

Reflections on Wolof ceremonies.

Naming ceremonies show up in a very clear fashion the various principles of Wolof social structure. The ceremony is a matter of concern not merely to the two parents and close relatives but to a much wider segment of society than would be the case in the western world. The whole village where it takes place is deeply involved, for Wolof villages are small, averaging less than a hundred people, and everyone knows everybody else. Kinsfolk and friends from neighboring villages come to renew their ties, while others attend purely to share in the general entertainment.

Kinsfolk, affines, age-mates, friends, neighbors, people of slave origin, members of the casted groups (leatherworkers, smiths, praise-singers), strangers, Muslim leaders, etc. all find themselves playing the roles demanded by the ceremony, reaffirming traditional social structure. Something of the consciousness of social role playing is emphasized by Noni Jabavu for Xhosa society: "I thought how with my people, you are not often left to be merely your private self; you represent others, or others represent you, so that you are ever conscious of relative status, classification, interdependent relationships." It is through standing around, watching interaction, and gradually participating that children learn the nature of their culture and society, and absorb traditional values, including ideas about the nature of what is desirable.

In the case of a first born child new roles are established for the first time for many of the people involved. A wife becomes a mother, a husband a father, a mother a grandmother, spouses' brothers and sisters are now uncles and aunts, and this is the first formal occasion on which the new roles are publicly played out. When a child is born it is obligatory to inform relatives on both the father's and mother's sides, for failure to do so would imply that they had been cut off from the kin group and lead to ill feeling. The person informed is now under an obligation to fulfil his new role and attend the

naming ceremony unless old age, illness, or the illness of a child makes it impossible, in which case a representative, or at least a message, is sent.

Not merely is the kinship system manifested, but also the system of social stratification is confirmed. People of slave origin still undertake ceremonies, many of the domestic roles in/ skinning and butchering animals, helping to pound millet, drawing water, bringing firewood, helping to cook and serve meals, distributing "charity", and it is still felt right that they should participate in these ways, though slavery as an institution has long been abolished. People of the caste groups such as the smiths receive gifts from patrons who are freeborn, for it is a sign of nobility to give to them without receiving a gift in return. The amounts given are commented on openly by the receivers, so the givers are obliged to be as generous as possible.

Esteem among fellow villagers is gained by generosity, but even generosity must be appropriate to the occasion. One cannot be so overgenerous as to impoverish one's own kin group, and so there tends to be a mild form of social restraint exercised by kinsfolk who are not so emotionally involved as the father and mother, who suggest that the parents hold out against the excessive demands of the praise singers. As a result there arises a good deal of interplay between people in their roles in the system of stratification, and considerable social skill is brought into play to deal with interpersonal relations so as to maintain face and yet leave no one angry or offended.

The relationships between man and the supernatural world, between man and the forces of nature and between man and God are reaffirmed. The protective powers in various plants and substances are utilized by man; God's blessing is sought; protection is asked against evil spirits; while the sacrifice of an animal involves old concepts now incorporated and reintegrated in Islam. There is no 'law' that one should kill a goat or a sheep at a naming ceremony, but it is felt to be right to do so if one has

the means, for not merely will the guests be pleased, but also God.

If younger people are forgetful or careless about performing a rite, or taking a ritual precaution, some old person will at once remind them of the proper way of doing things, and even though they may not necessarily 'believe' in the old ways, they will nevertheless carry out the required procedure, so as not to offend the old. Though the elderly are always saying that the present generation do not observe traditional ways, yet in rural society as a whole, tradition is very persistent

At the same time the pattern of the ceremony permits minor changes. The Imam at Buntung, for example, used to hold the naming ceremony early in the morning, because he had learnt this from his own teacher, whereas elsewhere the ceremony was usually held later in the morning. Imported pocket knives are now generally used for the shaving instead of the traditional local knife, and any type of mat, whether locally made or imported, may be used to sit on. In urban centers the items distributed to guests now include locally made ginger beer, mineral waters, pancakes, biscuits (crackers), as well as the traditional kola nuts.

