

## The Pre-reformation English Priesthood and Contemporary East African Quasi-traditional Healer-diviners: An Historical Comparison with an Evolving Religious Professionalism among the Sukuma of Tanzania

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**KEY WORDS** Function; priest; healer-diviner; adaptation; non-literacy; opportunism.

**ABSTRACT** The functions of medieval English priest and East African healer-diviners are similar except for celibacy and teaching roles. The former have not been able to adapt with the coming of widespread literacy and institutional controls. The latter have adapted without difficulty to the tensions in their societies combining a response to popular needs with commercial and status opportunism.

### INTRODUCTION

On reading Marshall's 'The Catholic priesthood and the English Reformation' (Clarendon Press, 1994) and Hatfield's unpublished doctoral thesis 'The Nfumo in tradition and change; a study of the religious practitioners among the Sukuma of Tanzania' (Catholic University of America, 1968), one is immediately struck by the vividness of the comparisons which can be made between these Catholic priests and contemporary quasi-traditional healer-diviners among the Sukuma of Tanzania, a large Bantu tribe of five millions living to the south of Lake Victoria, with whom the author has had substantial published research experience. Further these functions are shared by these same quasi-traditional healer-diviners in a wide variety of tribal and urban settings in sub-Saharan Africa who similarly base their methods on a religious ideology of connections with spirits.

The roles and functions so carefully prescribed for the pre-Reformation English priesthood have become less part of their official canonical roles and have perhaps survived as more occasional responses to the requests of parishioners. The Sukuma traditional healer-diviners have not only survived but have significantly evolved their procedures to coincide with the

needs and opportunities in their rapidly changing "new" society and have also retained a very significant overall popularity.

One is also struck by the fact that the changes in religious rituals brought about by the English Reformation did not come about as a result of popular religious consumer demand, whereas the continued popularity of these quasi-traditional East African healers is clearly such a response.

It is proposed to examine this issue in relation to a number of hypotheses.

- 1) Literacy and prescribed ceremonial slow down the rate and possibilities of formal religious change coinciding with religious consumer demands.
- 2) Institutional specialisation, organisations with structures supported by written regulations, slows down the rate of change in formal religious practices. Experts have to be consulted, past recorded decisions re-examined, committees created and consulted and a climate of informed opinion for change created. The required existence of theologians and liturgists whose professional status depends on their co-professionals rather than on the generality of denominational practitioners.
- 3) It is not in the interests or capabilities of literate religious specialists to encourage and respond rapidly to consumer demands change.
- 4) Non-literate religious reactions and practices continue to maintain popular appeal, since they operate on the basis that performance of ritual is enough to bring about results, not only for the sacraments but for para-liturgical practices as well.

Overall one is struck by the need to examine whether indeed canonical religious practices do

develop in terms of what is actually practised and whether or not subsistence economies, however defined, produce similar religious practices.

Thus there are here interesting theoretical issues of comparative religious change over time in which the historical discontinuity in the western socio-religious experience may have contributed to secularisation. On the other hand the vitality in the religious experience of functionally non-literate societies may be attributable to its uninterrupted continuity.

The parallels given here between the contemporary quasi-traditional Sukuma healer-diviner and the pre-Reformation English priesthood follow the categories in Maxwell's study.

#### **The Pre-reformation English Priesthood and Confession**

The priest as confessor relates in practice to concepts of sin held by the person confessing perhaps rather more than what the Church as an institution considers to be sinful. Sin in the East African tribal paradigm relates to some activity or failure to act diagnosed by a healer-diviner as having upset a spirit who has caused the complainant some misfortune. The result is an opportunity to conform to family and communal needs as required by these spirits, as a preliminary to restoring the social situation to its assumed previous balance.

In the Sukuma situation most non-conformities are known. Since most consultations are in the open, there is no expectation of secrecy. Some troubled persons would prefer to go out of their neighbourhoods for consultations and diagnoses but there is no expectation of secrecy in what is discussed simply because it could not be provided.

While the English priest may have found himself stretched over Easter to hear annual obligatory confessions, it is safe to assume that most will be formalised recitations without much personalised content. With the part-time Sukuma practitioner on the other hand, consultations will be spread over the year with possibly some increased frequency during the dry season or on days off in the towns, and each of them will relate to personal problems, bad enough to have pushed the sufferer into seeking a solution requiring some financial outlay.

