THE SHAMAN’S LEGAL ROLE

by

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Introduction

The Akawaio are a Carib-speaking people with a mixed economy of horticulture, hunting, fishing and collecting. They live in a number of villages and joint family settlements in the Guiana Highlands, mainly in the Upper Mazaruni District of British Guiana but also on the Upper Continga River in Brazil and the Wenamu River of the British Guiana and Venezuela border.

Each village or family settlement is autonomous; there is often considerable co-operation between villages and settlements, with regular visiting and feasting between those which are based on the same river and are, consequently, referred to as belonging to a particular river area.

The every day activities of the small number of families which make up a village community are carried out either independently by the family concerned or, where more co-operation is desirable, by arrangement between heads of families. Each village has a leader (ebulu) and the heads of families and senior men and women are spoken of as his assistants or helpers (boidoludong). Although the leader and his family are regarded as the core of the village, leadership is weak. It consists mainly of setting an example in carrying out work and trying to achieve agreement and support in the pursuit of common interests, particularly

(*) This article is based on fieldwork done among the Akawaio of the Upper Mazaruni District, British Guiana, from June 1951-August 1952 and from April-Sept. 1957. I dedicate it to the memory of the late Dr. Alfred Metraux to whom I shall always remain greatly indebted for his example of devoted research in the Americas and for his generous encouragement of my work, in the field of shamanism in particular.

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in relation to other villages. If people do not want to co-operate with their village leader then the latter has no means of enforcing his will. His admonitions, persuasions and direct requests are simply ignored. For example, it is regarded as the leader's prerogative to summon the heads of families from their garden places to the village for purposes of common interest, such as arranging a village feast or for consultation in some urgent matter. A young relative of the leader is sent as messenger to each garden place, which may be at any distance between 1 hour to day's travel away from the village. If a family is busy, is out of temper with another family or is disinclined to answer the call for any reason, then the head usually sends back an excuse of some sort: he may just say "I can't come", or even "I don't want to come".

The Akawaio leader is not therefore, a ruler with instituted authority or power. He is accorded respect and he exerts influence but even these cannot be commanded. Ultimately, the influence which any leader has over his fellow villagers depends on the degree of co-operation and service they willingly accord him, or which he can coax out of them. In effect, this means that he owes his ascendancy to a combination of talents and circumstances, including powers of personality and persuasion and a large following of close relations. A man with brothers who have managed to marry within the village community is normally in a strong position as they, their families and affines, work in close association. A man who has a number of sons in law, whose services he can call upon under the conditions of matrilocal residence and service to wife's parents, is also in a strong position. By carefully deploying the energies of his immediate dependents he can, for example, gain influence by giving feasts from his superior food resources. This tends to attract more distant relations to his village as followers and adherents so that he becomes known as a "big man".

An able man has ways therefore, of building up his position as leader, but this position is not hereditary, nor is it necessarily stable over the years. Moreover, if a leader tries to impose on unwilling followers he will quickly find his village community melting away: any amount of protesting, haranguing and moralization will not save his village from being reduced to a single, extended family settlement and his effective position from that of leader to head of family only. Those who break away from a village, owing to grievance or even sheer lack of enthusiasm, go to
live in relative isolation in their own extended or joint family garden settlement, perhaps attaching themselves to relatives in another village for periodic feasting and dancing.

Personal loyalty, close kinship ties, mutual advantage and common interests, maintain associations of independent family units at a village level – not the possession or display of power and authority by a single person or group of persons. The fact that long periods are spent isolated in family garden places at a distance from the village base, gives each family head the maximum of independence and every opportunity to pursue family affairs exclusively and to follow his own wishes and judgement.

This loose organisation of Akawaio community life and the pronounced independence of the component family units leaves redress in grievances, the settlement of disputes and the direction of proper observance of customary behaviour in the hands of the individuals concerned and their immediate relatives. Others will not directly interfere with the course of events since it is not their business to do so. Nevertheless, gossip and the spread of scandal may automatically enable the community at large to bring pressure to bear on disputants who are disrupting the peace of mind and well being of everyone else.

