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## Colour Classification in Ndembu Ritual

### A Problem in Primitive Classification

There has recently been a marked revival of interest in what Durkheim (1963) called 'primitive forms of classification', a revival in which the names of Lévi-Strauss, Leach, Needham, and Evans-Pritchard have been prominent. Much attention has been focused on dichotomous classification in kinship and religious systems or on other kinds of isometrical arrangement such as quaternary and octadic divisions. Needham's resuscitation of Robert Hertz's (1960) work and Needham (1960) and Beidelman's (1961) recent studies in the symbolism of laterality, of the opposition of right and left and its sociological implications, represent this interest. During my own investigations of Ndembu ritual symbolism I came across many instances of lateral symbolism and indeed of other forms of dual classification with which the opposition of right and left might or might not be correlated. Since one of my major lines of inquiry was into the problem of social conflict and its resolution, I was sensitive at the time to the symbolization and formalization of such conflict. Many disputes involved opposition between the principles of matriliney and virilocality, and it seemed, therefore, reasonable to suppose that the opposition between the sexes would secure ritual and symbolic representation. I found that this was indeed the case, but I was not long in discovering that not only the dualism of the sexes but indeed every form of dualism was contained in a wider, tripartite mode of classification.

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This tripartite classification relates to the colours white, red, and black. These are the only colours for which Ndembu possess

primary terms. Terms for other colours are either derivatives from these – as in the case of *chitookoloka*, 'grey', which is derived from *tooka*, 'white' – or consist of descriptive and metaphorical phrases, as in the case of 'green', *meji amatamba*, which means 'water of sweet potato leaves'. Very frequently, colours which we would distinguish from white, red, and black are by Ndembu linguistically identified with them. Blue cloth, for example, is described as 'black' cloth, and yellow or orange objects are lumped together as 'red'. Sometimes a yellow object may be described as '*neyi nsela*', 'like beeswax', but yellow is often regarded as ritually equivalent to red.

When I first observed Ndembu rites I was impressed by the frequent use of white and red clay as ritual decoration. I assumed that only these two colours were ritually significant and that I had to deal with a dual classification. There was, indeed, a certain amount of support for such a view in the anthropological literature on the West Central Bantu. For example, Baumann, writing of the Chokwe of eastern Angola, had asserted that for these people: 'White is the colour of life, of health, of moonlight and of women. Red, on the other hand, has connections with sickness, the sun and men' (1935, pp. 40-41). He then attempted to equate the opposition between the colours with that between right and left, associating red with the right and white with the left. But Baumann also admitted that white clay 'figures as a life-principle' and is consequently forced by the logic of his dual scheme to regard red as the colour of 'death'. Yet when he discusses the red decoration of novices in the circumcision ceremony he writes: 'It seems as though the red colour were in itself not only the colour of illness, but also the colour of averting illness.' Other authorities on the West Central Bantu are by no means in agreement with Baumann's interpretation. C. M. N. White, for example, holds that 'red is symbolic of life and blood in various Luvale contexts' (1961, p. 15), and the Chokwe and Luvale are culturally very similar. White also writes that various red fruits and trees are 'constantly associated with fertility and life'.

My own field observations among the Ndembu tended to confirm White's interpretation rather than Baumann's, although it is true that there are a number of ritual contexts in

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which red is associated with masculinity, as in the red ritual decorations of war chiefs (*tumbanji*), circumcisers, and hunters, and white with femininity, as in the case of the *mudyi* tree which secretes a white latex and is the supreme symbol of femininity and motherhood. But on the other hand, I came upon at least an equal number of ritual occasions where white represented masculinity and red femininity. For example, in the *Nkula* rite, performed to rid a woman of menstrual disorder, red clay and other red symbols represent menstrual blood, 'the blood of parturition', and matriliney – all feminine things. In the *Wubwang'u* rite, performed for a mother of twins or for a woman expected to bear twins, powdered white clay, kept in a phallus-shaped container and blown over the patient as she stands on a log near a stream-source, is explicitly likened to 'semen'. On the other hand, powdered red clay, kept in the shell of a river mollusc and blown over the patient after the white powder, is said to represent 'the blood of the mother'. The white clay is applied by a male, and the red clay by a female doctor. I discuss this rite more fully in an essay to be published, but the point is made. There is no fixed correlation between the colours and the sexes. Colour symbolism is not consistently sex-linked, although red and white may be situationally specified to represent the opposition of the sexes.

It is clear that Baumann's attempt to polarize the symbolic values of white and red is artificial and constrained. This would suggest that we are dealing here with something wider than a dual classification. White and red are certainly opposed in some situations, but the fact that each can stand for the same object – in other words, they participate in one another's meaning – suggests that more than a pair of opposites has to be taken into account. As a matter of fact, as I have already indicated, there is a third factor, or term. This is the colour black, in some ways the most interesting of the three.

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Let us now examine some contexts in which the three colours appear together before we look at them singly or in contrasted

pairs. Ndembu assure me that the relationship between the colours 'begins with the mystery (or riddle - *mpangu*) of the three rivers - the rivers of whiteness, redness, and blackness (or darkness)'. This cryptic utterance refers to part of the secret teaching of the lodge during the circumcision rites (*Mukanda*) and during the phase of seclusion at the rites of the funerary associations of *Chiwila* and *Mung'ong'i*. It is said that girls were also, until recently, taught this mystery (*mpang'u*) during their puberty rites (*Nkang'a*), but I found no evidence of this.

I have not personally observed the instruction of novices in this mystery of the three rivers, but I have recorded several accounts from reliable informants. The first of these is from a member of the *Chiwila* society, which performs elaborate initiation rites for young people at the death of its female cult members. *Chiwila* is no longer held in Northern Rhodesia, but my informant had been initiated as a young girl among the Ndembu of Angola. She described to me how the novices were taught the mystery of one of the 'rivers' (*tulong'a*), in this case 'the river of blood' (*kalong'a kamashi*) or 'the river of redness' (*kachinana*). The prefix *ka-* sometimes signifies that the term it qualifies is a liquid, usually water. Thus *ku-chinana* means 'to be red (or yellow)', *chinana* is the radical, and *ka-chinana* means 'red fluid' or 'red river', and *keyila*, the 'black river'.

My informant told me that the novices, boys as well as girls, were taken to a long, roofed but unwallled shelter called *izembi*. The senior celebrant, entitled *Samazembi* ('father of *mazembi*'), then took a hoe and dug a trench inside the hut. It was shaped 'like a cross' (*neyi mwambu*), but could also be made in the form of an Ndembu axe (*chizemba*) or a hoe (*itemwa*). Next he took sharp reeds, such as are used for making mats, and planted them along both sides of the trench. This was followed by the planting of many small antelope horns, containing pounded leaf-medicine (*nsompu*), in lines on either side of the trench. He then filled the trench with water; *Samazembi's* next task was to behead (the term *ku-ketula*, 'to cut' is always used for this) a fowl and pour its blood into the 'river' to tinge it with red. Not content with this, he added other red colouring matter such as powdered red clay (*mukundu* or *ng'ula*) and powdered gum from the *mukula* tree. *Samazembi* then washed his body with medicine

made from root scrapings soaked in water and contained in his personal calabash. What was left after washing he threw into the 'river of redness'. Next he took some powdered white clay (*mpemba* or *mpeza*), addressed the spirits of 'those who had passed through *Chiwila* long ago', anointed himself by the orbits and on the temple with *mpemba*, anointed the novices, and then harangued them as follows:

'Pay attention! This river is blood. It is very important (literally, "heavy"). It is very dangerous. You must not speak of it in the village when you return. Beware! This is no ordinary river. God (*Nzambi*) made it long, long ago. It is the river of God (*kalong'a kaNzambi*). You must not eat salt for many days, nor anything salty or sweet (*-towala* means both). Do not speak of these matters in public, in the village; that is bad.'

When he had finished, each novice bent down and took one of the small horns by the teeth, without using hands. They all went outside and tried to perform the difficult feat of bending over backwards and tossing the horn up in such a way as to be caught by adepts standing just behind them without spilling the medicine.