Just as the humanely expert English priest confessor may have attracted custom, so do the intuitive successes of Sukuma quasi-traditional healer-diviners extend the range of their clientele. Since both were and are not operating within 'a theological construct of great profundity, they are relatively free to adapt to the vagaries and difficulties of individual experience (Marshall, 1994: 18). However the pre-Reformation priest was operating within an institutional framework of written rules about human behaviour listed in manuals for confessors with stated harsh penalties for certain common sexual failings. There may have been problems of conscience when faced with people they knew and to whom they were neighbours. The Sukuma quasi-traditional healer-diviner would have no such problems.

These Sukuma practitioners are thus free to relate their interpretations of these individual misfortunes to anything that comes up within the accepted contemporary paradigm and which at the same time potentially enhances their reputations when they are accepted as subjectively successful by those who consult them.

One is inclined to think that much the same factors motivated the pre-Reformation English priesthood dependent as they were on their parishioners for their everyday survival unless they had independent means. He would not risk isolation by what his parishioners would evaluate as harsh reactions to what they saw as inevitable and understandable sin. Any such concept as "access to the infinite mercy of God (and) to facilitate (their) reconciliation to Christ's body" (Marshall, 1994: 19), is more likely to have been a covering phrase for formalised confession rather than a solution for highly personal problems.

Similarly African traditional practitioners will rarely give any prominence to God and only refer to God in terms of an insoluble problem rather than as a covering phrase to encourage reconciliation to the community or as a solution to a personal problem.

Overall the priest provided the forgiveness of God while the modernised Sukuma traditional practitioner provides the means for the re-assumption of social normality and their patients experience of forgiveness lies in this. A similarity in social consequences if not in theological functions.

### Priest as Celebrant

There are obvious parallels between the "distinct theatricality adhering to the Catholic Mass and the priest's role within it" and these African celebrants. The Sukuma practitioner dresses theatrically often in ways that combine the relics of traditionalism with the off-shoots of modernity. There are parallels here to vestments with modern designs.

The sacred equipment for the East African quasi-traditional healers-cum-diviners are personalised and idiosyncratic rather than institutionally conforming; they wear whatever their spirit connections suggest to them such as personalised amulets, miscellaneous strips of skin from previous sacrifices, virtually anything can be used which is seen as appropriate. This is evidence of their connections and commitment to the spirit world but neither they nor the Catholic priests had any outsiders who behaved or dressed similarly.

Both the Catholic Mass and the Sukuma ceremonies of ancestor propitiation are re-enactments of historical events. The former as a widely accepted historical fact and the later as a construct by the diviners of what they see as the event which may have initiated the disapproval of particular ancestors.

Historically the theological implications of the Mass were almost certainly beyond the comprehension of most if not almost all Catholics and worshippers participated for any number of reasons within the boundaries of personal belief. Their reasons for participating were probably not far different from that of contemporary Sukuma. The only difference being that the Mass was carried out according to the calendar and clock. The Sukuma and other East African rituals were mainly situational responses with attendance related to family connections or personal difficulties; there was little calendrical requirement.

The "why do you participate" questions from a researcher brings the inevitable response "It is the way we have always done it" and this illusion can be maintained in the absence of any written records.

The modern Sukuma believer in these quasi-traditional practices has access to an adequate repertoire of explanatory ideas so that there is no

need for any precisely formulated concepts; ancestors, spirits, emnity-they are all there ready to hand. Certainly in some cases there is some incorporation of the spirit world in the realities of living such as the taking of a name or the dedication of an animal as an instant metaphysical as well as long-term reminder. Functionally the taking the names of saints and ancestors are similar.

The modernising traditional healer-diviner acts as an agent through which the metaphysical world can be contacted and appeased. Their performances are unique in the sense that they lack any formal consistency and in relation to a particular client this uniqueness is a function of their infrequency.

These healer-diviners are initially under the control of a personal spirit which enables them to intuitively interpret the misfortunes of their clientele. In both cases the vocation has a spiritual dimension. At least initially they become possessed by a spirit in perhaps the same way as a Christian priest becomes convinced of his vocation.

Where there is infrequent sacrificing to aggrieved ancestors there are parallels to the Mass in connecting the sacrifice to those who offer it and the consumption of the Eucharist by participants. Thus it would seem that in functional terms there are parallels in their ritual performances but none in the ideas behind these functions. It is possible to ask in the Sukuma milieu in which Catholicism and quasi-traditionalism operate side by side, whether anyone notices other than those in the Christian establishment that it is a sacrifice. Both are ceremonies through which participants hope to get what they want.

