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THE LEFT HAND OF THE MUGWE: AN ANALYTICAL NOTE ON THE STRUCTURE OF MERU SYMBOLISM

RODNEY NEEDHAM

I

IN his admirable study of the Mugwe, a religious dignitary among the Meru of Kenya, Bernardi reports a singular fact which raises a problem of comparative and theoretical interest: viz. that the left hand of the Mugwe possesses and symbolizes his ritual power. The issue is best seen, to begin with, in the following passage:

Among the Imenti [a sub-tribe] an unusual aspect of the people's conception of the Mugwe concerns his left hand. It is this hand . . . that should always hold the *kiragu* [insignia] and be used only to bless. It is a most sacred member of the Mugwe's body and no one is allowed to see it. During the day, the Mugwe spends his time playing *kiothi*, the Meru draughts, but even while he plays, he must always keep his left hand covered and no one must see it. Sudden death would overtake anyone who dared to look at the left hand of the Mugwe.¹

Neither in this place, nor in any other of the references to this hand, does Bernardi offer an explanation. The object of this note is to suggest a possible answer.

That the position of the left hand of the Mugwe does raise a problem hardly needs demonstration. Hertz showed fifty years ago the universality of a symbolic differentiation of right and left, and examined in his classic paper² the grounds for the pre-eminence of the right; and Wile has brought together in his work on handedness³ an overwhelming amount of evidence on the distinction of the sides and the practically universal privilege of the right. These two works alone show that in every quarter of the world it is the right hand, and not the left, which is predominant; and this is so whether in the great civilizations of China and India, or among the most primitive and isolated peoples known. The issue can be studied in such varied fields as the Homeric poems, alchemy, and thirteenth-century French religious art, in Hindu iconography, classical Chinese state ceremonies, emblem books and bestiaries, as well as in Maori ritual, Bornean divination, and the myths of the most disparate cultures. This differentiation and opposition of right and left is the very type of symbolic classification, and its logical simplicity and universal distribution make it a fundamental concern in the social anthropologist's study of symbolism. If, then, we are clearly told by a reliable authority that the *left* hand of a certain personage is sacred and used exclusively for his religious functions, we have every reason to be surprised and to look for an explanation.

¹ B. Bernardi, *The Mugwe, a Failing Prophet*, London, 1959, p. 74.

² Robert Hertz, 'La Prééminence de la main droite: étude sur la polarité religieuse', *Revue Philologique*, vol. lxxviii, 1909, pp. 553-80. Also in English translation by R. and C. Needham, in *Death and The*

Right Hand, London (1960).

³ Ira S. Wile, *Handedness: Right and Left*, Boston, Mass., 1934. (I am indebted to Professor E. Adamson Hoebel for my acquaintance with this useful compilation.)

Let me begin by compounding the remaining evidences in Bernardi's monograph relating specifically to the left hand of the Mugwe. Enemies try to strike the left hand of the Mugwe of the Imenti 'because it was said to hold the power of the Mugwe'; the *kiragu*, insignia of power, the things by which the Mugwe is made to be the Mugwe, are held in his left hand, and for this reason the Mugwe of the Imenti keeps his left hand always under cover of his mantle; a very special power in connexion with his blessings is popularly attributed to his left hand, and anyone going to him is advised above all never to look at this hand; in it the Mugwe holds the power of his blessing; it is enough for him to lift his left hand in order to stop any enemy attacking his people; it is a source of great awe; respect and fear are felt for this hand, and no one may look on it without dying.¹

The facts are thus quite clear. The most valuable relate to the Imenti sub-tribe, but I draw whatever usable evidence I can from other sub-tribes also, and my interpretation should essentially apply to the Meru in general. It would be inappropriate for me, as an orientalist, to introduce ethnographic or cultural considerations by pursuing a comparative study of the matter in other Bantu societies, and I base my analysis entirely on the evidence presented by Bernardi in his monograph. The theoretical problem is one which may properly be tackled by any social anthropologist, whatever the area of his special competence, but I should nevertheless feel hesitant about advancing my interpretation if it were not for the fact that any proposed answer is readily testable by Africanists and by persons in Africa in close touch with the Meru. What I present, therefore, is not merely a speculative exercise of some technical interest, but a testable hypothesis. If correct, it may add to our understanding of the Meru; and in any case it will permit a test, in a new field, of a method of inquiry which has already proved illuminating in others.

There are now two elucidatory matters, one cultural and the other structural, to be examined before dealing with the evidence. The first is that the Meru have been influenced by Christianity. A number of Meru informants in Bernardi's work bear Christian first names, and Christian elements have clearly been introduced into Meru mythology. This, so far as one can see in the monograph, is the most considerable extraneous cultural influence powerful enough to affect their symbolic notions. However, it is certain that the attributes of the left hand of the Mugwe have nothing to do with Christian belief or teaching; for in all the references to the right and left hands in the Bible which Wile has listed, 'in no single instance is the left hand given a position of honor, superiority or righteousness'.² Also it is common knowledge that in western cultural notions in general (such as might have influenced the Meru) it is the right, where any differentiation is made, which is pre-eminent and not the left. The position of the left hand of the Mugwe is not, therefore, due to influence by western culture in general or by Christianity in particular.