Sometimes public opinion is divided, or ill-informed, or does not care; it may even be ineffective – where, for example, a particular issue is in dispute and the families of a village are divided in their allegiance to the parties involved. Since there is no overriding power or authority within the community and every settlement is autonomous, how can a solution to the difficulties be achieved and pressure be brought to bear on those who have behaved badly or inappropriately? This is where Akawaio beliefs concerning the causation of sickness and death relate to the state of society at the particular time. It is believed that hostility, between individuals, families, river groups and tribes, is a source of sickness, misfortune and even death. Incorrect behaviour, whether ritual or secular, is also detrimental to health and general well being. Physical sickness and social sickness are linked by the belief in spirit activity: spirits, whether living human ones, nature spirits or ghost spirits, operate in conditions of disharmony. The shaman, as arbiter of spirit activity, is called in to deal with hostile spirit forces. His task is a medical one in that he has to diagnose and cure the sickness of his patients: he
also plays a political and legal role in that he seeks to cure the social ill which is believed to be the fundamental cause of sickness. An examination of some of the Akawaio shaman’s seance pronouncements shows that by the very process of restoring health and normality to his patients he automatically helps to restore order and normality to infected sickness. An examination of some of the Akawaio shaman’s medical role rapidly converts into a legal role whereby he exercises considerable social control, so providing a legal mechanism appropriate to the undifferentiated, equalitarian form of society in which he works.

1. The Dispute between King George and John Charlie of Kataima Village, Mazaruni River Area.

During my stay at Kataima village in 1951-52 I witnessed the beginning of a series of attacks of illness suffered by the village leader (ebulu) John Charlie, which, a year later, led to his death from tuberculosis of the lung. This disease had already carried off his brother and several other close relatives. Various reasons were being assigned as the cause of John Charlie’s continual indisposition, but no firm conclusion in village speculations was reached before Francis, the shaman of Tagaikapai village, was brought in to consult the spirits. There was no competent shaman living in Kataima at that time and besides having the highest reputation Francis was a friend of the patient.

Francis made himself acquainted with the latest details of the illness and relevant circumstances: then he conducted a seance. During the course of it the spirit (akwalu) of King George, one of the family heads in Kataima, was made to confess to having placed a curse by blowing (taling) on John Charlie. King George was away from the village at the time; his spirit had been summoned from a distance.

At first sight it might seem as though Francis had deliberately stirred up trouble and was fostering a feud, for King George, on return to the village a few weeks later, soon heard what had happened and was furiously angry. He claimed that the spirits had made a mistake and he determined to go to Tagaikapai to see Francis about it. He went, but Francis had wisely anticipated the event and had left. In the company of Edmund, leader of

1. For details of ritual blowing as a means of causing or curing sickness see Butt 1956 and 1961.
Imbaimadai village further up the Mazaruni, he went on a prolonged visit to relatives up the Kako River, so passing into another river area.

When the first anger had worn off King George dropped his intention of challenging Francis about his seance. Instead, he planned to burn down his house at Kataima, so demonstrating that he, his wife and children, were finished with the place and its inhabitants. He told people he was going to settle at Kurupung, the mining village with mixed population, at the foot of the Pakaraima escarpment on a tributary of the Lower Mazaruni River. He said he would return to Akawaio country only to reside at his garden place at Kamarang Mouth, near the Government Station there. In fact, he left Kataima for his garden place but did not cut his connections permanently with the village or burn his house as a demonstration of feeling.