*Samazembi* collected up all these horns and secreted them in his medicine-hut (*katunda*). The medicine was called *nfunda*, a name also applied to the lodge-medicine of the *Mukanda* or Boys' Circumcision rites. In addition to other ingredients it contained ashes from the burnt hut of the deceased. *Nfunda* is never thrown away but the portion left over at the end of each performance of *Chiwila* or *Mung'ong'i* is used at the next performance, where it is mixed with fresh medicine. The *nfunda* used at the circumcision rites, though not in the *chiwila* rites, contains ashes and powdered charcoal from the seclusion lodge, which is burnt at the end of the seclusion period, and ashes and charcoal from various sacred fires extinguished at the conclusion of the rites. These are held to be 'black' symbols. It is interesting to learn from Baumann (p. 137) that among the Chokwe *ufunda* stands for 'interment' and is derived from the verb *ku-funda*, 'to bury'. The term *funda*, which seems to be the cognate of *nfunda*, according to Baumann, stands for 'a bundle' and



'appears to be connected with the idea of the bundled corpse laced on to the carrying-post'. *Nfunda*, as used at *Mukanda*, *Mung'ong'i*, and *Chiwila*, rites of the Ndemba is certainly a medicine-bundle; but the possible etymological connection with death is suggestive in view of its connection with funerary rites, the destruction of sacred edifices, and black symbols.

My informant on *Chiwila* customs was unable or unwilling to venture much in the way of their interpretation. But other informants on *Mukanda* and *Mung'ong'i* ritual supplied further exegesis. At these rites, they told me, there are 'three rivers'. 'The river of blood', usually made in the shape of an axe, represents 'a man with a woman' (*iyala namumbabda*), or 'copulation' (*kudisunda*). 'The man' is represented by the axe-head with its tang, and the woman by the wooden shaft.<sup>1</sup>

But the main 'river' or 'trough', the 'elder' one as Ndembu put it, is the 'river of whiteness' (*katooka*). This 'runs in a straight line to the *izembi* shelter'. 'The river of red water is junior, and this is followed by the river of black water. The red river is a woman and her husband.' The crossing of the mother's and father's blood means a child, a new life (*kabubu kawumi* - *kabubu* stands for a small organism, such as an insect; it also stands for the navel-cord; *wumi* signifies generic life rather than the personal life-principle - thus an infant before it is weaned is thought to have *wumi* but not a *mwevulu*, a 'shadow-soul' which after death becomes an ancestor spirit of *mukishi*). One informant told me that the *katooka* is whitened with powdered white clay (*mpemba*), 'stands for *wumi*', and is 'the trunk to which the red and black rivers are attached like branches'. The black river (*keyila*), darkened with charcoal (*makala*) represents 'death' (*kufwa*).

During *Mung'ong'i* the novices are asked a number of riddles (*jipang'u*). One of them is, 'What is the white water restless by night?' (*katooka kusaloka*). The correct answer is 'Semen' (*matekela*). Thus one of the senses of the 'white river' is masculine generative power. This river, too, is described as 'a river of God'.

In *Mung'ong'i*, and also formerly in *Mukanda*, the novices are taught to chant a song, or rather incantation, full of archaic

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and bizarre terms. I record the text but cannot translate several of the words:

*Katooki meji kansalu kelung'i chibungu chebung'a belang' ante-e*

White river, water of the country, cannibal monster (or hyena) of the country . . .

*Mukayande-e he-e kateti kasemena mwikindu mwini kumwalula hinyi?*

In suffering (?) the little reed of begetting in the medicine basket (?), the owner who may find him?

'The little reed of begetting' is probably the penis; 'Mwini', the Owner, may refer to the name of a territorial spirit or demigod propitiated in the *Musolu* rite for bringing on belated rains and is perhaps connected with the 'water' motif. Incidentally, Ndembu describe semen as 'blood whitened (or purified) by water'. The verb 'to urinate' has the same radical *-tekela* as the noun *matekela*, 'semen'. Moreover, the urine of an apprentice circumciser is one of the ingredients of the *nfunda* medicine. It is clearly implied that the river of whiteness is untainted while the river of blood contains impurities. This difference will emerge more sharply when I present informants' interpretations of the individual colours.

While I was discussing the 'white river' with one informant he treated me to a short disquisition on the Ndembu theory of procreation, referring it directly to the initiation mysteries. 'A child', he said, 'means good luck (*wutooka*, which also means 'whiteness'). For a child gives things in the first place to his father who first begat him. The mother is like a pot only, the body and soul of a child come from the father. But it is *Nzambi*, God, who gives life (*wumi*) to the child.' I asked him why it was, then, that Ndembu traced descent through the mother. He replied, 'A man begets children, but they are the mother's because it is she who suckles and nurses them. A mother feeds a child with her breast; without it the child would die.' Then he cited the proverb: 'The cock begets, but the chickens are the hen's (*kusema kwandemba nyana yachali*).' He went on to point out that breast-milk (*mayeli*) is 'white' too, a 'white stream', and that the *mudyi* tree, dominant symbol of the girls' puberty

rites, is a white symbol because it exudes white latex. Indeed, the primary sense of *mudyi* is breast-milk. Thus the *katooka* or 'white river' is bisexual in significance, representing both semen and milk. White symbols may then stand for both masculine and feminine objects, according to the context or situation, and are not reserved, as in Baumann's account of the Chokwe, for feminine objects.

Finally, at *Mung'ong'i* there is a long song, chanted by novices, the refrain of which runs: '*Yaleyi Nyameya lupemba lufunda antu wafunda nimumi niwayili*', which means literally, 'You the man Nyameya, the big *mpemba* which draws lines on people, you draw lines on the living and those who went (i.e. the dead)'. *Yaleyi* is a somewhat familiar term of address which may be applied to a person of either sex, like the South African English word 'man'. *Nyameya* means literally 'the mother of whiteness' in the Luvale language, but the prefix *nya-*, 'mother of', may be used honorifically of important men, such as chiefs or great hunters, with the flavour of 'one who nourishes'. *Lupemba* is *mpemba* or *pemba* with the additional prefix *lu-* which often denotes size. Nouns in the *lu-* class are commonly inanimate, and include many long articles. But here I am inclined to think that the 'greatness' of '*mpemba*', and of the 'whiteness' it represents, is being stressed. *Ku-funda*, in the Lunda language, means to 'draw lines' with white clay, red clay, or charcoal. When the father or mother of children dies, a line is drawn in white clay from the middle of the chest down to the navel, as a sign that the deceased is desired as a giver of names to his or her descendants. To give someone one's name, for Ndembu, implies a kind of partial reincarnation of certain traits of character or body. When a sterile person dies, however, a line of black is drawn with a stick of charcoal from the navel of the dead person downwards, between the legs and round to the sacrum. This is a sign to the dead not to visit the world of the living again, 'to die forever', as Ndembu say.

The living, too, in many rites are marked with white clay. To take one example, when Ndembu address the spirits of their ancestors at special quick-set shrine trees planted in their honour in the villages, they take white clay, mark the tree with white, then draw one, three, or four lines on the ground from



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the base of the tree towards them, and finally anoint themselves with this *mpemba* beside the orbits, on the temple, and above the navel. The *mpemba* is said to represent a state of good will or good feeling between living and dead. There are held to be 'no secret grudges' (*yitela*) between them, to 'blacken' (*kwiyl-lisha*) their livers (*nyichima*), the seat of the feelings.

### COLOUR CLASSIFICATION IN NGONDE LIFE-CRISIS RITUAL

Other accounts of initiation rites in Central Africa mention many of the elements just described. For example, Lyndon Harries (1944) records several texts among the Ngonde of Southern Tanganyika which discuss the meaning of the colour triad in both male and female initiation. He asked native informants to interpret for him some of the cryptic songs of the seclusion lodge. One explanation ran as follows: 'A woman conceives through the semen of a man. If the man has black semen there will be no bearing of a child. But if he has white semen he will have a child' (p. 19). The esoteric teaching given to the novices includes the displaying by an elder of 'three things symbolic of sexual purity, sexual disease through impurity, and menstruation'. These symbols are white flour, black charcoal, and red *inumbati* medicine respectively. 'The boys are taught by means of these symbols' (p. 23). Incidentally, red *inumbati* medicine is used for 'anointing a newly-born child', and the novices' song 'I want *inumbati* medicine' Harries takes to mean 'I want to bear a child'. *Inumbati* medicine is made from the powdered gum or bark of a *Pterocarpus* tree; the species *Pterocarpus angolensis* plays a major role in Ndembu ritual where it figures as a red symbol. Again, we hear that 'the boys smear themselves with black clay (*cikupi*) so that "they may not be seen by passers-by in the bush"' (p. 16). Blackness, among the Ndembu, is also connected with concealment and darkness. It stands not only for actual but also for symbolic or ritual death among the Ndembu, and it may well have this significance in the Ngonde practice just mentioned.