The second, structural, matter is that in societies based on descent such symbolic representations may be expected to correlate with the type of descent system.

¹ Bernardi, pp. 61, 103, 110, 120. At the ritual of accession among the Imenti the new Mugwe runs with an old woman, keeping hold of her hand: if she dies, he is a fit successor (p. 93). It is not stated by which hand the Mugwe holds hers; and it is unclear

if it is because of the touch of his left hand that she dies, though one might infer so, since she is supposed to be overwhelmed by his supernatural power.

² Wile, pp. 339-40.

Roughly, in cognatic societies the relation of symbolic to social order may be indefinite or minimal; in lineal systems the relationship may be discernible in a limited range of particulars but not commonly in a comprehensive manner; and in lineal systems with prescriptive affinal alliance there is usually a correspondence of structure between the two orders such that one may speak of a single scheme of classification under which both are subsumed.¹ Meru society is at present based on exogamous patrilineal descent groups, so that we may therefore expect some elucidation of their symbolic notions by examining their social structure, though not so certainly or profitably as if we were dealing with a system of prescriptive alliance. There is, furthermore, certain evidence on the social system (which I shall examine below) which brings Meru society closer to one form of prescriptive system and makes such an approach even more promising.

What I shall do now is to abstract from Bernardi's account isolated evidences of a scheme of symbolic classification by which the Meru may be taken to order their universe, and within which the peculiar character of the Mugwe's left hand may make sense. This involves the establishing of analogical connexions between very different institutions and situations; and this type of analysis brings with it, I fear, the likelihood of a rather disjointed exposition. However, as the evidence accumulates and the conceptual connexions are elicited a certain coherence should emerge, the key to which I shall try to set out clearly and briefly towards the end.

II

According to Bernardi, all Meru believe they came from the land of Mbwa, to the north. The word by which they designate the north is *urio*, which 'literally' means the right hand.²

There are distinct traces in Meru society, connected with their myth of origin, of a dual division. This has now lost its significance, but appears to have been typical of all the nine sub-tribes. Clans in the Imenti sub-tribe have names which refer to the intensity of the light while they were crossing the great water in the tribe's exodus from Mbwa: some are called 'black', some 'red', and some 'white'. Those who crossed during the night are black; those who crossed at dawn, red; and those who crossed when the sun was up, white. The elders say, however, that there was 'really no distinction' between red and white, and that these formed a single group. The clans may thus be distinguished simply as 'black clans' and 'white clans'. It seems certain, says Bernardi, that this distinction had in the past some effective territorial, social, and probably political significance.³

This division of the clans is concordant with a division of the Imenti into two

¹ R. Needham, 'A Structural Analysis of Purum Society', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 60, 1958, pp. 75-101; 'An Analytical Note on the Kom of Manipur', *Ethnos*, vol. 24, 1959 (in press).

² Bernardi, pp. 2-3. It is not clear why Bernardi isolates a literal meaning, implying that only by a kind of extension does the word mean 'north'. (Cf. Sanskrit *dakshina*, Hebrew *jamin*, Irish *deis*, 'right, south'.)

³ Bernardi, pp. 9, 58. Though the clear statement about the equation of red and white clans is highly

satisfactory for my present purpose, the triadic division presumably 'means' something, and is possibly connected with the number of other contexts in which three seems to have a special significance: see Bernardi, pp. 21, 25-26, 58, 68, 90. Also, W. H. Laughton, *The Meru*, Nairobi, 1944, pp. 11, 14, 15; H. E. Lambert, *Kikuyu Social and Political Institutions*, London, 1956, p. 27. Laughton, p. 2, says that it is the red and the black clans which have 'merged into one group'.

groupings, the Nkuene and the Igoki. These were territorial, Nkuene being on the south and Igoki on the north. Igoki seems to have included all the white clans, and the two designations appear to have become synonymous. The divisions were also referred to geographically, as those of *urio*, north, and those of *umotho*, south. The Igoki are said by the elders to have been 'always very proud; they wanted always to be first in grazing and watering their cattle'.¹

In the Tharaka sub-tribe there was a similar division, and the Mugwe came from the *umotho* (southern) group. Only the people of Umotoh were privileged to take part in full array at his ceremonial blessings. Those of *Urío* are described as 'alien to the Mugwe', and were not expected to visit him at his residence. 'It seems there was, or could be, some kind of friction between the two divisions.' The divisions were not exogamous.²

In the Tigania sub-tribe the divisions were named Athwana and Igoki: the former was also referred to as *umotho* and the latter as *urio*. The Mugwe of the Tigania resides among the Igoki, i.e. in the northern grouping, a fact which will acquire some significance later. Bernardi reports that the Athwana are described (like the *Urío* of Tharaka) as alien to the Mugwe, and regards his presence in a specified division as indicative of a former social and political significance to the dual division in this sub-tribe also.³

In the Igembe sub-tribe the only mention of *urio* and *umotho* refers not to moieties but to the location of the huts of wives in a polygynous household: 'the first wife is always *Urío*, the right'.⁴

Another institutionalized duality is seen in the age-set system: all the age-sets were related in a dual division, sets of alternate division being successively in power.⁵