After Francis’ controversial seance John Charlie got better temporarily, only to fall more seriously ill a month later. Francis held two seances for him, in February 1952, with a few weeks interval between them. In the first of these he was more cautious in his choice of spirits. The diagnosis was that a spirit (akwalu), unnamed, was “blowing bad” (taling). Francis said that he could not discover where this spirit came from that was cursing John Charlie: people were left to draw their own conclusions. On the second occasion a ghost spirit (akwalupa) of a person long dead, whose name was not known, was the cause of the trouble. Some months later, after recurring spells of illness of increasing severity, John Charlie died. What other causes had been unearthed through spirit consultation I do not know, but on my return in 1957, five years later, the blame had been assigned to a family of sorcerers (edodo) who were then emerging as the cause for all the ills and deaths of the previous years and were spreading terror in the tribe at large. King George had, meanwhile, become a member of the new village of Jawalla, established on the abandonment of Kataima. He never took over the leadership. From time to time he carefully informed people that he was travelling

2. Under such circumstances, I was told, a family might also burn its gardens at the village, harvesting the mature manioc roots and any other produce before setting fire to the remains. King George did not do this.

3. A disproportionate number of deaths, including that of John Charlie the leader, caused Kataima to be associated with sorrow and misfortune. As a result of this and pressure from a newly established mission to get the village transferred from a forest to a riverside site, a general move was made to Jawalla, a family settlement of John Charlie’s successor Henry.
about and working too much outside the village for it to be practical to take over the leadership. In stating this he was using John Charlie's own argument and also that of the District Officer whose task it was to supervise, guide and confirm the appointment of village leaders. This was a face-saving assertion since King George and his wife were personally unpopular and unlikely ever to command the necessary support of the other families of the village.

Subscribing to scientific medical theories of causation we might be justified in asserting that shamans will cause trouble and even blood feuds by their spirit pronouncements and accusations. Looking at the case as far as possible in terms of Akawaio concepts a different conclusion can be drawn. Since the Akawaio do not believe that illness may be caused by disease alone, without an enemy agent, everyone in John Charlie's case was looking for an enemy. This was their initial assumption and the real problem was the identity of the enemy and how he or she was working. Evil blowing (taling) was a fairly obvious diagnosis: no one assumes sorcery (edodo) until death seems inevitable, for this is the equivalent of giving up hope. Moreover, a victim of sorcery dies within a few days of the attack. A curse by blowing tends to inflict a long and lingering illness, such as John Charlie was enduring, though of course sorcery might be the final means of killing. Living in the village at the time I heard all the attendant circumstances in the village gossip and this information explained the seance pronouncements.

The pronouncements were the culmination of a series of incidents between King George and his family on one side and John Charlie and his family on the other. Everyone knew of the bad relationships between the two. King George was seeking to displace John Charlie as officially recognised village leader and had even approached the District Officer at the Government Station to this effect. King George had had his garden place at Kataima before it became a village: it was by agreement between him and John Charlie that the old village of Waramadokmapu had moved to the Kataima site a few years previously. In terms of prior occupation therefore, it was King George's place.

Other reasons for the dispute gradually emerged. King George had wanted one of John Charlie's very eligible daughters as a second wife but the girl's mother said that she disliked King George's first wife so much that they would be bound to quarrel. There was also bad feeling
between John Charlie's sister Mary and King George. King George himself asserted that this was due to his having acted as interpreter at the time when Mary's son was ordered down to Georgetown for hospital treatment. The boy had died in hospital and the interpreter was held partially responsible for the order which, in Akawaio opinion had led to the boy's death. Apart from a mutual dislike between the womenfolk of both families there was an increase in tension and an aggravation of relationships by small incidents. King George's gardens were always separate from those of the rest, "to prevent interference" he and his wife told me. With John Charlie's increasing illness came the climax and Francis' seance for the diagnosis of the cause of the sickness.

Francis undoubtedly knew about King George's aspirations and the enmity between the two families: he was not alone in linking it to the illness which, at this time, began to appear serious. When King George's own spirit (akawalu) was made to declare that he was the originator of evil blowing, no one in John Charlie's family doubted it, for all the circumstances pointed to him. Was he not at enmity and had not good reason for bad feelings and its expression in blowing? Francis was not himself on bad terms with King George and was neither a near relation of John Charlie nor a very close friend. There could be no personal motive in his pronouncement. The fact is that Akawaio do not, any more than other people, suddenly turn and accuse someone of evil deeds unless they have what they consider to be good and sufficient reasons within terms of their own habitual modes of thought and logic. When a shaman is called in on such occasions, the causes of strife are already present and it requires only the spirit pronouncements to bring the case to its climax — to confirm people in their opinions by making certainty doubly certain.