At girls' puberty rites among the Ngonde, newly initiated girls 'are taken by an older initiated girl to the well. Whenever they

come to a cross-path, this older girl stoops down and draws three lines on the path, one red one with ochre to represent menses, one black one with a piece of charcoal to represent sexual impurity and one white one with cassava flour for sexual purity' (p. 39). Here once more we have a relationship between water, the cross motif, and the colour triad.

Dr Audrey Richards, in *Chisungu*, describes how among the Bemba colour symbolism plays an important role in the girls' puberty rites. Thus the *mbusa* pottery emblems used to instruct the novices in ritual esoterica are 'usually painted with white, black and red' (p. 59). Larger models of unfired clay are decorated with beans, soot, chalk and red camwood dye (p. 60). The red camwood powder 'is the blood', Dr Richards was informed (p. 66). It is rubbed on those who have passed through danger, such as lion-killers or those who have successfully undergone the poison ordeal. Red camwood powder, in some situations, is clearly a male symbol, as when the bridegroom's sisters, stained red, simulate bridegrooms (p. 73). Again, the *mulombwa*, the hardwood tree which exudes a red juice, 'represents the male, the lion, and in some cases the chief' (p. 94). But red among the Bemba, as among the Ndembu, also has feminine connotations, for it represents menstrual blood in many ritual contexts. Among the Bemba white represents the washing away of the menstrual blood (p. 81). All three colours are brought together in the cleansing rite of *ukuya ku mpemba* ('going to whitewash') where the novice is washed and cleansed and her body is covered with whitewash. At the same time a lump of black mud is put cross-shaped on her head and this is decorated with pumpkin seeds and red dye. Meanwhile the following song is sung: 'We make the girls white (like egrets). We make them beautiful . . . they are white now from the stain of blood . . . it is finished now the thing that was red.' This rite marks a definite stage in the puberty ritual (pp. 88-90). In another episode white beads stand for fertility (as indeed they do among the Ndembu) (p. 72).

In his book *Les Rites Secrets des Primitifs de l'Oubangui* (1936), A. M. Vergiat discusses colour symbolism he recorded at the circumcision rites of the Manja (or Mandja) in the following terms (p. 92):

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'Black (in the form of powdered charcoal) is devoted to death. Warriors smear themselves with soot when they leave for war. People in mourning stay dirty, they do not wash any more. Black is a symbol of impurity. The colour white is that of rebirth. It protects from illness. At the end of the rites the initiated boys paint themselves white. These are new men. At the ceremony of the mourning gathering, the relatives of the dead do the same. White purifies. Red is a symbol of life, joy and health. The natives rub themselves with red for dancing and those who are sick pass it frequently over their bodies.'

#### COLOUR CLASSIFICATION AND THE HIGH GOD IN CENTRAL AFRICA

It is needless to multiply such citations; they are there in the literature on African initiation rites for all to read. But it is perhaps worth mentioning that Baumann (1935, p. 12) came across a ritual shelter (*izembi*) – called by him 'zemba' – of the *Mung'ong'i* cult in a Chokwe village north of the upper Kasai, and was told that two large fires burning in it 'are called "Kalunga" (that means God); they reach "up to the sky"'. Thus we find the three colours fairly widely associated with initiations and life-crisis rites, and among the Ndembu and Chokwe at any rate with the High God. Of the three, white seems to be dominant and unitary, red ambivalent, for it is both fecund and 'dangerous', while black is, as it were, the silent partner, the 'shadowy third', in a sense opposed to both white and red, since it represents 'death', 'sterility', and 'impurity'. Yet we shall see that in its full significance black shares certain senses with both white and red, and it is not felt to be wholly malignant. The colours are conceived as rivers of power flowing from a common source in God and permeating the whole world of sensory phenomena with their specific qualities. More than this they are thought to tinge the moral and social life of mankind with their peculiar efficacies, so that it is said, for example, 'this is a good man for he has a white liver', or 'he is evil; his liver is black', when in physical fact a liver is dark red. Although the Ndembu, like many other simple societies, may

be said to have 'an otiose God', nevertheless that God may be considered active in so far as from him stream unceasingly the three principles of being that are symbolized and given visible form in the white-red-black triad. Evidences of these principles or powers are held by Ndembu to be scattered throughout nature in objects of those colours, such as trees with red or white gum, bark, or roots, others with white or black fruit, white kaolin clay or red oxidized earth, black alluvial mud, charcoal, the white sun and moon, the black night, the redness of blood, the whiteness of milk, the dark colour of faeces. Animals and birds acquire ritual significance because their feathers or hides are of these hues. Even human beings, Negroes though they are, are classified as 'white' or 'black' in terms of nuances of pigmentation. There is here an implied moral difference and most people object to being classified as 'black.'

#### THE NDEMBU INTERPRETATION OF THE COLOUR TRIAD

What, then, are the novices taught about the meaning of the triad? I have collected a considerable number of texts from my Ndembu informants on colour symbolism recording what they have learnt, at initiation and in the course of their participation in rites of many kinds, about the significance of the colours. Let me begin by citing the basic senses of each.

##### *White*

Informants agree that white clay (*mpemba* or *mpeza*) and other 'white things' (*yuma yitooka*) stand for 'whiteness' (*witooka*) which is:

1. goodness (*ku-waha*);
2. making strong or healthy (*ku-koleka* or *ku-kolisha*);
3. purity (*Ku-tooka*) [this merely signifies 'to be white' but is contextually recognizable as 'purity'];
4. to lack (or be without) bad luck or misfortune (*ku-bula ku-halwa*);
5. to have power (*kwikala nang'ovu*) [literally 'to be with power'];

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6. to be without death (*ku-bula ku-fwa*) [i.e. not to have death in one's kin-group];
7. to be without tears (*ku-bula madilu*) [as above];
8. chieftainship or authority (*wanta*);
9. (when people meet together with ancestor spirits (*adi-bomba niakishi*);
10. life (*wumi*);
11. health (*ku-handa*);
12. begetting or bringing forth young (*lusemu*);
13. huntsmanship (*Wubinda*);
14. giving (or generosity) (*kwinka*);
15. to remember (*kwanuka*), i.e. one's ancestors with gifts and offerings at their muyombu shrines;
16. to laugh (*ku-seha*) [the mark of friendly sociability];
17. to eat (*ku-dya*) [Ndembu remark that both mother's milk and cassava meal, the main food, are white in colour];
18. to multiply (*ku-seng'uka*) [in the sense of the fertility of humans, animals, and crops];
19. to make visible or reveal (*ku-solola*);
20. to become mature or an elder (*ku-kula*) [Ndembu comment here on the fact that elders have white hair – it is their 'whiteness' becoming 'visible'];
21. to sweep clean (*ku-komba*) [i.e. to rid of impurities];
22. to wash oneself (*ku-wela*) [as above];
23. to be free from ridicule – 'people do not laugh at you because you have done something wrong or foolish.'

#### Red

'Red things (*yuma yachinana*)', say informants, 'are of blood (*mashi*) or of red clay (*ng'ula*).' There are different categories (*nyichidi*) of blood. These are:

1. the blood of animals (*mashi atunyama* or *mashi anyama*) [this stands for huntsmanship (*Wubinda* or *Wuyang'a*)], also for meat (*mbiji*);
2. the blood of parturition, of mothers (*mashi alusemu amama*);
3. the blood of all women (*mashi awambanda ejima*), i.e. menstrual blood (*mbayi* or *kanyanda*);



4. the blood of murder or stabbing or killing (*mashi awubanjji hela kutapana*), the blood shed at circumcision comes under this heading as does the red decoration in the rites to purify a homicide or the slayer of a lion, leopard or buffalo;
5. the blood of witchcraft/sorcery (*mashi awuloji*), for Ndembu witchcraft/sorcery is necrophagous and in anti-witchcraft rites red stands for the blood exposed in such feasts.

'Red things belong to two categories, they act both for good and ill (these), are combined (*Yuma yachinana yakundama kuyedi, yela nikuwaha nukutama, yadibomba*).'

This statement well expresses the ambivalence of the red symbolism.

6. 'Red things have power (*yikweti ng'ovu*); blood is power, for a man, an animal, an insect, or a bird must have blood, or it will die. Wooden figurines (*nkishi*) have no blood and hence cannot breathe, speak, sing, laugh, or chat together – they are only carvings in wood. But if the figurines used by sorcerers (*aloji*) are given blood, they can move about and kill people.'
7. 'Semen (*matekela*) is white (lucky, pure) good blood (*mashi atooka amawahi*). If it is red (or) black, there is no begetting (*neyi achinana eyila kusema nehi*). Red semen is ineffective or impotent (*azeka*), it cannot penetrate fully (*ku-dita*).'