### Priest as Teacher

The Sukuma have never evolved the need for their traditional religious healers to preach and disseminate an abstract moral message, and indeed they have no opportunity to do so. It is possible that subsistence societies do not have the functional need for abstract ideas and that an abstract noun class may have been a relatively late linguistic development or that such words are only used by a limited number of intellectuals. They do not perform any ritual by the calendar or clock, nor do they have except on

rare occasions, a congregation and even then it is not a regular one. Larger numbers would attend a rain-making ceremony for which there is just this one purpose, just as they might in England for a harvest festival. The absence of rain does not carry with it any generalised and non-specific burden of guilt. This requires the organisation and performance of promotional rituals that relate to metaphysical generalities rather than situational ethics on which the Sukuma base their lives.

The Sukuma as individuals look for relief from their misfortunes within their paradigm of religious thinking. Since they have been only loosely institutionalised into chiefdoms and have a variable environment, they could never have been historically or indeed today, any general agreements on what they should or should not do or believe in specific situations.

Essentially every household, family, lineage, clan or tribal segment was in disguised opposition to the surrounding social units. If there was any moral agreement on behaviour, it might well have been something on the lines of 'do not rock the boat because it will upset the rocker in the end'.

How different were the pre-Reformation English to this Sukuma pattern. There seems to have been a positive dislike of preaching. The letters of Gardiner written in the 1540s state that "the ordinary English people cannot abide long sermons and the ineffectiveness of sermons was compounded when they be not handsomely uttered." The editor commented that if priests were to read from the newly published Book of Homilies, the people would hear them in the same way as they heard matins, that is, they would be pre-occupied with their own devotions and pay little attention to the priest (Gardiner, 1933).

While priestly ignorance may have headed the historical indictment of the mediaeval English parish clergy by the intelligentsia, it may have mattered little at the average parishioner's level. It was their personal misbehaviour rather than their scholastic ignorance which was disliked.

In the Sukuma comparison, they take much the same attitude to their local contemporary quasi-traditional religious healers with the exception that, since they are self-employed and dependent on public custom and support, they

would not be practising at all if they were ignorant. They are not appointed according to any standards as there is no centralised supervisory authority. These men and women have to know what is going on and to be personally alert to its implications in much the same way as the mediaeval English clergy. There is no place in this situation for them to preach at their clients who would have seen anything like this to be a useless waste of both their times.

In mediaeval England an enquiring and critical mind has been correlated to growing standards of lay literacy, but there is no necessary correlation. With the Sukuma there may well have been a permanently critical attitude to the practices of individual traditional healers-cum-diviners (Heald, 1991). This is more likely to be correlated to the many and various dichotomous relationships in which they were and still are emeshed. The Sukuma traditional healers-diviners have always had to provide their clients with a rationalised diagnoses to fit in with their paradigmatic understandings. They do not speak in any way on matters outside their clients immediate needs; there would never be stock answers that particular behaviour would inevitably have certain consequences.

In training as opposed to teaching there are some parallels. Prior to the establishment of seminaries, some training of potential priests was done on the job within parishes; an informal apprenticeship. The would-be Sukuma traditional healer then as now, would attach himself to a successful practitioner and learn over a prolonged period. In both cases a form of evolving diaconate.

#### **The Priest as Anointed**

In mediaeval England the division between the ordained clergy and the laity was held to be fundamental and a distinct manner of living properly belonged to each estate. The layman in order to become a priest had to go through the symbolic process of taking Holy Orders. The sense of a specific religious calling may have been rare and the desire for material prosperity or at least a secure future may have been prevalent.

The parallels with the Sukuma quasi-traditional healer are clear except for the absence of any clearly delineated rite of passage. Without

doubt some Sukuma practitioners may have had, and indeed do have a sense of calling to help their fellows, but it is rare and hard to identify particularly as there has to be a pay-off for them to survive, if they are not going to have to cultivate, keep livestock, have a small shop or take a job. There is a parallel here with contemporary priest and pastors who also have part-time secular employment.

The Sukuma in the past had two distinct lines of possible upward social mobility open to the enterprising. The first was restricted to the lineage of the chief and his affines, more or less replaced by the contemporary political field of opportunity. The second was the traditional and now the modernised healer-diviner; non-hereditary vocations which were open to anyone, male or female from any family.

Theoretically the idea of a vocation is there because the healer is pushed into the 'business' of healing by pressure from ancestors or unrelated spirits or rather it is phrased in this way even though it may be widely accepted that their motives are largely secular. The extent of such psychological pressures and their reality over the need for personal gain and status is impossible to evaluate. But the idiom in which it is expressed, just as it was and is now with the Christian priest, is that of a calling to these occupations by an other worldly power. Certainly for the Sukuma and other tribal societies, the success of these quasi-traditional healer-diviners in ameliorating a wide range of private misfortunes must account in large part for the popular perpetuation of this role.