Men and women are differentially evaluated. An Imenti elder, to affirm that 'to be circumcised is nothing', says that 'even women are operated upon', clearly implying a depreciation of women. More explicitly, elders use the term 'woman' to describe their present subordinate political condition: 'We are all *women*: the real *man* is the government', expressing also the superiority of man over woman. Further, at the official ceremonies of the Mugwe, on which the stability and continuity of Meru society are said to rest, women and children are not allowed.⁶

'The sun rises at the place of Mukuna-Ruku and sets at the place of the Mugwe.' Mukuna-Ruku is a name applied by Meru to a legendary ivory-trader, probably an Arab. His residence is said to have been Mombasa, 'i.e. the east, where the sun rises'. Mukuna-Ruku is also a mythical figure with a body that is all eyes and gives light to the sun. The obvious inference is that the Mugwe is symbolically associated with the west, but Bernardi says that this 'cannot so easily be implied'. The elucidation he presents is that the house of the Mugwe cannot come to an end, the Mugwe cannot die; and it is therefore at his dwelling that the sun sets. 'The sun, as the Mugwe, cannot fail to give its light and warmth, it cannot die, and therefore it sets at the dwelling of the Mugwe in order to renew its power for the next day. There is a

¹ Bernardi, p. 9. I understand from Dr. J. H. M. Beattie that *umotho* or one or other cognate word means 'left' in at least some neighbouring Bantu languages. See, e.g., M. B. Davis, *Lunyoro-Lunyankole-English . . . Dictionary*, Kampala-London, 1938, p. 95, s.v. *moso*.

² Bernardi, pp. 10, 42.

³ Bernardi, pp. 11, 76.

⁴ Bernardi, p. 10.

⁵ Bernardi, pp. 21-23. See also, Laughton, p. 4: 'There is a traditional and ceremonial antipathy between successive age-sets.'

⁶ Bernardi, pp. 17, 39, 90.

parallel between the two figures of Mukuna-Ruku and the Mugwe, both possessing a very special character and a very special power: light and immortality.¹ Bernardi does not cite here, as he usually does elsewhere, Meru statements to show that this interpretation is that of the people themselves, and it has the air of being his own. I think, in any case, that it is inconsistent with what else can be discerned of Meru symbolism, and shall try to show why later. For the moment, I suggest that Mukuna-Ruku is associated with east and light, and the Mugwe with west and darkness. This is supported, to give a brief indication, by the colour of the sacrificial bull, which must be black, 'a colour sacred to God', and by that of the Mugwe's staff, which is 'the ritual black',² permitting the inference that darkness is not symbolically incompatible with the Mugwe's ritual position.

We have already seen that the Mugwe keeps his left hand concealed while he plays 'draughts', and although there is no other information on his right hand the tenor of the evidence is that this is his profane hand. His left hand is reserved for his sacred function, viz. to bless, which is described as his 'essential work'. His authority, in fact, is 'basically religious'; while it is the elders who control all forms of social and political activity and are 'the real masters of the country'. 'The external machinery of tribal government and of social life would appear to work satisfactorily even without the Mugwe', and this is underlined by Bernardi's discovery that, apparently until very recently, the very existence of the Mugwe had entirely escaped the Administration. The Meru are admittedly described as looking up to the Mugwe as their father, and the elders say that before the European administration there was no other 'chief' but the Mugwe; but these statements do not really conflict with the clear distinction of function between the Mugwe and the elders, especially when we further learn from the elders themselves that they protect the Mugwe as though he were a queen bee. The Mugwe was in a literally singular position, the one person on whom the society could be said to focus, and whose presence and (ritual) services could be regarded as essential; and in view of his functions it is easily comprehensible that he should be referred to in such terms. The fact is clear, I think, that there was a distinct partition of sovereignty into the religious authority of the Mugwe, seen in his indispensable blessing in the major social institutions, and the political power of the elders, seen in their effective jural and administrative control.³ The apparently conflicting evaluations of the respective status of Mugwe and elders are made within different contexts and characterized by different criteria.

Finally, the possible significance of temporal succession deserves some attention. In the myth of the exodus of the Meru from Mbwa the people come to the water and their leader (= Mugwe) divides it with his staff to make a passage for them. He first sends across a small girl and a small boy, and then a young woman and a young man; and only when they have crossed does he take the main body over. This suggests the possibility that those who are first, the forerunners, are of inferior status, and that those whom they precede, the main body, are of superior status. It would probably be going too far to infer that the order in which the sexes are mentioned—

¹ Bernardi, pp. 73, 74.

² Bernardi, pp. 92, 99.