### Black

'Black things include: charcoal (*makala*), river mud (*malowa*), dye from the *mupuchi* and *musamba* trees (*wulombu*, the word now used for "ink"), and the black fruits of the *muneku* tree.

'Blackness (*wuyila*) is:

1. badness or evil (*ku-tama*), bad things (*yuma yatama*);
2. to lack luck, purity, or whiteness (*ku-bula ku-tooka*);
3. to have suffering (*yihung'u*) or misfortune (*malwa*);
4. to have diseases (*yikweti yikatu*);
5. witchcraft/sorcery (*wuloji*), for if your liver is black, you can kill a person, you are bad (*muchima neyi wuneyili wukutwesa kujaha muntru, wunatami dehi*); on the con-

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trary, if your liver is white, you are good, you laugh with your friends, you are strong together, you prop one another up when you would have failed alone;

6. death (*ku-fwa*);
7. sexual desire (*wuwumbi*);
8. night (*wufuku*) or darkness (*mwidima*).

#### *Commentary on the black symbolism*

The inventory of 'black' attributes I have recorded here would inevitably give a false impression of how Ndembu regard this colour were I to omit all reference to the concept of mystical or ritual death and to the related concept of the death of passion and hostility. The Ndembu concept *ku-fwa*, 'death', does not have the note of finality that, despite Christianity, 'death' seems to possess in Western civilization. For the Ndembu 'to die' often means to reach the end of a particular stage of development, to reach the terminus of a cycle of growth. When a person 'dies' he is still active, either as an ancestor spirit who keeps watch over the behaviour of his living kin and manifests himself to them in various modes of affliction, or as partially reincarnated in a kinsman in the sense of reproducing in the latter some of his mental and physical characteristics. Such a person has undergone not merely a change in social status but also a change in mode of existence; here there is no question of annihilation. The term *ku-fwa* also stands for 'fainting', and, indeed, on many occasions Ndembu have told me that they had 'died' and recovered after treatment by a doctor (*chimbuki*). An English idiom which perhaps hits off the Ndembu sense best is 'to have a black-out'. Death is a 'black-out' – a period of powerlessness and passivity between two living states. There is also a connection between the concepts 'death' and 'maturation' (*ku-kula*) among the Ndembu. One tends to grow up by definite stages, each of which is the 'death' of the previous stage, by a series of 'deaths and entrances'. Thus when a girl first menstruates Ndembu say '*wunakuli dehi*', 'she has matured', and the same remark is made at her First Pregnancy rites and when she bears her first child. The connection between *ku-fwa* and *ku-kula* is strikingly illustrated also at the circumcision rites where the site of the operation is termed *ifwilu*, 'the place of

dying', while the place where the boys sit bleeding while they recover from the operation is a long *mukula* log, a red gum tree whose name is derived from *ku-kula*, 'to mature'. 'Through death to maturity' might well be the motto of *Mukanda*, the circumcision rites. The site where a girl lies motionless, covered with a blanket, for a twelve-hour ordeal on the first day of her puberty rites (*Nkang'a*) is also *ifwilu* or *chihung'u*, the place of suffering (see Black Symbolism, item 3,) and the aim of these rites is to endow the novice with sexual maturity.

Black symbolism plays an important, though unobtrusive part, in the boys' circumcision rites. I have already mentioned how certain black symbolic articles constitute important ingredients of *nfunda* medicine. Again, when the novices are returned to their mothers after seclusion, they beat two sticks over their heads while they are carried by their ritual guardians (*yilombola*). These sticks are striped by alternate bands of white and black which, according to informants, stand for 'life and death'. Black symbolism sometimes appears also on the face masks of the *makishi* maskers, who are believed by the boys to emerge from under the ground at the *ifwilu* site. There one sees three horizontal rectangular bands, rather like a small flag. One is white, one red, and one black, white being uppermost and black underneath. These are described as 'very important'. In explanation I was referred to a song of the *Nkula* rites, performed *inter alia* to cure a woman of the frigidity which is preventing her, so Ndembu think, from conceiving a child, and which is associated with such menstrual disorders as menorrhagia and dysmenorrhoea. The song runs:

'You destroy lines (stripes) mongoose, that is your habit which makes you refuse men, you destroy lines.'

(*wakisa nyilenji nkala chaku chey'ochu chiwalekelang'a amayala, wakisa nyilenji.*)

It was then explained that the *nkala* species of mongoose has 'red, white and black stripes down its back'. The song means that 'the woman patient is a bad, useless woman, she has no power (*hawaheta ng'ovuku*) - you are destroying yourself woman; you ought to have babies, you are unworthy (*hawatelelaku*), guilty. You are a frigid woman (*wafwa mwitala*, literally "dead

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in the hut"). The mongoose has stripes, but this woman, although she has been given her privy parts, has kept them useless.' Incidentally, the stub of wood carried at all times during their seclusion by the novices at *Mukanda* and representing their *membrum virile* is also called *nkala*, 'mongoose', and this animal is one of the tabooed foods of the lodge. It would seem to be a bisexual symbol for generative power and to represent the simultaneous action of all three colour principles. What does black mean in their combination, if it does not there mean evil or unlucky things?

There is undoubtedly a connection between the colour black and sexual passion (*wuvumbi*). For example, during seclusion older women take the sooty black bark of certain trees, such as the muddyi tree, and blacken the novice's vulva. This is thought to enhance her sexual attractiveness. Women with very black skins are said by Ndembu men to be very desirable as mistresses, though not as wives. Sexual passion is associated with darkness and secrecy also. Hence black represents that which is hidden (*chakusweka*, *chakujinda*), and is not only hidden, but an object of longing. The Wagnerian notion of a 'love-death', as exemplified in *Tristan und Isolde*, springs to mind here.

But black is also connected with licit love, and in several contexts represents 'marriage'. For example, just after the girl's puberty rites are over, the novice spends the night with her bridegroom (known as *kalemba*). The couple have frequent intercourse and if the bride considers herself satisfied she makes a secret sign of affirmation to her ritual instructress (*nkong'a*), who visits her early in the morning. The latter tiptoes away to collect some *malowa*, black alluvial mud, that she has fetched from a stream the previous evening at sundown and 'kept hidden away from the eyes of men'. Then she scatters a little *malowa* on the threshold of every hut in the village. This was explained to me as follows by an Ndembu informant: 'The *malowa* is a symbol (*chijikijilu*) of love (*nkeng'i*). For a young girl and her husband now love one another. But everyone in the village must connect with that same love. *Malowa* is used also because it is cold from the river. Their marriage must then be peaceful. *Malowa*, though it is black, does not stand for bad luck here, but marital peace or happiness (*wuluwi*).' Here blackness plus

'coldness' appear to represent the cessation of hostility between two intermarrying groups, a hostility previously mimed in the rites. Black can, therefore, sometimes represent the 'death' of an inauspicious or undesirable condition.

#### THE WHITE-BLACK CONTRAST

A brief survey of the senses attributed by informants to 'white' and 'black' respectively indicates that these can mostly be arrayed in a series of antithetical pairs, as for example: goodness/badness; purity/lacking purity; lacking bad luck/lacking luck; lacking misfortune/misfortune; to be without death/death; life/death; health/disease; laughing with one's friends/witchcraft; to make visible/darkness, etc.

This mode of arrangement reveals clearly that when the colours are considered in abstraction from social and ritual contexts Ndembu think of white and black as the supreme antitheses in their scheme of reality. Yet, as we shall see, in rite after rite white and red appear in conjunction and black is seldom directly expressed. In abstraction from actual situations red seems to share the qualities of both white and black. But in action contexts red is regularly paired with white.