Both to the contemporary Sukuma and the medieval English, the concept of priest was and is narrowly functional. Whereas this held together in medieval England only so long as sacramental worship remained unchallenged, while the Sukuma premises have remained more or less intact because they never have been written down and institutionalised and thus have been relatively free to adapt to changing circumstances. They are thus able to maintain the convention that this way of solving problems by relating to the spirits is traditional.

The Sukuma quasi-traditional healers are occupationally distinct, but not socially separated from their neighbours except by their own suc-

cessful careers, their popularity enhanced by rumour and occasionally by costume. They live in the community and as an insurance against failure, continue as subsistence farmers. There is no separatist mentality of a distinct religious identity and with their personally varying success, are even less occupationally distinct, just as the medieval secular clergy with their many lay preoccupations may have been similarly indistinguishable.

There was and is no tension between the ideal and the reality of Sukuma healers-diviners because those involved are as well aware as the outsider anthropologist, that some are fraudulent or at least not validly drawn into this work since they have not been successful in getting clients; thus it is not a true vocation because it has not been successful (Gable, 1995). This may be tautological but it is nevertheless a socially adequate explanation.

Role conflicts may apply as much to the contemporary Sukuma healer-diviner as they did to the medieval English clergy. Behaviour which would be seen as incompatible with the interests of the directing spirits and indeed any behaviour which would be unacceptable to the average Sukuma, would be unacceptable in them, since the nature of their calling makes them privy to the privacies of others.

#### **Priest as Celibate**

There are no parallels at all in Sukuma society for the ideal or indeed the idea of celibacy since the persistently unmarried man is treated as a continuing adolescent and the unmarried woman as a biological inadequate. A traditionally minded family would be outraged by a daughter refusing to be married in order to take up a celibate religious vocation and thus failing to augment the fortunes of their family by bringing in bridewealth cattle and money in return for the expenses of bringing her up.

Thus despite the absence of an ideal of chastity, there has always been the ideal of an ordered society in which adultery rather than fornication was treated as a serious breach of acceptable behaviour. The traditional healer's vocation came from the ancestors and adultery would always been seen as seriously compromising their perpetuation as lineal ancestors.

The decline of a healer's career, or its failure to take off, could well be taken as evidence of some moral failure such as sexual misbehaviour with the women who come to them for treatment. There must have been some idea of role conflict here but not from conflict with any ideal behaviour specifically related to the role of traditional healer. Thus except on the periphery of sexual misbehaviour, there are no parallels between the Sukuma quasi-traditional healer and the medieval English priesthood. Celibacy in English does not require a subordinate phrase but in Bantu languages it requires them; to be without a wife or husband; it could never be a state supported by an abstract ideal.

#### **Priest as Pastor**

The concept of pastoral activity in the two religious systems was theoretically different though in practice comparable. The Christian priest by his own understanding was saying a Mass on behalf of all mankind; socially and psychologically this may have been impossible. In the vast majority of cases the Mass was said with a particular named intention, possibly more so then than today, priests said Mass for someone alive or dead and for a particular intention.

While these intentions may have been for the generality of mankind, this must have been exceedingly rare. To have a Mass said was certainly an investment; the rich in their wills could provide for Masses to be said for the repose of their own souls; they could afford to do so. Mass requests in the Dominican priory at Bol in Croatia for March 1743 were divided equally between family, socio-religious societies and the Dominican community; the environment there then as now was very harsh.

The majority of people were hoping for more direct results or they would not have made the payments to the priest in a subsistence agricultural system. Thus their intentions would be related to their own families and their personal concerns; a narrow perspective of self-interest extending no further than their relatives and affines, despite the theological aim of generality.

Here the parallels between the functions of the Sukuma quasi-traditional healer-diviner and the pre-Reformation English priest are more exact. The Sukuma have no written theology, but a

tenacious religious paradigm; the spirit world acts on the living to whom they are usually related directly or indirectly. There are higher and more detached unrelated spirit forces but they have a fall-back position explaining the failure of the related spirits to respond to the petitions of their descendants. Petitions do not appear to be made directly to these detached spirit powers.

In both societies religious activity was and is carried out for and on behalf of relatives and indeed who else would be worth the effort in societies in which the only form of social security must have been reciprocal relationships within an extended family of both agnates and affines of which the dead formed an integral part.

Thus in practice the focii of religious activism or pastoral concern must have been largely the same, even though the objects at which it was directed may have been different; related spirits and unrelated saints, the Virgin Mary or a particular part of the Trinity. They were expected to perform or propose rituals for the benefit of their parishioners or clients.

In another area, the performance of rites of passage, there are no parallels. The Christian priest was involved then as now in performing rites of passage; christening, confirmation, marriage and burial, while the Sukuma traditional healer-diviner was not involved in these at all except in relation to his own family. Why should there be such a clear difference?

