

SECRET SOCIETIES OF THE SOUTHERN SUDAN.

The following is a resumé of information about Secret Societies among the tribes of the pagan South in Sudan Territory with which we have been favoured by correspondents. For various reasons it is impossible in every case to indicate the source from which this information has been obtained, but there is no doubt of its authoritative nature. Although none of the societies mentioned appears to be of very recent origin, it seems that their baneful influence has been increasing during the last few years and the Government has found it advisable to pass special legislation for the suppression of their 'dangerous and obscene' rites. (The Unlawful Societies Ordinance 1919; Sudan Government Gazette No. 351. 15 November 1919.) The societies dealt with in our notes differ in name, origin and geographical distribution, and there appears to be no evidence of any connection between the several organisations. At the same time we cannot fail to notice striking similarities in their objects and methods in so far as they are known; but more information is still required to throw light on the religious and magical aspects of these cults. Most observers who approach the subject from the administrative point of view, emphasise their evil influence as media of terrorism, debauch and robbery, and it is suggested that they are mainly the work of unscrupulous individuals who exploit the fears of primitive man for their own nefarious ends. But the analogous phenomena in other primitive communities as well as the use of 'fetish' or magical objects in their rites suggest that there is a religious side to the practices of these societies which deserves to be more closely studied. It would be interesting to know, for instance, whether these cults are regarded as supplementary or antagonistic to the traditional rites and beliefs of the uninitiated members of the community, and whether their influence depends on the transitory prestige of some particular person or is deeply rooted in the 'official' religion of the tribe.

I. BIR (BILI)

cp. S. N. R. vol. 11. p. 27.

YAMBIO DISTRICT: Deserters are believed to be harboured by the professional magicians who set up their establishments in the densest and least accessible parts of the forest. These impostors give out that the betrayal of any fellow member frequenting these establishments leads to the inevitable and instant death of the informer by magic agencies; consequently they become the resort of criminals of all kinds and their arrest is difficult. (December 1915)

A few months later the Acting District Commissioner reports that the evil influence of the magicians is on the increase and that he has received complaints from the chiefs whose authority the witch-doctors undermine, as also from the Mission. The members of a secret society called Bili consider themselves superior to the rest of the Azande who do not know their rites. They aim at the destruction of persons who have wronged or offended them, the extortion of women and goods, the defiance of all authority and independence for themselves as superior beings. Many deaths have been ascribed to Bili and without doubt some of them with reason. The Rev. W. Hadow C. M. S. states that the Azande themselves have told him that they recognise Bili as an evil and assign it the first place in the category of evil; people live in mortal dread of death, or at least dare not refuse any demand the magicians may make of them.

MERIDI DISTRICT. Reports dated January 1916 to July 1918, state that the Zande portion of the district is overrun by votaries of the cult of Bir which is undoubtedly the same as Bili described as being prevalent at Yambio. A Bir house was surprised by night and several arrests were made. Hashish galore was found amongst other things on the premises. The practices and initiation ceremonies of this cult, as described by the Inspector, are too infamous to bear repetition.

The fear of death at their hands is not unfounded. A corporal of Police who was rewarded for his zeal in finding out concealed Bir houses, only just discovered in time on the following day that the mouthpiece of his pipe had been stuffed with virulent and deadly poison.

Sultan Yango, one of the most powerful chiefs of Meridi district, found that during his absence in Khartoum four of his wives had been enticed away by Bir parties, but was frightened to pursue the matter as he had been threatened with death, should he attempt to interfere. The District Commissioner was able to obtain a guide to the secret meeting place. The Bir party had posted a sentry along the cleared path who challenged in the ordinary military way, but the guide gave some secret pass word which enabled the party to approach the sentry and seize him. Unfortunately the noise alarmed the rest of the party and only three were caught. The others had escaped at the first alarm taking Yango's four wives with them and probably found refuge in the Belgian Congo. At the Bir rendez-vous there was a cleared space and rakûba and a good quantity of hashish and special Bir wood was found, also a basket rattle containing seeds and shells. This rattle is a Monbittu production and a picture of one may be seen in the full page illustration of Manza, a Monbittu chief, in Schweinfurth's book. It is quite foreign to the Azande, though the Bandas wear a somewhat similar rattle tied below the knee during the performance of certain of their dances.

TEMBURA DISTRICT. The District Commissioner reported in July 1917 that there were very few Bir or Biri devotees in this district or in the adjoining country of chief Toin. He mentions however that it is now the fashion amongst the natives to label any deaths which their oracles declare are due to spells, (and which they formerly accepted as such) as being caused not by these spells but by Bir. This they do in the hope that the Inspector will be beguiled into taking action against the persons whom the oracles have declared to be responsible for the various deaths.