³ Bernardi, pp. 160, 161, 150, 155, 136, 174, 142, 151, 161. This is not to say that the Mugwe is quite without political influence, and we are indeed told

that his religious authority is capable of 'political extension' (p. 139) and a source of political power which a strong and ambitious man could exploit (p. 161); but this is a contingent matter of fact, whereas I am concerned with a conceptual system.

first female, then male—makes the same point; but if this is a culturally conventional order it is at least consistent with the fact that first the younger cross and then the older, and with the relative status of women and men.¹ The second illustration also comes from myth. All peoples are said to come from the same place, but the first to be born was a black man, and after him a white² man. In this case the predecessors are (whatever their other qualities and however they regard themselves in other respects) political inferiors, and their successors are superiors, an opposition explicitly made by the elders quoted above. Related to this theme, also, is the myth of the origin of the exploitation of natural resources: first came the age-set with the Mugwe, and this is the one which started honey-collecting; next came the set which was the first to cultivate. We cannot be sure of the relative evaluation of these two subsistence activities, but one would think that basic sustenance would depend more on the latter than on honey, which is described merely as one of the staple elements of diet among the Tharaka. Moreover, we can see here another instance of the theme of complementary functions; for sacred honey-beer is one of the insignia of the Mugwe, and the rite of blessing itself consists in the Mugwe sipping some honey-beer and gently spitting it on to the people; whereas according to Laughton (to cite another authority for once) all rights in land lie with the elders, and it is they who control its preservation and exploitation.³

III

Having completed a survey of the evidence, we are now in a position to make a systematic interpretation by which the position of the left hand of the Mugwe may be comprehensible. The first step is to construct a table such as that which follows: this represents a symbolic classification in which pairs of opposite terms are analogically related by the principle of complementary dualism.⁴ It relates specifically to the Imenti, though the principle exhibited appears valid for at least some of the other sub-tribes. The oppositions are listed seriatim as they have been elicited in the exposition of the relevant facts.

left	right
south	north
Umotho	Urio
Nkuene	Igoki
black clans	white clans
night	day
co-wife	first wife
junior	senior
subordinate age-division	dominant age-division
woman/child	man
inferior	superior
west	east

¹ In one myth, God is described as creating man and then woman; but this is said by Bernardi (pp. 52, 55) to be Christian. However, there is still one clear contrary indication: in an invocation by the Mugwe, he refers to his people as 'male, female . . . boys and girls', which tends to dispose of the idea. Bernardi,

pp. 192, 121.

² Bernardi, pp. 193-4. 'White': lit. *umutume*, red; cf. the equation of red and white clans.

³ Bernardi, pp. 100-1, 110; Laughton, pp. 3, 5.

⁴ Cf. Needham, 1958, pp. 97, 99.

sunset	sunrise
—— (moon?)	sun
darkness	light
(blindness)	sight (eyes)
black	——
Mugwe	elders
religious authority	political power
predecessors	successors
younger	older
black man	white man
honey-collecting	cultivation

It will readily be seen that the scheme is coherent, and that it displays a systematic order which can immediately be apprehended. A few clarificatory notes may, however, be helpful, and there are also certain difficulties which have to be discussed.

A matter which may occasion some reserve is that the Mugwe should be associated, however indirectly, with feminine. This may be thought in conflict with his paternal authority and with the statements that the Mugwe is 'higher' than the elders and 'above' them.¹ But we have to remember, firstly, the matter of context: ritually, as a symbol of the unity of Meru society, the Mugwe is superior to the elders, but politically he is definitely not. Even this is misleading, though. It is the *complementarity*, I think, which should be emphasized, rather than differential status in opposed contexts.

Secondly, it has to be kept in mind that the ascription of terms to one series in the scheme does not entail that they all share the particular attributes of any one term. The association of these terms rests on analogy, and is derived from a mode of categorization which orders the scheme, not from the possession of a specific property by means of which the character or presence of other terms may be deduced. One does not, therefore, say that the Mugwe *is* feminine, any more than one would say that night or south or the subordinate age-division is feminine.

Nevertheless, the association in any way of religious authority with feminine may still seem to call for an explanation. This question, it seems to me, can be resolved by comparison with other societies. I select two particularly clear parallels from widely separated and disparate cultures, in which a symbolic association of religion with feminine is quite explicitly and directly made. Among the Ngaju of south Borneo, most religious functionaries are priestesses, and religious matters are so intimately associated with the feminine that men who professionally assume such functions also assume feminine social status. They wear women's clothes and dress their hair like women; they are commonly homosexual or impotent, and they even marry men. A man who has thus assumed femininity is thought to be more efficacious in the supernatural sphere than a woman.² Among the Chukchi of Siberia, there are four stages in becoming a particularly prominent kind of shaman, each marked by an increased assumption of feminine attributes. In the first, the man adopts woman's hair-style; in the second he wears woman's dress; in the third he throws away all his masculine appurtenances and undertakes woman's tasks, his voice changes and his body acquires

¹ Bernardi, pp. 139, 152-3.

² A. Hardeland, *Dajacksch-Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Amsterdam, 1859, pp. 53-54, s.v. *basir*; M. T. H.

Perelaer, *Ethnographische Beschrijving der Dajaks*, Zalt-Bommel, 1870, p. 35; H. Schärer, *Die Gottesidee der Ngadju-Dajak in Süd-Borneo*, Leiden, 1946, pp. 64-67.

the helplessness of a woman; and in the final stage he 'changes sex', taking a lover and after a time a husband, and may even claim to give birth to children. Such a shaman has a special relation with the supernatural, marked by the protection and guidance of a guardian spirit, and he is dreaded, even by untransformed shamans.¹ On the most general grounds, therefore, and taking the most extreme cases, the inclusion of the Mugwe in a category which includes feminine may be considered not at all unusual. I may now adduce a superficially isolated and otherwise incomprehensible fact, reported in connexion with sexual intercourse, which also associates the Mugwe (of the Imenti) with feminine. An elder says: 'Another wonder for the common people: the Mugwe never asks for his wife; it is his wife who asks for him.'² This very unusual practice can now be seen as an elaboration on a symbolic classification which gives it meaning.³