The Christian system conforms to a divine plan in which conformity alone is seen and experienced as virtuous. The Sukuma religion is principally one of reacting to experienced malfunctions in individuals and their families; thus conformity to a general behavioural paradigm does not require any particular rituals involving a specialist.

The division of pre-Reformation England into administrative units for church and state provided a defined unit of population with a legally obligated pastor. On both sides there were defined pastoral obligations and expectations which in many cases could not be fulfilled because there was no priest in residence and the people were very poor. There was a geographical and ecclesiastical structure within which everyone operated with varying degrees of social and religious efficiency. The pastoral care was dependent on the

abilities of the priest and the priest was almost always dependent on the parishioners. Whatever the theological connection may have been, the practical one was related to subsistence however disguised. It is probable that the priest was more aware of this than his parishioners.

The Sukuma system has no built-in sense of institutional obligation which is not dependent on circumstances and abstract charitable acts would be misconstrued and probably seen as damaging their own interests. Thus the quasi-traditional healer-diviner just as the traditional ones, does not provide a pastoral service except on demand and indeed their very presence is dictated by demand; without demand they would not be practising at all. They had no institutionalized dependence or obligations; they would not visit the sick or directly tout for custom, the sick would come to them. Noone had any obligations towards them which were not related to their own needs. It might well be dangerous for an unrelated person to visit a sufferer as it would lead to speculation as to what was known and what were the motives for such visits. Both the Catholic priest and the Sukuma quasi-traditional healer were and are paid to perform required services but the difference is that the latter were paid in part by results.

#### **Priests as Neighbours**

The Sukuma quasi-traditional healer-diviner is a man or woman with some specialised talents who functions mostly as a subsistence farmer or wife of a farmer until and unless their talents allow them to become full-time which is very rare. In this sense they are ordinary people until their professional popularity makes them independent of subsistence farming. In this they were not much different to the founders of Independent Christian Churches. The contemporary healer-diviner may live in a town and be on the fringe of other occupations and just as likely to be unable to make his or her professional ambitions pay for their livelihoods.

They will have their own houses or compounds in which they practice and except for spirit shrines erected there and which indeed may exist in other compounds, so there is little to distinguish them from their neighbours. Their putative role does not excuse them from any of the

obligations of family, neighbourliness or citizenship.

They are enmeshed in the need for reciprocities and these would increase rather than diminish with any degree of success as healer-diviners; they would be the objects of jealousy. They are thus local people to whom an enforceable neighbourliness and extended family membership would apply. They would want to keep the fruits of their professional services as secret as possible as success would make them the targets of additional demands from their extended families and their neighbours.

So they are caught in a professional dilemma. They need to know what is going on in order to function successfully by being able to tell those who consult them, the possible sources of their misfortunes which requires the expenditure of time and money in socialising and indeed more so should he or she be successful. On the other hand they would prefer not to be involved too closely in their own community if this could be avoided as it could make them the target of enmity and accusations of witchcraft. However it does not need much specific knowledge and intelligence to recognise that most misfortunes fall within very general categories. The average observant parish priest and quasi-traditional East African healer-diviner can touch on the likely cause of problems without having any specific information as to what is going wrong. Rhetorical questions can stimulate subjective thinking; a simple question as to whether they have recently remembered their ancestors is likely to stir up some sense of guilt.

Thus it is not surprising that those who go to healer-diviners prefer not to consult those who know them personally, while they would find it easier to be successful if they were privy to local information.

However they do have an advantage over the pre-Reformation priest as both petitioners and practitioners are functioning within the same social and religious paradigm. The priest functioned uneasily within the paradigms of village society in which they were living as neighbours since his social and economic functions had to be combined with the impersonality of the institutional role. The balancing of these two worlds seems to have been resolved successfully with

the priest performing many useful services for his neighbours outside his role as provider of the sacraments. He may have given advice on health problems and written letters on behalf of non-literate parishioners.

So both these functionaries had to live as neighbours and to survive under conditions of neighbourliness which would enable economic and social survival. For the pre-Reformation clergy who did not have institutional economic support and yet who were separated socially from their neighbours by the fact of ordination, this must have been a more difficult role to play.

#### **The Priest as Enemy**

Anyone acting in a professional role in a village community is likely to make enemies and such quarrels either continue or are solved by one party leaving the community. Since the priest was appointed, he could with some difficulty be removed by his bishop.

For the Sukuma quasi-traditional healer-diviners that would be much more difficult as they are in most cases farmers. They cannot easily move except by going into the towns and getting employment or migrating to the newly opened areas to the west where they could find new farmland. Even this would require help from agnates and affines if they were going to survive until the first harvest.