#### *The characteristics of the colours white and red*

(a) *Whiteness*. Although each of the ritual colours has a wide fan of referents, nevertheless each has its own distinctive quality, which can be briefly expressed by saying that whiteness is positive, redness ambivalent, and blackness negative. To be 'white' is to be in right relation to the living and the dead. To be in right relation to these is to be whole and hale in oneself. One neither incurs the wrath or envy of others, nor does one feel animosity towards them. Hence one does not fear witchcraft/sorcery, nor is one inwardly tainted by the temptation to practise it. Such a one is admirably equipped to exercise authority (*wanta*), for he will not abuse his power. He will be generous with gifts and hospitality, and magnanimous. He will sweep away 'evil things' from the village or chiefdom in his charge, just as he piously sweeps away dust and impurities from the base of the *muyombu* tree where he makes libation to the



spirits of his ancestors (with the white maize or bullrush millet beer) and invokes their aid on behalf of his people. He will provide food for his people and nourish them with wisdom. For white is, *inter alia*, the symbol of nurture. This quality is 'made visible' (as Ndembu say) in such material forms as breast-milk, semen, and cassava meal. It represents smooth continuity from generation to generation, and is associated with the pleasures of eating, begetting, and suckling. Begetting and feeding are, indeed, processes that are often identified by Ndembu. For example, after a woman is known to be pregnant her husband continues to have intercourse with her for some time 'in order to feed the child' with his semen. The same term *ivumu* is used both for 'stomach' and 'womb', and a woman undergoing a long and difficult labour is often given food 'to strengthen the child'.

Another aspect of the white symbolism is the nature of the relationship between persons that it represents. This is a relationship of feeder and fed. Dominance and subordination are certainly implied by it, mastery and submissiveness, but it is a benevolent dominance and a mild mastery. The senior partner in the relationship gives nourishment and knowledge to the junior. Whiteness expresses the generosity of the dominant partner, and, at the same time, the gratitude of the subordinate. The situation of ancestor veneration brings out these features. The living bring wood, drink, and symbolic food in the form of *mpemba*, the white symbol par excellence, to the ancestor spirits at their shrine-trees, which possess a white wood. Thus at this phase of the proceedings the dead are dependent upon the living. But on the other hand the living are dependent upon the dead for long-term health, happiness, fertility, and good luck in hunting, for the ancestors are believed to have power to withhold these blessings and 'to tie up' (*ku-kasila*) the fertility and huntsmanship (*wubinda*) of their living kin, if the latter neglect to make offerings to them. Furthermore, to get a hearing from the ancestors the whole congregation, the core of which consists of the matrilineal kin of the ancestors, should by rights be at peace and in agreement with one another. This harmony between living and dead and among the living is represented by white marks on the *muyombu* tree, white lines between tree and

invoker, white marks on the invoker and finally on the other members of the congregation. Once the circuit of whiteness is established, as it were, material nourishment and benefits and invisible virtues are believed to flow through the whole group including its deceased members.

Whiteness not only has the note of social cohesion and continuity, but also stands for that which can be seen by the eye, what is open, and unconcealed. Ndembu morality is essentially corporate; the private is the suspect, probably the dangerous, possibly the deadly. Persons who eat or work alone, such as certain chiefs and great hunters, are always suspected of possessing sorcery powers. In a society living at bare subsistence level, all must be seen to pull their weight, to share goods and services fairly. Persistent selfishness may actually imperil the survival of the group, and must therefore be condemned. It is recognized that a person may live most of his life in full public view and yet have secret reservations about assisting his fellows. He may cherish grudges and nurse ambitions. Such a person, I have shown in a Rhodes-Livingstone Paper on Ndembu divination (Turner, 1961, pp. 61-62), if exposed by divination, is regarded as a sorcerer. Whiteness is thus the light of public knowledge, of open recognition. In fact, it represents daylight, and both sun and moon are said to be its 'symbols' (*yjikijilu*), contrary to what Baumann records of the Chokwe who, he says, regard white as 'the colour of moonlight' and red as 'having connections with the sun' (1935, p. 40). Sun and moon are also regarded as symbols of God (*Nzambi*) and once more we come back to the notion that whiteness, more than any other colour, represents the divinity as essence and source, as well as sustentation. But whiteness as light streaming forth from the divinity has, in the sense we are considering here, a quality of trustworthiness and veracity, for Ndembu believe that what is clearly seen can be accepted as a valid ground of knowledge.

White is also the unsullied and unpolluted. This quality of freedom from defilement may have either a moral or a ritual character. Thus I have heard an African storekeeper expostulate, when he was accused by his employer of embezzlement, 'My liver is white', much as an Englishman would say, 'My con-

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science is clear'. On the other hand, there are certain ritually polluting states or statuses. Thus an uncircumcised boy is known as *wunabulakutooka*, 'one who lacks purity or whiteness', and he may not eat food cooked in the same pot as an adult man's meal. If he did so, it is believed that the various mystical powers acquired by a man as a result of having undergone many rites, such as the power to slaughter game, would lose their efficacy. It is believed that the 'dirt under the foreskin' (*wanza* - regularly used as a term of abuse) of an uncircumcised boy is defiling in the extreme, regardless of his moral qualities as an individual. Water is regarded as 'white' because it cleanses the body from dirt, but more especially because washing symbolizes the removal of impurities inherent in a biological condition or social status which one is now leaving behind. For example, novices at both boys' and girls' initiations are thoroughly washed just before they return to society after the period of seclusion. At the end of the funerary rites a widow or widower is washed, anointed with oil, shaved around the hair line, given a new white cloth, and adorned with white beads, a series of acts which illustrate the close connection between washing and white symbolism. What is being washed off in these life-crisis rites is the state of ritual death, the 'liminal' condition, between two periods of active social life. Whiteness or 'purity' is hence in some respects identical with the legitimate incumbency of a socially recognized status. To behave in a way that transgresses the norms of *that status*, however innocuous that behaviour might be for the incumbent of another status, constitutes impurity. It is particularly impure to behave regressively, i.e. in terms of the norms of a status occupied earlier in the individual life-cycle. This is because the successive stages of life are felt to represent an ascent from the impurity of the uncircumcised to the purity of the aged in the case of men, and from the impurity of a menstruating maiden, through the increasing purity of the mother of many children, to the postmenopausal status of *kashinakaii*, the venerable leader of the village women. Ancestor-hood is purer still and albinos are regarded as peculiarly propitious beings because they have 'the whiteness of ancestor spirits' (*wutooka wawakishi*).

Behind the symbolism of whiteness, then, lie the notions of

harmony, continuity, purity, the manifest, the public, the appropriate, and the legitimate.

(b) *Redness*. But what are we to make of the red symbolism which, in its archetypal form in the initiation rites, is represented by the intersection of two 'rivers of blood'? This duality, this ambivalence, this simultaneous possession of two contrary values or qualities, is quite characteristic of redness in the Ndembu view. As they say: 'Redness acts both for good and ill.' Thus while it is good to combine the blood of the mother with that of the father it is bad to practise necrophagous witchcraft. Both the blood of childbirth and the blood relished by witches are represented by red oxidized clay or earth (*mukundu, ng'ula*). Red is peculiarly the colour of blood or flesh, the carnal colour. Hence it is redolent of the aggressiveness and pangs of carnality. It stands for the killing and cutting up of animals and for the pains of labour. There is something impure, too, about redness. A homicide has to be purified from the stain of the blood he has shed, though he is entitled to wear the red feather of Livingstone's lourie (*nduwa*) after the purification rites on subsequent ritual occasions. Red stands also for the menstruation of women in such rites as, for example, *Nkula*, a term which is sometimes used as a synonym for menstruation. The common term for menstrual discharge is *mbayi*, which may be connected with *ku-baya*, 'to be guilty', though *kanyanda* is often employed. *Kasheta* represents a menstrual period, but the circumlocution *ku-kiluka kwitala dikwawu*, 'to jump to the other hut', is quite commonly heard. For until recently each village had at least one grass hut near the edge of the bush, in which women stayed during their periods. Here they prepared their own food. They were forbidden to cook for their husbands and children or eat food with them during this time. Another woman of the village would undertake these offices for them during their absence. The blood of menstruation and murder is, therefore, 'bad' blood, and is connected by Ndembu with blackness.<sup>2</sup> But the blood shed by a hunter and offered at the graves and shrines of hunter ancestors is reckoned to be 'good' blood, and is associated ritually with white symbolism. Most rites of the hunters' cult are characterized by conjunction of white and red symbols.

There appears to be some correlation of the male role with the

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taking of life and of the female role with the giving of life, though both activities remain under the rubric of redness. Man kills, woman gives birth, and both processes are associated with the symbolism of blood.