These points made, we may now understand from the scheme why the Igoki were so proud, and why they demanded always to be first in grazing and watering their cattle; for by analogical inference they were the senior of the moieties (Igoki:Nkuene: : north : south :: senior : junior), and these may well have been their traditional and distinctive rights. To take another case, it is even possible that the scheme may give a lead as to whether the Meru came from the north, as Bernardi reports, or from the east, as is said by Lambert, Holding, and, by implication, Laughton.⁴ In addition to the equation north = right, which is consistent with an eastern origin, there are the elements of white, day, sun, and light in the right-hand (dominant, privileged) series—all commonly assigned, not to the north, but generally and naturally to the east. One might therefore tend to think (assuming some connexion between traditions of origin and Meru symbolic classification) that they came from the east rather than the north. Finally, historical questions aside, it may be seen on what grounds I suggested above that predecessors may be classed as junior. Whether moving from the north or from the east, the children and young people are the first to the south or west; and they are therefore associated with the juniority of the co-wife and the inferiority (asserted, it appears, by the Igoki) of the Nkuene.

However, this last matter brings us now to some difficulties. The predecessor in the advancement of the age-sets is not junior but senior; the predecessor in marriage to a man is not a junior co-wife but the senior; and the elders, similarly, are predecessors to all their younger juniors. Meru ethnography is not extensive or detailed enough to permit useful speculation on my part about these points. It may be that my formulation of the defining relation is mistaken, or that the formal resemblance between the situations from which I elicited it is misleading, e.g. that it is not simply precession that is decisive, but that some other kind of distinction is symbolically significant. This one couple of terms (predecessors : successors) aside, though, the subsequent and derivative couples remain consistent with the scheme.

Though it is only the Mugwe who is clearly associated with black in a ritual con-

¹ W. Bogoras, *The Chukchee*, Leiden-New York, 1909, pp. 449 ff.

² Bernardi, p. 107.

³ Bernardi at one place even suggests that a reference to a certain woman could have been 'an indirect way of referring to the Mugwe' (p. 39). Note that these cases relate to the Imenti. I do not overlook the possible relevance of the theme of reversal which so

often characterizes ritual; but this is an enormous topic which I cannot broach here.

⁴ H. E. Lambert, *The Systems of Land Tenure in the Kikuyu Land Unit* (Communications, School of African Studies, 22), Cape Town, 1950, p. 7; E. M. Holding, 'Some Preliminary Notes on Meru Age-grades', *Man*, vol. xlii, 1942, p. 58; Laughton, p. 2.

text, it is not only he who wears a black mantle, but the elders as well.¹ If black were a sign of superior social status there would be no difficulty in seeing that the Mugwe and the elders might together be distinguished in this way as social leaders; but in the face of the ritual associations of black, the ritual office of the Mugwe, and the secular status of the elders as a body, this fact creates a contradiction to the scheme which does not seem resolvable by resort to the published ethnography.

There are other points, too, which cause difficulty, such as the relationships focusing on the concept of *nindiri*.² I have not felt sure enough to include them in the scheme: the ethnography on these points is too slender for any compelling logic to emerge as directive, and a speculative review of the formal possibilities would not be decisive.

IV

The only assumption I have made in constructing the scheme of classification is that Meru symbolism is consistent; and so far as I know I have not omitted from the account any relevant facts which are contradictory to the scheme, or which would lend another interpretation to the significance of the facts to which it relates. I now proceed to the problem.

The resolution which I propose is that it is in accordance with this symbolic order, and consistent with the total scheme of relations between the particular terms, that the left hand of the Mugwe should be regarded as sacred. By a conceptual dichotomy operative in a number of contexts he is symbolically assigned to the category of the left, and it is consistent with this that in some cases his own left should symbolize his status.

There is one point, however, to be made directly. Given that the Mugwe himself belongs symbolically to the category which includes left, it does not necessarily follow that his sacred hand shall also be his left. It is perfectly conceivable that his right hand should be endowed with this value, without contradiction to the classification; and Bernardi's account gives reason to suppose that in most of the nine sub-tribes this is indeed the case. Of the five references which he makes to the left hand, three (comprising the greater and most explicit part of the evidence) relate specifically to the Imenti, and one appears to relate to earlier statements about them; while only the remaining one refers to other sub-tribes as well. This is that in which is described the Mugwe's power to halt enemy attacks by raising his left hand: 'This belief was common with the Tharaka, the Chuka, the Igembe and the Imenti; but it is especially with the Imenti that the left hand of the Mugwe has become a source of great awe.'³ We are told, furthermore, in the quotation first cited, that among the Imenti the people's conception of the Mugwe's left hand is 'unusual'. In most of the sub-tribes, then, the Mugwe's sacred hand may well be his right; while in some, and typically the Imenti, it is his left. This situation has to be taken into account when we try to relate the sacred left hand to the scheme of classification.

It is thus evident that in this context the fundamental distinction to be registered in the scheme must be that between the profane hand of the Mugwe and the sacred

¹ Bernardi, p. 95.