In both cases the pressure to move would come from boycotts which the Sukuma would find much harder to resist than the priest who would always be needed for soul-saving ceremonies as his parishioners would still use him or have the difficulties of going elsewhere.

What might be the grounds for hostility? Since the Sukuma healer-diviners could only operate within the paradigm of their social and religious values and obtain success only within this, then hostility would also develop within the same paradigm and in the same acceptable ways.

The grounds for any hostility would not be enhanced by outside factors and would develop from their general cynical approach to the abilities of individual practitioners; it has always been a common subject of conversation. Failure as much as success feeds on jealousy if there are not more specific complaints such as their inter-

ference with other men's women.

The pre-Reformation clergy would have been subject to the same range of personalised complaints but they had the legal rights to tithes which were unrelated to personal worth or standards of service and upon which they were dependent for survival. It is easy to see how hostility to a priest might arise when he insisted on his legal rights when in the opinion of his parishioners his personal and professional behaviour did not justify such payments. Just as it is easy to see how reluctant the priests would be to make such demands if they still thought of themselves as neighbours rather than priests who had to consider themselves as neighbours.

So overall it seems that these two different religious functionaries were dealing with essentially the same range of problems but that their ability to do so varied with two factors, literacy and the institutionalisation of religion.

#### **The Modernising Quasi-traditional East African Healer-diviner**

These quasi-traditional healer-diviners in sub-Saharan Africa and in the particular context of the Sukuma of Tanzania (Tanner, 1957, 1958, 1969, 1992, 1997; Tanner & Wijzen, 1993) operate within a religious paradigm which has never had any part of it defined in print, so that issues of conformity to any tradition do not arise. There is an assumption of conformity to the past but since there is no way of checking this, it just correlates with the accepted popularity of each individual's methods, a combination of reputation and repertoire. Tradition is recreated rather in the form of a moving staircase. A constant process of conformity to contemporary psychosocial needs within a recreated cultural identity (Wijzen and Tanner, 2001).

Within their religious paradigm the Sukuma can attribute misfortune and well-being to ancestors, non-related spirits, witches and use many possible variations of rituals in combination with an enormous spiritual and material pharmacopoeia. In this context it is useful to use Merton's typology of adaptation (Merton, 1964).

*First:* Conformity is so loosely framed that it can mean no more than that individuals do not step outside what is generally considered to be acceptable behaviour which is related to particular



situations rather than to abstract ideals. Within this framework Sukuma religious practitioners and their clients can come up with a wide range of possible alternatives.

*Second:* Formal ritualism in the sense of a dominating religious activity regularly performed cannot exist without literacy and religious institutions, particularly in subsistence agricultural societies and in urban societies in which personal livelihoods for most function on a day to day basis. Religious ritualism in this context thus tends to be idiosyncratic. A strong "do it yourself" element within sensed rather than prescribed paradigmatic limits.

*Third:* Retreatism tends to occur if it exists at all, in this context to religious specialists who are sufficiently popular not to have to depend on farming to survive. A subsistence economy such as that of the Sukuma will not keep alive people who are not contributing to their own survival. Thus practitioners who might only meditate on their relationships with their ancestors are a denial in terms; they would just go out of business. These men and women have to be active not passive in pursuing a religious vocation. A purely religious vocation would be a functional impossibility.

As a symptom of distress and as a way out of personal difficulties, retreatism is certainly common but it has to lead to early solutions through available means. Thus possession by a spirit can relieve a wife from the difficulties of her marriage and a man can become a religious specialist under the duress of an ancestor. The wife's spirit possession has to be resolved in a way acceptable to her affines or she will end up divorced. The religious specialist's vocation has to be demonstrated in ways that are seen to help others; it cannot be a personal expression or resolution of psycho-social tension.

*Fourth:* Innovation. In the absence of religious institutions this is constant and broadly speaking, effortless, probably more so than it has ever been in the past with so much rapid change impinging on every individual. In the past it is likely that the Sukuma religious paradigm within which practitioners and petitioners operated did cover a much smaller range of acceptable religious behaviour.

A whole new range of artefacts which can be

used in ceremonies and consultations as well as new patterns of behaviour which can be used on those occasions (Tanner, 1997). In addition there is possibly a wider understanding of what can or cannot be controlled by religious activities. The religious vocation can take the form of visions and Satanic influences within a Christian idiom; evil spirits are no longer ancestors but the stranger down the street.