Akawaio society contains no law courts or judges: there is no conception of a formal investigation of cases by examination of witnesses, there is no administration of oaths or mediation of a third party. In this situation, the shaman's seance sometimes fulfills the functions of the court of justice in more complex communities. It does this because it

4. The job of interpreting for the administration at Kamarang Mouth was frequently regarded as an unpleasant duty. No Akawaio likes issuing orders to distant relations and strangers, even at second hand. Reporting unpleasant or unwelcome requests was especially distasteful, often causing the interpreter to modify them to the extent that they lost all force of impact.
provides an occasion for bringing disputes and malpractices into the open: if a culprit does not openly argue his case or make his excuses, the seance at least informs him that his various activities are under public scrutiny and he is given the chance of setting wrongs to rights.

2. Roy and the Stolen Rice.

In October 1951 I was staying in Tagaikapai, having as my assistants Roy Kenswil and his wife Sarah. Roy's father, F.W. Kenswil, was a miner who had settled among the Akawaio and married into Tagaikapai. He had died the year before my arrival, leaving a widow and four children of whom Roy was the eldest.

With the intention of diagnosing the cause of intermittent stomach ache and obtaining a cure, Francis conducted a seance for me. It was attended by most people of the village, including Sarah. Roy, although usually keen to attend seances, remained in his hammock in another house, pleading indisposition and without making any attempt to take advantage of the seance as a means of cure for himself. During the proceedings Kenswil's ghost spirit (akwalupa) arrived. The ghost said that his son, Roy, would get ill if he ate too much rice. The shaman's wife then spoke up on Roy's behalf and told her ghost brother in law - "You can't stop him eating what he likes".

The ghost's reply to this was incomprehensible, according to Sarah when I pressed her for an exact translation later.

This was one small incident in the seance which continued with the main task of diagnosing the illness I had contracted. Nevertheless, it had repercussions for the next day. Sarah came to my house with a handful of cooked rice and left it beside my cooking utensils. When I proposed mixing it in with my dog's food she threw it away, muttering that it would make anyone ill who ate it.

These occurrences explained my rapidly diminishing rice supply. Roy and Sarah, who were employed by me, had not been content with occasional gifts of rice but had been taking large quantities for themselves and for Roy's younger brother and sisters. This fact had obviously become known to Francis since nothing can be kept secret for long in a

5. See Case 8, pp. 172-4 for a more detailed account of this particular seance.
small Akawaio village. Moreover, this particular household had consumed the food without sharing it with the settlement at large, so that the charge of greediness could also be levelled against them in a community which required that any abundance of food should be shared by all. Stealing and greediness are regarded as nasty practices among the Akawaio, most especially when they occur within the same settlement and amongst close relatives. Francis’ remedy was to summon Roy’s father’s ghost to give a warning of the consequences of eating too much – a hint which the culprit quickly took when his wife reported back to him after the seance. Hence the return of the remains of the rice in an effort to right matters. Later on Roy confessed to me that he was getting headaches and he thought that it was through eating too much rice. His sufferings were therefore assumed to have been the outcome of his misdeeds – a logical deduction in terms of belief in the spirit causation of sickness. His absence from the seance might have been deliberate, due to a fear of possible spirit revelations to his detriment.

