THE SOUL AND SACRIFICE AMONGST THE SISALA

BY

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Introduction

The Sisala are a patrilineal group of horticulturalists living in the savanna-zone of Northern Ghana.¹ Their villages are widely scattered throughout the scrub brush, which is cleared on a rotating basis, for subsistence farming. There are two climatic seasons: rainy and dry. The Sisala cultivate crops of millet, sorghum, guinea-corn, maize, yams, rice and a variety of lesser crops. Cattle are kept for purposes of bridewealth payments and sacrifices.

Social organisation is based on the principle of agnatic descent. Residence is patrilocal. The Sisala are united by a loose-knit association of patri-clans which are sub-divided into villages, maximal lineages, lineages, compounds, houses and single rooms. The village is the most important political unit, while the lineage, normally comprising a patrilineally extended family, is the corporate unit of production and consumption. It is also the most important ritual unit, in terms of the frequency of ancestral sacrifice and the function of this institution as a means of social control. The compound-family, several of which comprise a lineage, is made up of either an extended family or a joint-fraternal family. Either the lineage or the compound may be the unit of production, depending on the stage of the group in the developmental cycle.

The Sisala are governed by a paramount chief who, for a three-year term, heads a five-man council of chiefs, after which time another member of the council is elected by council vote. This council has under its jurisdiction several divisional and village chiefs. Chiefship was created by the British and today exists in this form along-

¹ Field work was carried out in 1971 while a research student at Cambridge University under grants from the Snuts Foundation, British Universities Student Travel Association, and Wolfson College, Cambridge, and again in the summer of 1975 under a travel grant from Ahmadu Bello University.
side the traditional gerontocracy comprised of the jangtina (clan or village custodian) and the jangtingaa (elder's council).  

The leaders of the gerontocracy enforce the norms of society and dominate younger males and females, that is, juniors (hengmising), by controlling access to the ancestral shrines. For example, no junior can cure himself of an affliction without taking recourse to the consultation of the diviner, and post-divinatory sacrifice. Divination often brings to light moral offences (awbonung), including the failure of juniors to obey (sei) their seniors (nihiasing). Such offences are thought to bring immediate ancestral punishment (dokising). This punishment takes the form of illness, accident or other misfortune which befalls the sinner or his immediate family. To eradicate such misfortune the junior must eventually remand himself to the custody of his jural headman, confess his wrongdoing, and perform the necessary expiatory rites. This process exerts social control over juniors by the leaders of society.

In this paper I want to discuss two main questions with reference to sacrifice and the soul: First, 'Why is the nature of beliefs about the soul important to the proper understanding of sacrifice?' Second, 'If the soul is thought to rest eternally in the pleasurable realm of lelejang (ancestors' village), why do the ancestors punish their living kinsmen?'

Manifest and Latent Models of Reality

The cosmology of the Sisala contains their manifest model of reality. Anthropologists create another latent model of social reality. The manifest model, however, is the one which motivates human behaviour.

2 E. L. Mendonsa, Traditional and imposed political systems among the Sisala of Northern Ghana, Savanna 4 (2) 1 1975, 103-115.
3 This relates to a more general question raised by P. G. Riviere in his Mali-
nowski Memorial Lecture (The Couvade: a problem reborn, Man 9, 1974, 423-
435) about the relationship between cosmological ideas and social institutions. Much of my inspiration to write this article came from my reading of Dr. Riviere's article. See also E. L. Mendonsa, Functions, contingent and universal, Man 10 (3) 1975. 1-9.
4 E. L. Mendonsa, The journey of the soul in Sisala cosmology, Journal of Religion in Africa 7 (1) 1975. Winu actually means everlasting time or "for ever" and technically includes sisele. I use this term to distinguish between the spiritual world and this world. The Sisala normally use more specific terms like lele-
jang and Wiajang.