The high social and geographical mobility of the Sukuma has reduced the value of the welfare system provided by the extended family without the government and charitable agencies being able to replace it. It is now much more difficult to create and maintain a network of reciprocities. In these circumstances these quasi-traditional healers are responding to clear emotional and material needs. Since the Sukuma want results acceptable to them and it provides a pattern of practice which is in part under the control of the patient and does not involve culturally distinct foreign institutions and systems. Successful innovation pays off as the performance of rituals continue to be the way by which religious procedures are recognised as effective.

Finally religious revolution. This is a rare adaptation which has not appealed to the Sukuma even during the colonial period. So far there have been no reactions to generalised stresses in which religion have taken a prominent part as has occurred elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa; the Xhosa prophetess and the destruction of livestock (Pieres, 1989), Maji Maji rebellion in German East Africa (Bell, 1950), and the Shona resistance to the initial white invasion of Zimbabwe and the delay in granting political independence (Ranger, 1987).

We need to note here the overall importance of non-literacy, the extent of perennial and permanent personal difficulties and the high level of intelligence that can be proportionately expected in a number of individuals in any population at any stage of social development. The parallels to economically developed societies need to be considered.

#### **Literacy and the Rate of Religious Change**

One is immediately struck by the fact that these quasi-traditional Sukuma healer-diviners are not literate or at least literate to a very limited

extent. Literacy at any rate plays no part in their religious practices; they keep no records and have no training related to literacy. Their encyclopedic memories are correlated to non-literacy (MacLuhan, 1962: 1-42).

These non-literate religious activists have no rubrics to follow; there are no liturgists hovering critically in the background. Ceremonies or rituals are only vaguely similar even if they are carried out under the same cover name. Without literacy religious practitioners are freer to follow the needs of those for whom they are performing services provided that what they do is within the paradigm of social acceptability. Thus these specialists are continually evolving if not creating new techniques which satisfy their customers and without having to refer the procedure to anyone else. It could be said that they are "with it" without any committee or institution worrying about what that means.

Once literacy invades and dominates the validification of any religious activity, it tends to be referred to what has been written about it in the past and change becomes a discussible issue of conforming to that or justifying any change in assessable literate terms; thus there is a built-in time lag for any change whatever is aimed at and whatever its justification. This misses out the personalised immediacy of what the Sukuma healer-diviners are able to do without having to look over their shoulders towards some ideal of institutionalised conformity.

#### **Institutional specialisation and the rate of change**

When public religious behaviour is extensively institutionalised, the needs of clients become of less and less importance since there is a prescribed order of service into which individual needs have to be fitted. Applying the same five reactions to change which were applied to the quasi-traditional Sukuma healers-diviners there appear to be the following comparisons (Merton, 1964), which must in part be a personal adjustment to personal difficulties.

*First:* Conformity where there is the conscious and deliberate following of the prescribed written regulations but also in mental conformity to these theological ideas. Most pre-Reformation priests will have conformed.

*Second:* Ritualism in which those involved conform but get their return from the performance of specific rituals either regularly or in response to their periodic difficulties. Again literacy dominates.

*Third:* Retreatism where those involved sink into their religion to the exclusion of the everyday life around them. Possibly those who entered monastic religious life and the social supports that richer societies are able to provide.

*Fourth:* Revolutionary activism in which there is public opposition to particular religious practices, sect formation and the creation of personal forms of religious behaviour which are demonstrably different to what is institutionally acceptable. There does not seem to have been any independent religious activism among the parish clergy.

*Fifth:* Innovation in which people create their own forms of religious activity within the approved paradigms of a particular institutionalised faith. It seems likely that each priest may have had their own ritualistic quirks, particular devotions appealing both to themselves and their parishioners for which they would never have sought institutional support and which would have become more difficult to carry out as the Church became more effectively institutionalised.

#### **The services provided by the pre-Reformation English clergy**

The pre-Reformation English clergy and the roles which they performed passed into history for factors which were largely outside the control of and without the specific wishes of their parishioners to whom they appear to have given satisfactory service. The institutional framework within which they operated changed for political as much as for theological reasons and this enforced change on the parish clergy whether their parishioners wanted it or not.

Perhaps here we have the basic split between what ordinary East African people want from their religion within a tribal paradigm of thinking and what is provided for them for theological reasons. Virtue was realised and religious benefits accrued from the performance of rituals and the religious system imposed by institutional specialists was reluctant at the very least to allow such an easy option to their nominal followers. They promulgated that the performance of

rituals was not enough and that the true believer had to have an appropriate attitude of mind to acquire religious benefits.

At this point the post-Reformation English Christians were in effect left to pursue their basic religious needs by whatever means came to hand, while the new clergy preached a different system altogether. Thus the English clergy lost the hearts and minds of their parishioners, while the Sukuma healer-diviners, unaffected by political factors and the complications of a literate theology, continue to operate effectively in the face of the availability of literacy, Christianity, Islam and social development.