³ Bernardi, p. 110.

² Bernardi, pp. 13, 39, 60, 91, 94, 138, 139, 159.

hand. By analogical inference we have no choice about the series to which they must respectively be assigned: the sacred, efficacious hand must enter the series on the right of the scheme, in company with what is socially and mythically dominant and superior; while the profane hand must be assigned to the complex of opposite and complementary terms. Note that this is a purely symbolic ascription: which of the hands, organically speaking, shall be reckoned sacred, and which profane, is indeterminate. In fact, among most of the sub-tribes the sacred hand will apparently be the right (as on the most universal grounds we should anticipate), and it is the right hand which will be assigned to the right-hand series in the scheme, where it will be explicitly associated with 'right'. But among the Imenti (to take them as typical of the other sub-tribes in this respect, and among whom this symbolic elaboration is most marked) it is the left hand of the Mugwe which, exceptionally, is sacred; and in accordance with its determining character it must be assigned to the right-hand series in the scheme, in company with the generally dominant hand among the other Mugwe. This may seem puzzling at first, but it is obvious that to assign the left hand of the Imenti Mugwe to the left-hand series simply because of the common feature of leftness, which is a *factual* but not necessarily symbolic attribute, would reverse the ascription of *symbolic* value and constitute a direct contradiction to the symbolic order. The association of the Imenti Mugwe's left hand with the terms of the right-hand series is therefore analogically valid. For Meru in general, I take it, the formula is:— profane hand : sacred hand :: common left : common right. But in the case of the Mugwe of the Imenti the profane hand is his physical right, so that as far as symbolic attributes are concerned his right hand is his left.

The point is made, I hope, that the selection of one hand or the other as sacred (efficacious, pre-eminent) is not necessarily determined, and certainly not by matters of physical fact; and, in general, that the categorization of a term is not in principle deducible from any one of its properties. Symbolic attributes are not necessary, and one's task in elucidating them is not to claim that they have been determined but to show their coherence. I have tried to explain the symbolic attributes of the Mugwe by relating them to the system of ideas of which they are part, and to the mode of classification by which the ideas are ordered. It still remains to say something about why, in the exceptional case of the Mugwe of the Imenti, the left hand should be pre-eminent.

It may be claimed that the position of his left hand is consistent with the classification in a peculiarly satisfactory way. Even in the scheme I have constructed, which must be a very attenuated version of what might be detected in field investigations directed specifically to the issue, the symbolic reinforcement of the Mugwe's position is striking. He belongs to the left, the south (= left), and he is connected with the black clans (he is theirs), the night (in which he and they crossed the water), the west, sunset, darkness, and the colour black. It may be thought appropriate and intellectually satisfying, then, that the ascription of the Mugwe to the left-hand series should be symbolically intensified, among the Imenti, by the value attached to his left hand.

This contention is not a sophistical expedient adopted to give plausibility to an argument, for such re-emphasis of symbolic value has been recorded from other cultures. I shall mention two cases, one from another part of Africa and the other from the Indo-Burma border.

In a recent account of the pastoral Fulani, the following oppositions are recognizable:¹

left	right
east	west
back	front
north	south
feminine	masculine
junior homestead	senior homestead
genealogical junior	genealogical senior

There is no need to expatiate on this scheme, which is easily confirmed by reference to the source. One recognizes in it a differentiation between the two series of terms similar to that of the Meru classification, and even without recounting the ethnographic evidence a consistency of character can be seen between a number of the terms in each series. The point I wish to make concerns the relations north : south :: junior : senior. Within the homestead the bed-shelters of the wives are ranged north to south according to rank. At first sight one would expect the senior wife to be associated with south; but instead, within the feminine part of the homestead, her shelter is placed to the *north*, and the shelters of her junior co-wives in descending order of seniority to the south. Moreover, the senior wife is explicitly called 'north-one', and any junior wife 'south-one'. Here we have, then, an intensification of symbolic character precisely similar to that of the Mugwe's left hand among the Imenti.²

The second example relates to the Purum of Manipur. They seek augury by sacrificing a fowl and observing the relative positions of its legs: if the right rests on the left the augury is good, and if the left rests on the right it is bad. (Right is generally regarded as superior to left among all the Kuki tribes of this area, and this kind of symbolic distinction is radical to their culture.) At the name-giving ceremony for a boy a cock is sacrificed and the above rules of interpretation are followed, but at the ceremony for a girl there is a reversal of the symbolism: a hen is sacrificed this time, and it is the left leg resting on the right that is accounted good augury for her.³

These examples from very distant and different cultures demonstrate that the symbolic process which I have posited to explain the case of the left hand of the Imenti Mugwe is not a forced interpretation or a cultural singularity. On the contrary, it is an understandable manipulation of symbolic concepts which has its own validity, and which depends for its effect on the categorization with which it at first appears to be in conflict.

It might be emphasized, finally, that in proposing my explanation I do not intend

¹ D. J. Stenning, *Savannah Nomads*, London, 1959, pp. 39-40, 104-5, 106-8. Stenning himself appears not to have paid particular attention to Fulani ideology, and I should like to suggest that a structural analysis to elicit its ruling ideas may prove sociologically illuminating in a most general and profound fashion.