The case of the stolen rice, like that of the dispute between John Charlie and King George, shows the effective role which the shaman can have in the life of a village. It can also be said to be a typical Akawaio role by reason of the indirect approach which the seance permits. Francis had other courses open to him, more obvious ones but not so effective. As leader of the village he could have warned Roy outright about his misdeeds. There was one family in the neighbouring village of Wailakmapu whose members were constantly stealing: the leader there, Francis’ brother in law, was just as constantly telling them that ‘they should not do these bad things” – but without apparent effect. This lecturing, which often takes the form of thinly veiled references in general pronouncements made by village leaders on occasions of feasts and church festivals, is the most direct action which can be taken in public in such circumstances. Francis could have approached Roy privately and told him he was doing wrong, but this would have led to a personal confrontation and unpleasantness which every Akawaio seeks to avoid, although it occasionally occurs when someone loses his temper or is goaded beyond endurance. Such direct confrontation, if it leads to a row, causes the families to align themselves behind the disputants, to drag up all the causes of disagreement over the years – however petty – and it can lead to the partial break up of the settlement.
Moreover, if Roy had chosen to deny his fault and had asserted that he had only been eating the rice I had given away, Francis could have been placed in an awkward position. Actual proof is often difficult to obtain and Francis could have been accused of having “bad thoughts”. “Bad thoughts” among the Akawaio, is the initial state of feelings which may eventually express themselves through cursing by blowing (taling) or sorcery attack (edodo).

Finally, Francis could have come to me, the victim of the theft, but this would have been a betrayal of his “son” — Roy being the son of Francis’ wife’s half sister. Moreover, the betrayal would have been to a stranger and, for all he knew at that stage of our acquaintanceship, might arouse unpleasant repercussions at the Government Station, which Francis regularly attended in his capacity as a village leader (ebulu) and Government Captain.

In choosing the typically indirect approach of which the Akawaio are so fond Francis also chose the most effective approach in the circumstances. He brought down the most authoritative ghost spirit and so linked the sentiment and respect bound up with a powerful kinship tie with the consequences attendant on annoying the spirit world. In this way, he achieved a combination of pressures which might be calculated to prevail on the most obstinate and independent of Akawaio. He achieved this too without committing himself, since spirit forces performed the unpleasant task of making the pronouncement and threatening the consequences. So the wrong-doer was spared the shame and annoyance of a face to face encounter with his village leader and living “father”; moreover, he had the satisfaction of being defended by his classificatory “mother”, the shaman’s wife, during the seance. Yet, the situation was rectified and the principle that it is wrong to steal was publicly upheld. The entire case was a masterpiece of diplomacy and management on the part of the shaman.

This method of bringing social problems to a head during a seance, with view to achieving a settlement, was not confined to Francis’ shaman practice. A case of personal grievances in which I was later involved illustrates this.

3. Ghost Retaliation in a Dispute.

During a stay at Chinawieng village, Mazaruni River area, I had occasion to refuse to give away the remains of my supply of salt. The bulk had already been given and I
had retained only a few spoonfuls for household use. In spite of this, shaman Joe's old father, Amoko, had come along while I was out of the village and made off with half of what was left. I stated my annoyance and forgot the incident. Some days later, suffering from a slight inflammation of the eyelids, I asked Joe to conduct a seance on my behalf to find out both cause and cure. Eventually Joe's brother's ghost Enery (Henry) Degu, came and declared that he was angry with me and had sent the eye sickness (engup). However, Enery Degu agreed to make me well again and he blew on me vigorously through the medium of his shaman brother.

The next day I asked Joe why his brother's ghost had been angry with me: he avoided giving a direct answer and seemed highly embarrassed. It was not hard to guess what had happened: my annoyance at Amoko's removal of my salt had roused his son's ghost in his defence. My Akawaio friends suggested that a packet of cigarettes to Joe and his father would right the situation. It did.

In cases of serious sickness the seance is one long process of probing for causes. The behaviour of everyone concerned may be scrutinized minutely and anything detrimental is quickly seized on by the spirits possessing the shaman and is aired to the full. The spirits are said to know everything, so it is little use to dissimulate: moreover, the confession of wrong-doing automatically helps to achieve the cure since a correct diagnosis is more than half the battle. The spirits do not mince words and are fully capable of delivering homilies on correct conduct, denouncing malpractices and further humbling their victims by a combination of suggestive probes, satire and heavy sarcasm. At such times particularly, one is tempted to correlate the seance and the court of law: the spirits are barristers, extracting information and putting their case with sagacious wit: the patient and his immediate relatives are victims and culprits combined: the seance audience provides the witnesses and is the judge. It will eventually provide the final comment. The following case, conducted by Joe of Chinawieng, is a Good illustration of all these aspects of the seance and is relatively complex.