#### **How has the Contemporary Sukuma Healer-diviner Adapted?**

Their situation is not the triumph of a backwards looking traditionalism, the post-industrial equivalent to an African form of fundamentalism. The Sukuma as much as those in any other East African society have been greatly affected by political, economic, social and religious change. The creativity of their religious system is forward looking, while pretending to be traditional.

Firstly the traditional system largely centred on the propitiation of ancestors faded away because extensive internal migration and the breakdown of a traditional family structure had made it very difficult to accept their ancestors as involved in seeing their descendants conforming to a traditional pattern. Some may still propitiate and others may wear amulets, change their names or dedicate animals to their ancestors. Town-dwellers and internal migrants found themselves unable to get their families together which would have made propitiatory rituals effective.

Thus there may have been a split between the more static traditional minded healer-diviners in the core areas from which there had been substantial emigration and the new healer-diviners, more open-minded to innovation, operating in newly occupied areas and in the townships where there may always have been a much larger number dealing with new problems associated with social change.

The healer-diviners there attributed personal misfortune either to generalised spirit forces, which have no specific focus or to specify the cause to be non-related persons in the urban-

industrial environment into which the Sukuma may not have been effectively incorporated.

So the healer-diviners have adapted to a changing environment with new concepts and new ways of gaining and retaining the support of those who need help. This has been enabled by a number of interconnected factors.

- 1) The new nation has not been able to provide an effective social welfare system while the old extended family system has faded away. Helping people has become an opportunity for those with the necessary intelligence and ability. A form of economically based religious opportunism.
- 2) There is no religious or political establishment which has either the power or the wish to invade this area which has many of the characteristics of victimless crimes where all those involved are content.
- 3) No quasi-traditional Sukuma healer-diviner works from a basis of literacy and any concepts of what may or may not have been the practices of the past are subject to the immediacies of current adaptations. It is part of a wide-ranging process of recreating their cultural identity (Wijsen and Tanner, 2001).

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

The pre-Reformation clergy suffered from the political as much as the theological climate within which they operated which allowed the institutional Church to develop the ideal of priestliness and a professionalised climate of religious expectations which were impossible to fulfil. The laity slipped away into their own implicit religious activities gradually abandoning explicit observances. A process of ostensible secularisation.

The Sukuma were perhaps fortunate in not having their religious ideas and practices institutionally controlled. Their scepticism of the abilities of many practising and would be practising healer-diviners was part of their religious paradigm within which they were free to use a wide variety of religious practices to suit their circumstances.

There were and are no institutions which could direct much less control such a system which has no basis in literacy and written records. Individually these men and women can do very much what the socio-religious market wants,

rather than what they thought the market should need.

Perhaps the Sukuma because of this lack of institutionalised religion, were able to get what they wanted within an ever-changing religious paradigm, while the English were forced into a non-adaptive form of religious compliance which they often neglected. Furthermore the Sukuma healer-diviners have never been able to separate themselves from the current affairs of their neighbours on whom they were dependent. Any tensions that might develop between them and the people were easily resolved by a transfer of clientship to another one in another neighborhood.

There is a tendency to see if not expect the use of peripheral or popular religions, however defined, in developed societies to be confined to the socially disabled and those on the edges of society. Work in America (McGuire, 1988) has shown that the otherwise orthodox practitioners of the main religions have moved sideways from orthodoxy into more personalised cultic groups because the former faiths have not provided the adaptive and personalised religious services which they needed. The Sukuma modernised traditional religious practitioners have moved with the times and provided this all along without being aware that they have done so.

It has been suggested by Kavanagh (Kavanagh, 1982) that the primary religious acts are those which are "most all-encompassing, integral and foundational as well as being occasional, formal, unifying and about survival." He contrasts this with secondary theology "highly developed, almost hypertrophied, linguistic and conceptual."

Thus it would seem that contemporary Sukuma healer-diviners just as their forebears, are engaged in primary theological acts dealing with the whole range of human misfortunes, putting them into a foundational and all-encompassing context which gives the individuals who consult them, some understandings and a better chance of survival.

The pre-Reformation English priest was perhaps able to provide similar services for his parishioners of this primary type and it was only later with the institutional dominance of theologians and the growth of the institutional Church's ability to control so that the gap developed be-

tween what the people wanted from religion and what the new Protestant Church were prepared to provide.

The present situation among the Sukuma is an illustration of this; they prefer the rituals which are personalised and creative to the abstract ceremonies in churches and mosques which do not effectively recognise the primary needs of those to whom their messages are presented.

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