The Governor of Bahr el Ghazal Province writing in August 1918 makes the following remarks about Bir: 'There is no doubt that this disgusting 'Society' is gaining in numbers and it is my belief that wherever the NyamNyam are gathered together there will votaries of the cult be found. . . . Besides being ultra-bestial in its rites Bir undermines the foundation of local society, for one of its tenets is that a woman who has been initiated cannot ever sleep—have intercourse—with her husband again, under pain of death both to herself and the husband. Unmarried girls, whom I am sorry to say the Society also numbers amongst its members, must not marry

outside the Society. In effect the women and girls are shared by the male members, a proceeding which must tend greatly to spread venereal disease. That the people are in fear of the Birites there is no doubt, and it is a significant fact that two men have died in Wau hospital within the last few days of poison.

BELGIAN CONGO: Here also the Bili (or Nbili) Society is rampant; it is stated to have originated among the Monbittu and to have been spread by them among the Azande. Members upon being initiated receive new names, like Gilinga, Gaduma, Zombo, Missa, Mando etc. for men, and Nebili, Matala, Manzekke, Bumandu and Toro-rogo for women. The chief of the cult is supposed to be able to cause and cure diseases, to ensure good crops or cause them to be destroyed by elephants and to kill people by means of lightning etc. The magic is worked by means of a small wooden whistle called filfili: in order to injure a person it is sufficient to speak the name of the intended victim and blow a blast on filfili. The power of using this instrument of destruction is not confined to the chief, but shared to a certain extent by other initiates. New members are often recruited by force or intimidation. When a woman has been seized by the votaries of Bili, her parents or brothers are called upon to pay her ransom and in many cases they themselves join the Society through fear. New initiates are required to remain several weeks or even months at the headquarters of the chief and to work in his cultivation. Members show great hospitality to one another, and the secret of their rites is very carefully guarded. The hut or shed in which the headquarters of Bili are situated, has six doors, one of which is used by the new members, while others are reserved for patients who have been made ill by filfili and apply to be cured by the same agency; a door to the right is reserved for the chief and one to the right of that for the chief's principal assistant who is always a woman. In the middle of the building a fire is kept continually burning, the ashes from which are carefully preserved near by. Around this main building are grouped a number of huts each surrounded by a zariba.

II. MANI.

A society called Mani (also spelled Maney) is reported from Yei River district, Tembura in the Bahr el Ghazal, and the Belgian Congo. Accounts are somewhat conflicting: the Yei report states

that it originated in the Belgian Congo amongst the Azande and that in the district mentioned it is practically confined to the Makraka tribe who of course are closely affiliated to the Azande. The Belgian authority on the other hand states that the greater part of the members are young Avungera girls, the object of the society being debauchery. According to this observer the members use a small blue bead which seems to be imported from the Sudan as a distinctive badge, and they do not inspire the superstitious fear which is such a characteristic feature of Bili. The District Commissioner of Yei is of opinion that it has nothing whatever to do with Bili, and that it was brought to Yei about two years ago by an individual called Fa Ray who initiated several persons. The initiation consists in the individual receiving some of the Mani medicine for which he pays two or more spears. The benefit derived from eating this medicine is as follows: if an individual A has an enemy B who kills A through the agency of a spirit (Lukunda) then if A is a Mani, B will also die of a spirit. Mani therefore does not ensure protection, but by threatening certain vengeance acts as a deterrent.

The Mani people hold special dances which are not unlike the ordinary Makraka dances and are sometimes performed naked. At these dances further payments are made to the head of the society present. Initiates are given special names which are not used in ordinary conversation, and members on meeting use a special form of salutation.

NOTES.

FUNG PROVINCE.

SOME NOTES ON BURUN CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS.

By Capt. J. P. MOSTYN.

The following notes are based on information obtained from time to time during my journeys (1915) amongst the Buruns. They are very possibly inaccurate. It is very difficult to get these wild people to talk. I do not think, however, that much, if any, information about their customs and beliefs has ever been sent in, so possibly that contained in these notes may be of some use.

Buruns on J. Maiak and its vicinity.

The sun is the big god but each Jebel is believed to have a god of its own who lives in the rocks. Bad years and such like are thought to be a sign that the god is angry with the inhabitants of the Jebel. I was unable to find out how he can be propitiated. Possibly they have to wait till his anger calms down.

These people have witch doctors; if any one is sick the witch doctor comes and sucks some part of the invalid's person and thus sucks out the disease.

They take omens by lighting a fire and observing how the flame burns or the direction in which the wind blows it, and according as this happens the omen is good or bad. I was unable to discover further details about this.

Buruns on the Khor Yabus.

The rain and the sun are considered "gods". The sun being the bigger god of the two as he appears daily whilst the rain only comes in the rainy season. The rain god is called doam. Only big chiefs (and very few attain this honour) are thought to have an after life. I do not think any chief within living memory has been great