² Unfortunately, we are not told whether the traditional Meru homestead is orientated or whether the relative positions of its members within it are of

any significance. Laughton (p. 9) reports merely that the hut of the owner of the homestead is on the right as one enters, and that the huts of his wives are disposed anti-clockwise from this; but this, though it suggests a conventional arrangement, is not symbolically informative.

³ T. C. Das, *The Purums: an Old Kuki Tribe of Manipur*, Calcutta, 1945, pp. 195, 234; cf. Needham, 1958, pp. 90-91, 97.

to claim that for Meru in general the left hand has anything of the value which is attached to that of the Imenti Mugwe. Indeed, though Bernardi's ethnography says nothing on this point, I feel sure that for them it is the right hand (as one would expect) that is pre-eminent. I should think, also, that it is the exceptional status of the Imenti Mugwe's left hand, in contrast to the general evaluation of the right, which in his case marks particularly his exceptional personal status and the nature of his authority.¹

V

There is one possible objection to the type of analysis that I have made which I should like to comment on briefly. Hertz has written that dualism is of the essence of primitive thought;² and I should go further to say that the symbolic opposition of right and left, and a dualistic categorization of phenomena of which this opposition is paradigmatic, are so common as to seem natural proclivities of the human mind.³ Does this sort of analysis then have any explanatory merit? That is, if we are dealing with a fundamental mode of thought, the demonstration of the existence of a dualistic classification among the Meru might be thought nugatory or tautological. But this is not the case. Firstly, even a fundamental feature of thought is not necessarily formally manifested in a scheme which is based upon it. Secondly, whatever their logical grounds, symbolic classifications are not everywhere of this dualistic kind: some are triadic, and others feature four, five, or more major categories. They may be reducible, but they are formally distinct from the Meru scheme. Thirdly, although it is possible to maintain that in certain contexts there is a 'natural' symbolism which is immediately apprehensible, irrespective of culture, the particulars of a classification are not necessary; so that to elicit from an ethnographic description the symbolic classification and mode of conceptual relation characteristic of a culture is in fact informative. Finally, the construction of this sort of scheme does not depend simply on ingenuity in relating concepts and values which one has some reason to expect in any case. To the extent that the ethnography is comprehensive and reliable, the form of the classification by which a people order their world imposes itself on the analytical construction: 'Le système est vraiment dans les faits' (Dumézil).

If, in spite of these considerations (which are advanced, after all, in an excessively summary manner for such a large topic), it is still thought that the approach is faulty, there will yet remain a considerable problem: viz. to explain how it is, in that case, that the ethnography permits the coherent interpretation which I have put upon it, and which I would decline to think fortuitous. And a sociological enterprise would still remain to be carried out, viz. to determine the range of symbolic significance in social systems of different type, and to explain the correlations of social and symbolic structure.

VI

I conclude with an indication of the wider theoretical significance of this inquiry. It derives from the work of Durkheim and Mauss⁴ and of Hertz, and nearer to our

¹ There is a weaker, because less singular, parallel to this among the Ibo. The right hand is clearly superior and the use of the left is prohibited; but a warrior who has killed a man with his own hands is permitted, as a privilege, to drink with his left. A. G. Leonard, *The Lower Niger and its Tribes*,

London, 1906, p. 310.

² Hertz, 1909, p. 559.

³ Needham, 1958, p. 97.

⁴ E. Durkheim and M. Mauss, 'De quelques formes primitives de classification: contribution à l'étude des représentations collectives', *Année Sociologique*, vol. vi, 1903, pp. 1-72.

time takes as models the publications of the Leiden school¹ and Hocart,² and latterly the stimulating analyses of Lévi-Strauss.³ A particular issue connected with the continuing theme of these studies, and to which I wish to draw attention in connexion with the Mugwe, is that of the dual nature of sovereignty: the complementary functions of priest and king, the ordering of social life by dualistic notions of religious authority and secular power of which these figures are exemplars. Dumézil has with fascinating effect exploited this type of opposition, compendiously represented by the couple Mitra-Varuṇa, in his analysis of sovereignty in Indo-European society;⁴ and Coomaraswamy has similarly, and more minutely, examined the ancient Indian theory of government in terms of the complementary opposites of spiritual authority and temporal power.⁵ In contrast to the superficially rather trivial interest of the left hand, it is to these studies that I should wish to relate this modest and tentative note on the Mugwe.

If we are to understand his position in Meru society, it may be more illuminating, it seems to me, and less potentially misleading, to make a structural analysis of the sort I have proposed rather than to try to decide whether he is best described, in our language and symbolic ambience, as leader, public figure, judge, diviner, priest, bishop, prophet, God, chief, or king. All these various appellations, severally applied in order to define one or other aspect of his status, are, as Bernardi himself points out, inexact and misleading. The Mugwe is the Mugwe. What this means may best be understood, I suggest, by concentrating on the functions, attributes, and conceptual associations of the Mugwe in terms of the structure, symbolic as well as social, which gives his office its proper significance. The most general notion by which this structure may be defined is that of complementary dualism, which appears to be a pervasive feature of traditional Meru culture. In the context of the present problem this is expressed in the opposition of secular and religious status: political power is complemented by religious authority.⁶

The distinction of the hands is the commonest manifestation of the mode of classification isolated by this inquiry, and it is the pursuit of an explanation for the

¹ e.g. W. H. Rassers, *De Pandji-Roman*, Antwerp, 1922. (It is not generally realized that the Leiden school of anthropology inherited and effectively exploited French sociological ideas at a time when they were all but ignored in Britain and the United States.)

