can be explained by demonstrating that beliefs are related to external conditions under which they are invoked. During the time that Middleton lived among the Lugbara, population growth and the related shortage of land often brought lineage members into conflict with each other. These are two of the conditions with which the Lugbara are shown in this book to struggle. Their social environment helps to account for how and when they pursue their accusations and interpretations. The Lugbara seek both power over others and autonomy for themselves. Yet when they do so they seem continually to hesitate, always to be afflicted with uncertainty about the validity and outcome of their actions. Contrast Middleton's image of the Lugbara with the certainty of Evans-Pritchard's account of the neighboring Nuer, who were described as having no difficulty "moving from representation to representation" (1956). The Lugbara are pictured in a manner that brings them closer to Meyer Fortes's portrait of the Tallensi, among whom forms of control seem very tenuous indeed. Like the Tallensi, the Lugbara seek to "prehend" and manage innately uncontrollable and unknowable occult forces, which themselves manage to overcome the political interests that seem only on the surface to govern any given moment of Lugbara life. Both the Tallensi and the Lugbara more often choose to seek guides for action in an uncertain world than to maximize advantage and control (Fortes 1966, 1985). Fortes's

writings about the Tallensi and Middleton's *Lugbara Religion* together pose challenges to the relativist assumptions of symbolic anthropology and the utilitarian assumptions of transactional analysis. Neither the assertion of cultural uniqueness nor the presumption that all action conforms to the "laws" of the marketplace can explain the balance between universal problems and contingent solutions examined in these two studies.

*Lugbara Religion* also challenges our sense of how a "religion" might be described in another culture. As I suggested, the Lugbara case leads to an understanding of religion that moves away from the account of a systematic theology articulated in an institutional setting. It forces us to examine religion as a set of beliefs and practices that people invoke to define evil, alleviate suffering, and contain an uncontrollable world. I have not meant to suggest that *Lugbara Religion* does not describe Lugbara discourse about the world. That task is left until the last chapter, which provides a masterful account of how "inversion" and spatial distance are devices used to define identity and deviance, a Lugbara ideology of self and other. Even though the description of ideology and belief is left to the conclusion, this book is one of the few works by an anthropologist that is truly concerned with religion in its central sense of raising questions about how being in the world relates to moral concerns.

For the Lugbara, discourse about morality engages questions of power and discipline. Witches are defined as lacking discipline over their emotions and desires and at the same time failing to control their quest for power. *Lugbara Religion* shows the Lugbara to be almost obsessed with both power and discipline. Their concerns are displayed through the superb texts of interviews with them found throughout the book. More than almost any other Western account of an African religious system, this one refuses to obliterate the African voices on which it is based. Not only do the Lugbara accuse, but they also doubt, worry, and vacillate. While I would not call them philosophers in the sense of being engaged in second-order reflections on thought, the texts show that the interpretations the Lugbara make are vital to the conduct of their lives. At the same time, Middleton demonstrates how conflicting and disparate their interpretations may be, and it is that which may be the enduring contribution of *Lugbara Religion*. There is plenty of sociological analysis here and a fine account of idioms of interpretation. More important, however, is the book's sense of the complex contours of

life in an African society. *Lugbara Religion* is a work based on careful and sensitive fieldwork. If we read it carefully we can hear the echo of Lugbara voices.

*Ivan Karp*

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PREFACE

THIS book does not seek to present Lugbara religion as a system of theology, but to make a sociological analysis of the place of ritual and belief in Lugbara social life. For reasons which will become apparent, most attention is therefore devoted to the rites and beliefs associated with the cult of the dead. But, since this cult cannot be understood in complete isolation, I have included accounts of some other rites and beliefs.

The cult of the dead is intimately connected with the maintenance of lineage authority. The exercise and acknowledgement of this authority are bound up with the cycle of lineage development. Senior men attempt to sustain their authority against their juniors' claims to independence, and the consequent conflict is conceived largely in mystical and ritual terms. There are few accounts of African religions that are set in the context of the competition for power within the lineage and household. I have found that it is this context that makes intelligible what is at first sight contradictory ritual behaviour among Lugbara. In Chapter IV, which is the central chapter of the book, I show how the men of a single lineage group manipulate the cult of the dead as a means to the acquisition and retention of authority.

Lugbara hold certain particular beliefs, and they have a certain kind of social organization. Their behaviour is intelligible only in terms of these beliefs and this organization. The first three chapters, therefore, give an account of those aspects of Lugbara society and culture which are relevant to the theme of Chapter IV. In Lugbara thought all phenomena that can be called religious are explicitly associated with God, and in Chapter V I discuss the ways in which divine power is thought to affect men.

I have not considered many matters which might have been discussed in an account of Lugbara religion. In particular I should have liked to consider in detail the distinction made so clearly by Lugbara between things that are 'good' and things that are 'bad', a dichotomy which runs through almost all their thinking. Nor have I compared Lugbara religion with other African religions. I hope to do both of these things elsewhere.