Semen, as we have noted above, is blood 'purified by water'. The father's contribution to the child is, therefore, free from the impurity that invests female blood. And since whiteness is particularly closely associated with the ancestor spirits and with *Nzambi*, the High God, it might be said that the 'father's blood' is more 'spiritual' and less 'carnal' than the mother's blood. This greater purity is probably linked with the universal Ndembu belief that father-and-child is the one relationship completely free from the taint of witchcraft/sorcery. Mother-and-child, on the contrary, is far from free from this taint, and witches are thought to kill their own infants to provide 'meat' for the coven. Again, while a person has a strong jural bond to his maternal kin, he is considered by Ndembu to owe to his father and his father's kin important elements of his personality. For it is his father who has recourse to divination to find a name for him shortly after his birth, and it is from his father's deceased kin that he usually obtains it. It is believed that certain traits of character and physique of the name-giving spirit are reincarnated in the child. Again, the father plays an important role at *Mukanda*, the boys' circumcision rites, in providing care, instruction, and protection (against the carelessness of circumcisers) for his son during seclusion, while the mother is excluded from the lodge altogether. I mention these practices and beliefs to stress the 'pure' nature of the father-child tie. It is well-known among Ndembu that relationships between matrilineal kin are often strained, since competition is likely to develop between them over matters of inheritance and succession. Competition in kinship relations in African tribal society tends in the long run to give rise to accusations of sorcery and witchcraft, and sorcerers and witches, in Ndembu theory, are people 'with black livers' who lust after 'red human flesh' and harbour 'grudges' (*yitela*) which are classed among 'black things'. Thus while harmony lies on the 'white' father's side, competition lies on the 'red' mother's side (cf. Beidelman, 1961, pp. 253-254) - at least on the level of values if not of facts.



*White and red as a binary system*

This discussion of the sex-linking of white and red in the Ndembu theory of procreation leads inevitably to a consideration of these colours as a pair, as a binary system. For black is very often the neglected member of the triad. There are a number of reasons for this. In the first place, Ndembu regard symbols as articles or actions which 'make visible' or bring into play the powers inhering in the objects they signify.<sup>3</sup> Thus to employ a black symbol would be to evoke death, sterility, and witchcraft. Those contexts in which black is displayed openly, for instance the black and white striped sticks in *Mukanda* and the black band on the *ikishi* mask, usually refer to ritual death and are closely connected with the opposite notion of regeneration. When black symbols are used, as in the case of *malowa*, the black alluvial earth, they tend to be swiftly buried or hidden from view. *Malowa*, for example, is in several kinds of rites (*Kayong'u*, *Chihamba*, *Wubwang'u*) to propitiate ancestor spirits either plastered round the base of ritual objects, such as tree shrines, or buried under symbols of illness, 'to make them cool', i.e. to bring about the death of the 'hot' and hence mystically dangerous aspects of the affliction. It is alleged that sorcerers make use of materials considered 'black' and 'impure' such as the faeces of their intended victims, cindered foreskins stolen from circumcisers and the like, as ingredients of death-dealing 'medicine' (*wang'a*). But this very allegation illustrates how closely black symbolism is connected with socially undesirable behaviour or with the privation of life and goodness. It is the extinction, whether willed or otherwise, of everything that moves, breathes, and has self-determination.

White and red, on the contrary, are associated with activity. Both are considered 'to have power'. Blood, the main denotation of 'redness', is even identified with 'power' (p. 14). White, too, stands for life-fluids; it represents milk and semen. Black, on the contrary, stands for body leavings, body dirt, and the fluids of putrefaction and for the products of katabolism. There is, however, an important difference between white and red, for the former represents the preservation and continuance of life, whereas the latter may represent the taking of life, and even where, as in the case of certain red symbols, such as the *mukula*

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tree, it represents continuity through parturition, it still has a note of danger and discontinuity. Killing is an activity of the living, giving birth is also such an activity. Hence, red, like white, falls under the general rubric of 'life'. When it is associated with purity, we may think of red as blood shed for the communal good. Red may be tintured with white in Ndembu thinking, as in the case of normal semen, 'blood whitened by water', or with black, as in the case of an impotent man's semen, 'dead semen' (see p. 15). Now where a twofold classification of things as 'white' or 'red' develops, with black either absent or hidden, it sometimes happens that red acquires many of the negative and undesirable attributes of blackness, without retaining its better ones. It is, of course, of the essence of polarity that contrary qualities are assigned to the poles. Therefore, when the threefold colour classification yields to a twofold classification, we find red becoming, not only the complement, but also in some contexts, the antithesis of white. It might be apposite here to cite A. B. Kempe, the symbolic logician, who wrote: 'It is characteristically human to think in terms of dyadic relations: we habitually break up a triadic relation into a pair of dyads. In fact so ingrained is this disposition that some will object that a triadic relation is a pair of dyads. It would be exactly as logical to maintain that all dyadic relations are triads with a null member.' Thus in cases where white and red are regarded as complementary, rather than as antithetical pairs, we may very probably be dealing with a triadic relation of which black is the 'null member'. Since it is difficult, owing to Ndembu ideas about the nature of representation, to represent black visibly without evoking its inauspicious power, its absence from view may not necessarily mean its absence from thought. Indeed, its very absence may be significant since it is the true emblem of the hidden, the secret, the dark, the unknown - and perhaps also of potentiality as opposed to actuality. White and red, paired under the various aspects of male and female, peace and war, milk and flesh, semen and blood, are jointly 'life' (*wumi*); both are opposed to black as death and negativity.

SOME COMPARATIVE DATA

Since I have had little opportunity to comb through the literature systematically, what follows must necessarily be somewhat haphazard. I begin this comparative survey with ethnographic data on contemporary primitives, grouping them in broad regions.

*Africa*

M. Griaule (1950, pp. 58-81) describes the relationship among the Dogon of West Africa between a cosmological myth, masks, statuettes, ritual, rupestral painting and the colour rubrics, white, red, and black. Here black is associated with pollution, red with the menstrual blood of the Earth Mother who committed incest with her first-born, the Jackal, and white with purity. A large wooden image of a serpent, representing death and rebirth, is consecrated by blood sacrifices and decorated with these colours. Young male initiands wear masks coloured with white, black, and red. Wall paintings used in the rites are renewed with pigments of these hues. Red is also associated with the sun and fire.

Arthur Leib (1946, pp. 128-133) summarizes what he calls 'the mythical significance' of colours among the peoples of Madagascar as follows: 'With *black*, words like the following are associated: inferior, unpleasant, evil, suspicious, disagreeable, undesirable. With *white*: light, hope, joy, purity. With *red*: power, might, wealth.'

I have mentioned the ambivalence of black symbolism among the Ndembu. Black alluvial clay (*malowa*) is a symbol of fertility and marital love. Now, in many African societies black has auspicious connotations. Among the Shona of S. Rhodesia black represents *inter alia* the rain-bearing clouds which usher in the wet season, and sacrifices to spirit-guardians who send rain are made in black cattle, goats, or fowls while the spirit-mediums or priests wear black cloth. Thus in contiguous Bantu societies black may represent sterility in one and fertility in the other. According to Huntingford (1953a, p. 52) a black bullock is slaughtered over the grave of a rainmaker among the Kuku of Bari stock, while at the rainmaking ceremonies of the Lokoya a

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black goat is killed and the contents of its stomach smeared on the stones at the grave of the rainmaker's father. It is Huntingford, too, who informs us that among the Sandawe of Tanganyika 'priests (or diviners) are also rainmakers and offer sacrifices of black oxen, goats and sheep to bring rain' (Huntingford, 1953b, p. 138).

The Sandawe have often been alleged to have affinities with the Bushmen. Thus it is interesting to find that among the latter, according to Bleek and Lloyd (1911), a lustrous black powder made of pounded specularite, and known as *//hara* by the Cape Bushmen was used as body decoration and hair-dressing and appears to have been attributed with magical qualities. Thus, to quote one of Bleek's texts:

'They anoint their heads with *//hara* very nicely, while they wish that their head's hair may descend (i.e. grow long)' And it becomes abundant because of *//hara*; because they have anointed their heads, wishing that the hair may grow downwards, that their heads may become black with blackness . . . *//hara* sparkles; therefore our heads shimmer on account of it. . . . Therefore, the Bushmen are wont to say . . . "That man, he is a handsome young man, on account of his head, which is surpassingly beautiful with the *//hara's* blackness"' (p. 375, p. 377).

It is worth noting, in anticipation, that specularite (specular iron) was apparently 'an often sought after medium for paint in the Later Stone Age in the Cape, judging by the pieces that are found in the occupation sites' (Clark, 1959, p. 244). My own hypothesis is that black tends to become an auspicious colour in regions where water is short, for the black clouds bring fertility and growth (apparently of hair, as well as plants!). In regions where water is plentiful and food more or less abundant black may well be inauspicious. Thus it is not only among the Forest Bantu and Malagasy peoples that we find black to be inauspicious. For example, in a recent article Joan Wescott (1962, p. 346) writes: 'Black is associated (by the Yoruba) with the night and the night is associated . . . with evil. It is at night that sorcery and witchcraft are abroad and men are most

vulnerable. Some Yoruba say simply that Elegba (the Trickster deity) is painted black because of his wickedness.'