² Especially *Kings and Councillors*, Cairo, 1936.

³ C. Lévi-Strauss, 'The Structural Study of Myth', in T. A. Sebeok (ed.), *Myth: A Symposium*, Philadelphia, 1955, pp. 50-66; 'La Geste d'Asdiwal', *Annuaire 1958-9, École Pratique des Hautes Études* (Section des Sciences Religieuses), Paris, 1958.

⁴ G. Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuṇa: Essai sur deux représentations indo-européennes de la souveraineté*, Paris, 1948 (1st edn. 1940). At the end of his examination of Indo-European notions of sovereignty, Dumézil makes a brief comparison with the Chinese philosophy of *yin-yang* and concludes with the observation: 'Il sera intéressant de confronter le mécanisme indo-européen ici dégagé avec d'autres mécanismes que le *yang* et le *yin*' (p. 211). It is satisfying and intriguing,

then, to note how clearly we find in the present African context a Mitra-Varuṇa type of representation of sovereignty: elders = Mitra, the jurist, associated with this world, the day, masculine, senior, and the right; Mugwe = Varuṇa, the magician, associated with the other world, night, feminine, junior, and the left. Cf. also Dumézil, *Les Dieux des Indo-Européens*, Paris, 1952, ch. ii.

⁵ A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government*, New Haven, 1942.

⁶ To pursue an indication of the former constitution of Meru society which I have already touched upon, I should guess that Igoki was the politically dominant moiety, while Nkuene possessed the complementary religious authority of which the presence of the Mugwe was the sign. Cf. also the balance between the social superiority of the wife-givers and the ritual indispensability of the wife-takers in certain systems of asymmetric alliance (Needham, 1958).

singular attributes of the left hand of the Mugwe of the Imenti which has permitted this glimpse of the conceptual order of Meru society.

Résumé

LA MAIN GAUCHE DU MUGWE

Le Mugwe est un dignitaire religieux chez les Meru de Kenya. Il exerce son autorité par le pouvoir de sa bénédiction. Le problème réside dans le fait que le Mugwe de la sous-tribu Imenti bénit de la main gauche et que c'est cette main qui est sacrée. Cela est surprenant pour des raisons comparatives les plus générales : en effet c'est la main droite qui est normalement prééminente et sacrée. Le but de cette analyse est de proposer une explication à l'exception que présente le Mugwe.

Dans la société meru traditionnelle il y avait une dichotomie politique en ce qui concernait leur mythe d'origine : d'une part la division du nord (désignée par un mot qui signifie aussi ' droite ') et de l'autre la division méridionale (connue sous un nom qui signifie probablement aussi ' gauche '). Ces divisions étaient territoriales et le Mugwe appartenait à l'une d'elles, généralement à celle du sud. On trouve aussi une double division dans l'opposition des épouses supérieures et des épouses inférieures, du groupement des classes d'âge, des hommes et des femmes, et dans certains autres contextes idéologiques. Il existait également une double division de souveraineté entre l'autorité religieuse du Mugwe et le pouvoir politique des anciens.

Se basant sur de tels faits, il est possible de construire un système de classification symbolique dans lequel des paires de termes opposés sont liés analogiquement par un principe de dualisme complémentaire. Le Mugwe se classe dans la série caractérisée par ' gauche ' et ' féminin '. Les Ngaju de Bornéo et les Chukchi de Sibérie montrent qu'une fonction religieuse peut bien être associée symboliquement avec le féminin d'une façon fort explicite, et qu'une telle association chez les Meru n'est ni unique ni nécessairement une fausse interprétation de l'ethnographie.

Dans le système de classification symbolique, le Mugwe, par une dichotomie conceptuelle applicable à de nombreux contextes, est assigné à la catégorie de gauche, et il est parfaitement consistant avec ce fait que sa propre main gauche symbolise sa position. Ceci n'est pas déterminé par la classification, mais représente une possibilité symbolique exploitée dans d'autres civilisations. C'est-à-dire, le Mugwe étant assigné à la gauche, sa position symbolique est intensifiée par la valeur attachée à sa main gauche : son caractère de gauche en quelque sorte devient plus gauche par ce moyen évident.

La méthode employée ici dérive des travaux de l'école de l'*Année Sociologique* et de Lévi-Strauss, et est à associer avec les recherches de Hocart et de Dumézil en particulier sur le sujet de la nature de la souveraineté. La fonction du Mugwe pourrait être le mieux comprise, il semble, en se concentrant sur sa place dans la structure, symbolique aussi bien que sociale, qui confère à son état sa signification. Le principe gouverneur de cette structure est le dualisme complémentaire, exprimé dans le domaine de la souveraineté par l'opposition de l'autorité religieuse et profane. Cette opposition fait partie d'un ordre conceptuel discerné au cours de la recherche d'une solution au problème de la main gauche du Mugwe, ordre qui en fait paraît résoudre le problème.