The aesthetic aspect of ceremonies.

When one compares a number of naming ceremonies among rural Wolof, they clearly differ both in scale and in the general atmosphere that is generated. A ceremony involving a chiefly lineage is expected to be on a grander scale than one involving a lesser lineage, and people from most villages in the district will attend. A ceremony put on by a rich man is expected to be more lavish than one organized by a poor man. A ceremony in the rainy season when people are busy farming tends to be brief and few spectators attend, partly because of the pressure of work, and partly because of the shortage of food and money for entertainment, while a ceremony

held in the dry season after the cash crop, peanuts, has been sold, is regarded as an opportunity for all to enjoy themselves. The ceremony for a first born child, particularly if a boy, is more important than in the case of later children, for once a son has been born, the continuity of the lineage and the new roles of kinsfolk have been established. If there is a history of children dying at an early age, only the crucial acts of the ceremony may be performed, so as not to draw the attention of evil spirits, witches, etc. to the event.

People therefore have in their minds expectations which will make every ceremony unique, even though the rituals and sequence of events remains essentially the same. A ceremony which would be considered satisfactorily performed by a man known to be poor, would be considered totally inadequate and subject to adverse comment if done in the same way by a wealthy man. At the same time the behavior of an individual could also become too ostentatious and draw unfavorable comment. It would be considered tactless, for example, to follow a naming ceremony given by members of a chief's lineage by one which outshone it.

The Wolof have a sense of form which enables them to assess any situation and react appropriately. The satisfaction that is derived from a Wolof ceremony is not primarily in terms of witnessing or participating in major rituals, such as one might feel from attending a Greek Orthodox Anastasis service, for among the Wolof the ritual acts are brief, and often viewed by only a few select people. Instead the satisfaction comes primarily from the total human interaction, not merely from one's own performance, whether one is carrying out an essential act like praying over the child, or making a grand entrance at the right moment in one's best dress or robe, but also from appreciating the actions of other people.

At a ceremony people become more observant than in everyday life, and little details of behavior are noted to be savored and related at home later. Conversations are full of subtleties, overtones, and allusions, appreciated by insiders, but difficult for outsiders to catch. Tensions that have existed in daily life may be expressed and eased away in a joking fashion in the atmosphere of good will that prevails. In marriage ceremonies this is formalized since tensions that are expected to arise are dealt with in song by the bride's companions before any trouble has actually arisen.

The tone of any given ceremony results from the interplay between the behavior of different categories of people - between men and women, between young and old, between high ranking and casted groups, between those holding traditional beliefs, and those adhering to Islam in a stricter fashion. Individuals are (perhaps unconsciously) concerned with asserting and vindicating their position within the system. For the Wolof the main sources of aesthetic satisfaction lie not so much in objects (paintings, carvings, etc.), or natural features (the ocean, forests, sunsets) as in the western world, but in human actions - personal display, the quality of interaction, respect for the individual, the quality and appropriateness of speech and gesture.

In retrospect, I find that though I recorded in detail the general sequence of events, and followed this with interviews, I often neglected to record adequate data about the feelings and reactions of participants. Yet these are also a highly important feature of the culture, for they express the value system which holds together the social structure and enables it to operate smoothly.

A ceremony provides participants with a multi-sensory experience involving sight (the display of dresses, colors, etc.), sound (the buzz of conversation, the formalities of speeches and prayers, the rhythms of

drumming and clapping), taste (the specially prepared food), and smell (of food, of perfumes, of people), as well as a variety of feelings shown in gestures, ritual actions, and dances.

At any rate people went home from the Bunting ceremony feeling that it had been a highly satisfactory occasion, even if the dancing had been cut short, and talked of it to those who had not been able to go, describing the general air of festivity, the generosity of their hosts, the friends they had met, and all the latest news from round about.