### *Malay Peninsula*

The Bushmen employ all three colours ritually. So also do the Semang, Sakai, and Jakun of the Malay Peninsula. Like the Bushman these peoples are hunters and gatherers. Skeat and Blagden (1906, p. 31) write that the Sakai paint their bodies in 'black, white, red, and occasionally yellow, which last two appear to be of equivalent value from a magical point of view' – incidentally just as they are among the Ndembu. When children are born among the Sakai the midwife applies stripes of pigment from the eyebrows to the tip of the nose, black in the case of girls, red in that of boys (p. 48). The black nose line is said to be for the protection of women against 'the Blood Demon' (Hantu Darah) which stops a woman's courses, and so prevents her bringing healthy children into the world. White is generally an auspicious colour, among the Sakai and other Malay peoples.

### *Australia*

Charles P. Mountford (1962, p. 215) mentions that all three colours are used in the cave art of the Australian aborigines – black in the form of manganese oxide or one of the ferruginous ores, white from pipe-clay or kaolin deposits, and red ochre which may be secured by mining and trade – indeed men will travel a hundred miles or more to collect these ochres from special localities (such as Wilgamia in W. Australia and Blinman in the North Flinders Ranges of South Australia) (p. 210).

Mountford describes how white and red pigments are used in the cave paintings of the Wandjinas – tall mouthless figures with a halo-like design around their faces – sometimes these may be eighteen feet high. The face is always in white and surrounded by one, sometimes two, horseshoe-shaped bows which, in some examples, have lines radiating from them. These are usually in red. 'The aborigines believe,' says Mountford, 'that the paintings are filled with the essence of both water and blood; the water, so necessary for all living things, is symbolized by the white face and the blood, which makes men and animals strong, by the red ochre bows.' Note once more the close affinity



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with Ndembu exegesis of white and red. Water is 'white' for Ndembu, and blood of course is 'red'.

### *North American Indian*

My last example from ethnographic sources is drawn from the New World, from Mooney's *Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* (quoted by Lewis Spence in his article on the Cherokees in *Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*). Mooney shows how, among the Cherokees, white represents peace, happiness and the south, red is equated with success, triumph, and the north, black with death and the west, and blue with defeat, trouble and the north. These senses probably indicate that, as in parts of Africa, blue is felt to have affinities with black. Certain Cherokee divinities and spirits corresponded in colour to the characteristics imputed to them. White and red spirits were usually regarded, when combined, as those from whom emanated the blessings of peace and health. The black spirits were invoked to slay an enemy. It is interesting to recall here how white and red in Ndembu ritual are used to betoken powers which may be combined for the benefit of the subject of the rites (e.g. in hunting and gynaecological ritual), while black is the colour of sorcery or witchcraft.

### *The Ancient World*

Perhaps the most sophisticated exegesis of the colour triad and the most elaborate working out of its implications is to be found in the Chhândogya Upanishad of ancient Hinduism and in the commentary by Śri Śankārachārya, the great eighth-century philosopher. Swami Nikhilinanda has recently translated the Upanishads and supplied notes based on Śankārachārya's explanations. I shall quote a few passages from the Chhândogya Upanishad, VI, iv, 1, and follow each text with Nikhilinanda's notes:

"The red colour of (gross) fire is the colour of (the original fire); the white colour of (gross) fire is the colour of (the original) water (remember here the Ndembu and Aboriginal usages); the black colour of (gross) fire is the colour of (the original earth). Thus vanishes from fire what is commonly

called fire, the modification being only a name, arising from speech, while the three colours (forms) alone are true.'

*Commentary*

'The three colours, or forms, constitute the visible fire. When these three colours are explained as belonging to the original fire, water, and earth, fire as it is commonly known disappears, and also the word "fire". For fire has no existence apart from a word and the idea denoted by that word. Therefore what the ignorant denote by the word "fire" is false, *the only truth being the three colours*' (my italics).

'The whole world is tripartite. Therefore, as in the case of fire (or in the cases of sun, moon, lightning, etc.) the only truth about the world is the three colours. Earth being only an effect of water, the only truth is water; earth is a mere name. So, too, water, being an effect of fire, is a mere name, the only truth being fire. Fire, too, being an effect of *Sat* or Pure Being, is a mere name, the only truth being Pure Being.'

In this Upanishad the colours are sometimes known as 'deities'. Examples are given of the way in which they manifest themselves in phenomena. Thus 'food when eaten becomes threefold (VI, v. 1). What is coarsest in it (the black part) becomes faeces, what is medium (the red part) becomes flesh, and what is subtlest (the white part) becomes mind'.

Also, 'water when drunk becomes threefold. What is coarsest in it (or black) becomes urine, what is medium (or red), becomes blood and what is subtlest (or white) becomes *prana* (= the vital breath which sustains life in a physical body or the primal energy or force, of which other forces are manifestations).'

The three colours appear to be identical with the *gunas* or 'strands' of existence (a metaphor from weaving) found in the Samkya-Karika, a work attributed to the sage Kapila. These are described by R. C. Zaehner (1962, p. 91) as 'permeating every corner of Nature's being (*praktri*)'. 'These three' are called *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* which can be literally translated as 'the quality of being, energy and darkness'. *Sattva* is the quality of purity and tranquillity (and may be equated with white); *rajas* is the active principle which initiates *karma* (and may be equated with red), while *tamas* is 'constrictive, obstructive, and

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conducive to lethargic apathy (and may be equated with black)'. Zaehner quotes from Book 4, Chapter 5 of the great epic of the *Mahabharata* some verses which throw further light on the relationship between the *gunas* and the colours:

'With the one unborn Female, white, red, and black ("symbolizing the three *gunas*", as Zaehner writes) who produces many creatures like herself.

Lies the one unborn Male, taking his delight: another unborn Male leaves her when she has had her pleasure of him'.

It would seem probable that the notion of the colours is an inheritance from a remote (perhaps pre-Indo-European) past and that the Upanishadic texts are the speculations of a later philosophy on this primordial deposit.

It is again worth recalling at this point that the three colours or forms, in ancient Hinduism, are ultimately reducible to a single nature or being, to *Sat* or *Praktri*, for the Ndembu notion that the 'three rivers' of colour flow from Deity is not dissimilar. We find again in both cultures the notion that white is connected with purity and peace, and is the 'subtlest' or most 'spiritual' of the colours.

Much the same range of senses seems to be possessed by white in Semitic religions, for Robertson Smith records of the Arabs (1912, pp. 590, 583) that when a man disgraces himself by a breach of traditional custom or etiquette *his face becomes black*, whereas when he restores the omission, or makes up a quarrel, it again *becomes white*. There are also similarities between the senses of red in Hindu and Semitic cultures. Thus the common Hebrew word for passion (*quin'ah*) is derived from a verbal root which means primarily 'to be crimson'. And *rajas*, the second, 'red' 'strand' is often translated as 'passion' by English and American scholars. Maurice Farbridge (*Hastings Encyclopaedia*) writes that for the Old Testament Hebrews, 'red, as the colour of blood, represented bloodshed, war & guilt'.

#### THE THREE COLOURS IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL LITERATURE

In Africa many finds from the Stone Age from widely separated parts of Africa attest to the use of white, red, and black in ritual

contexts. To pick a few at random: Roger Summers (1958, p. 295) excavated a shelter at Chitura Rocks in Inyanga District on the eastern border of Southern Rhodesia and found in association with Stillbay artifacts of the Middle Stone Age at the back of the shelter numerous small lumps of red ochre mixed with similar sized pieces of charcoal. Leakey (1931, p. 109) discovered in Gamble's Cave II at Elmenteita in Kenya several skeletons buried in the ultra-contracted position, males lying on the right side, females on the left, and all were freely sprinkled with red ochre. These skeletons resembled the Oldoway skeleton discovered in 1913 in Northern Tanganyika. Men of this type have been found in association with Chellean and even pre-Chelles-Acheul cultures with pebble choppers and flake tools.

Van Riet Lowe (quoted by Desmond Clark, 1959, p. 249) describes Later Stone Age Bushman burials at Smithfield in the Orange Free State in the following terms: 'An inverted half of an ostrich eggshell lay beneath the arms of the flexed skeleton, coated internally with (black) specularite (which, you will recall, is still used by Bushmen as a hair decoration) and externally with red ochre.' At Wilton in the Southern Region, Clark mentions that there were almost invariably a number of grave-stones, some of which were grindstones, some covered in ochre or even painted. The body was 'liberally covered with red ochre as were some of the grave goods'.

White, too, is used in early African rupestral art. For example, C. K. Cooke, writing of the prehistoric artist's materials and techniques in Southern Matabeleland (in Clark, 1957, p. 284) describes how bird droppings (still called *mpemba*, 'white clay', by Ndembu), vegetable substances, and kaolin are used in the manufacture of white pigments for cave and rock paintings.

In this paper I have no time to discuss the rich literature on burial practices and cave art in the European Palaeolithic. But it again seems clear that the colour triad white-red-black is always prominent, though other colours, such as yellows and browns are also used. Archaeologists are still undecided as to the significance of the colours. Their views may perhaps be typified by Annette Laming's (1959, p. 112) comments on the Lascaux cave paintings:

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'The colours vary from group to group: sometimes one colour seems to have been more in favour than another. These preferences may have been due to the need for an economical use of some raw material which was particularly prized and difficult to obtain; or they may have been inspired by religious faith – by the belief in the greater efficacy of a certain red, or a particularly intense black, for example; or they may have been merely the result of a change in aesthetic taste.'

The hypothesis I am putting forward here is that magico-religious ideas of a certain kind were responsible for the selection of the basic colour triad and for the assiduity with which its constituent colours were sought or prepared. It is not the rarity of the pigments that makes them prized but the fact that they are prized for magico-religious reasons that makes men overcome all kinds of difficulties to obtain or manufacture them. I could cite much evidence to demonstrate the quite extraordinary lengths to which some societies will go to get red or black or white pigments. Sometimes to prepare a pure colour many ingredients are used, some of them probably with ritual intent. Thus, to make white paint for Dogon masks, limestone powder is mixed with cooked rice and the excrement of lizards or large snakes – the masks are used in rites connected with a mythical serpent. Among the Luluba, a Northern Nilo-Hamitic people, there is a big trade in a red ochreous substance made from biotite gneiss, which is powdered, buried for two months, and then after several processes roasted, when it can be mixed with simsim oil. Even black pigment may involve some degree of complexity in manufacture, as among the Dogon where it is obtained from the burnt seeds of *Vitex pachyphylla*, whose ashes are mixed with a tannin decoction. There are frequent records, both in prehistoric and in contemporary pre-industrial societies, of long trading expeditions being made to obtain red ochres.

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BASIC COLOUR TRIAD

In the ethnographic literature it is noteworthy that among societies that make ritual use of all three colours the critical situation in which these appear together is initiation. Each may



appear separately as a sign of the general character of a rite; thus red may be a persistent motif in hunting rites among the Ndembu, and white in rites dealing with lactation or village ancestral shades. But at the initiation of juniors into the rights and duties and values of seniors all three colours receive equal emphasis. In my view this is because they epitomize the main kinds of universal-human organic experience. In many societies these colours have explicit reference to certain fluids, secretions or waste-products of the human body. Thus red is universally a symbol of blood, white is frequently a symbol of breast-milk and semen (and sometimes of pus), while, as we have seen, the Chhāndogya Upanishad relates the black colour with faeces and urine (though other cultures connect urine with semen and both with whiteness). Each of the colours in all societies is multivocal, having a wide fan of connotations, but nevertheless the human physiological component is seldom absent wherever reliable native exegesis is available. Initiation rites often draw their symbolism from the situation of parturition and first lactation, where, in nature, blood, water, faeces, and milk are present.

I am going to throw caution to the winds for the sake of stimulating controversy and state boldly that:

1. Among the earliest symbols produced by man are the three colours representing products of the human body whose emission, spilling, or production is associated with a heightening of emotion – in other words, culture, the super-organic, has an intimate connection with the organic in its early stages, with the awareness of powerful physical experiences.

2. These heightened bodily experiences are felt to be informed with a power in excess of that averagely possessed by the individual; its source may be located in the cosmos or in society; analogues of physical experience may then be found wherever the same colours occur in nature; or else experience of social relations in heightened emotional circumstances may be *classified* under a colour rubric.

3. The colours represent heightened physical experience transcending the experiencer's normal condition – they are therefore conceived as 'deities' (Hindu) or mystical powers, as the sacred over against the profane.

4. The physical experiences associated with the three colours

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are also experiences of social relationships: thus white = semen is linked to mating between man and woman; white = milk is linked to the mother-child tie; red = maternal blood is linked to the mother-child tie and also the processes of group recruitment and social placement, red = bloodshed is connected with war, feud, conflict, social discontinuities, red = obtaining and preparation of animal food = status of hunter or herder, male productive role in the sexual division of labour, etc., red = transmission of blood from generation to generation = an index of membership in a corporate group; black = excreta or bodily dissolution = transition from one social status to another viewed as mystical death, black = rainclouds or fertile earth = unity of widest recognized group sharing same life-values.

5. While it is possible to find many references to bodily fluids in white and red symbolism, few societies specifically connect black with processes and products of katabolism and decay e.g. with decayed or clotted blood. It is possible that black which, as we have seen, often means 'death' or a 'fainting fit' or 'sleep' or 'darkness' primarily represents falling into unconsciousness, the experience of a 'black-out'. Among Ndembu, and in many other societies, both white and red may stand for life. When they are paired in ritual, white may stand for one alleged polarity of life, such as masculinity or vegetable food, while red may represent its opposite, such as femininity or meat. Or white may represent 'peace' and red 'war'; both are conscious activities as distinct from black which stands for inactivity and the cessation of consciousness.

6. Not only do the three colours stand for basic human experiences of the body (associated with the gratification of libido, hunger, aggressive, and excretory drives and with fear, anxiety, and submissiveness), they also provide a kind of primordial classification of reality. This view is in contrast to Durkheim's notion that the social relations of mankind are not based on the logical relations of things but have served as the prototypes of the latter. Nor has society, Durkheim argues, been merely the model on which the classifying thought has wrought: the framework of society has been the very framework of the system of things. Men were themselves first grouped. For that reason they could think under the form of groups. The centre

of the earliest system of nature is not the individual: it is the society. Against this I would postulate that the human organism and its crucial experiences are the *fons et origo* of all classifications. Human biology demands certain intense experiences of relationship. If men and women are to beget and bear, suckle, and dispose of physical wastes they must enter into relationships – relationships which are suffused with the affective glow of the experiences. These are the very processes which the Ndembu call 'rivers' – they stream from man's inner nature. The colour triad white-red-black represents the archetypal man as a pleasure-pain process. The perception of these colours and of triadic and dyadic relations in the cosmos and in society, either directly or metaphorically, is a derivative of primordial psychobiological experience – experience which can be fully attained only in human mutuality. It needs two to copulate, two to suckle and wean, two to fight and kill (Cain and Abel), and three to form a family. The multitude of interlaced classifications which make up ideological systems controlling social relationships are derivatives, divested of affectual accompaniments, of these primordial twos and threes. The basic three are sacred because they have the power 'to carry the man away', to overthrow his normal powers of resistance. Though immanent in his body they appear to transcend his consciousness. By representing these 'forces' or 'strands of life' by colour symbols in a ritual context, men may have felt that they could domesticate or control these forces for social ends. But the forces and the symbols for them are biologically, psychologically, and logically prior to social classifications by moieties, clans, sex totems, and all the rest. Since the experiences which the three colours represent are common to all mankind we do not have to invoke diffusion to explain their wide distribution. We do have to invoke diffusion to explain why other colours, such as yellow, saffron, gold, blue, green, purple, etc., are ritually important in certain cultures. And we must also look to processes of culture contact to explain differences in the senses attributed to the basic colours in different regions. The point I am trying to make here is that the three colours white-red-black for the simpler societies are not merely differences in the visual perception of parts of the spectrum: they are abridgements or con-

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densations of whole realms of psychobiological experience involving the reason and all the senses and concerned with primary group relationships. It is only by subsequent abstraction from these configurations that the other modes of social classification employed by mankind arose.

### NOTES

1. It is interesting to note that the art of iron-working is an exclusively masculine occupation and the use of the axe in bush-clearing is restricted to males. On the other hand, by far the greatest number of woodcarvings are of the female body.
2. Witches' familiars, called *tuyebela*, *andumba*, or *tushipa*, are commonly supposed to be kept in the menstruation hut.
3. A point I have discussed at length elsewhere, e.g. in *Ndembu Divination* (1961, p. 4).

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