4. The Sick Baby.

The baby in this case was about one month old in July 1957 and had developed a severe cold. The father, Leonard, was suffering from swollen and painful joints.
Joe began the seance by summoning his main helpers. First came the ladder spirit (*Kalawali*) to establish contact between the world of man and the world of spirits: his teacher's ghost spirit followed, singing about cooling down the child's sickness. Then came *Imawali*, the forest spirit, representing the main order of nature spirits. *Taiugu* the tree bark spirit came to give strength, for this spirit is especially strong; it can coerce and punish spirits causing sickness as well as force an entry into the home of *Imawali*. Finally, Joe obtained wings for spirit flight from the hawk (*Kukoi*) and from his spirit girl friend (*Maionggong bazi*), who was helping to attract the shaman's spirit into the sky. Since the illness was judged a serious one Joe entered his trance early in the seance.

The ghost spirit of his first wife came down, followed by *Imawali*, the forest spirit, who sang thus:

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atiabak iakwalula tainembaik?
Why his (sort of) spirit has gone away?
Amulegong angalumbapai
Your children have cried
Awazigong.
You women.
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"Why are you making the child cry so much that its spirit (*akwalu*) goes and the child gets sick?" asked *Imawali*. He then went on to accuse them of making the child cry so much that some ghost (*akwalupa*) had taken away the spirit (*akwalu*).

In reply to this the people of the audience told *Imawali* to bring back the child's spirit, but his response to this appeal was to begin castigating the mother for her past behaviour. "Why do they not blow on the child?" he asked. He knew they could blow "because the baby's mother always spoke about blowing" (*taling*).

This was a reference to the fact that she had once threatened to blow (ie. curse) a former boy friend when he left her for another girl.

"Now she needs to blow and she cannot, but has to come to *Imawali* for blowing. Why don't you blow on the child and get it better? Why did you take charms (*murang*) when the baby was born?"

6. For an account of these and the part they have to play in the shaman's experiences see Butt 1962.
The baby’s mother denied *Imawali*’s accusation concerning the taking of charms, but to no effect. Undeterred, the angry spirit asserted that she had been eating too much when the baby was born. Consequently he could do nothing about this illness because the charm had taken the child’s spirit, or some animal spirit had taken the child’s spirit. This referred to the fact that the mother had eaten meat at a time when it was strictly prohibited to her.

Somewhat cowed by *Imawali*’s browbeating members of the audience humbly replied that they only wanted to know who had taken the child’s spirit away. *Imawali* relented at this and sang thus:

“*Imawali wants to return the child’s spirit this side. Get better! Stand up!*” (addressing the child’s spirit) “Go to your former place and sit down in the baby sling”.

Then he admonished the mother telling her not to make the child cry so much again for he, *Imawali* the forest spirit, had brought the spirit back. Moreover, he said, the child’s father’s mother’s ghost had got inside the child. If they, the parents, did not take good care of the child this ghost spirit would come out and the child would get sick again. The ghost might even take the child’s spirit with it in such an instance, so – final warning – “they must care for it well”.

*Imawali* left, having helped towards the restoration of the baby’s spirit. This restoration was not yet complete by any means and the seance went on with the task of healing. The next to arrive was *Engwarak*, a lizard spirit. Meanwhile, the shaman’s tree bark helper, *Taiugu*, had been at work helping to release the child’s spirits (ewang). *Engwarak*, the lizard, sang about how he was being met by *Taiugu* who was sending him to bring back the baby’s spirit. The lizard had apparently been one of his captors. The seance audience

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7. Charms are believed to attract, so that care has to be taken that they do not attract the wrong object. At the time of the couvade, meat is strictly forbidden to both the mother and father of the child. This is because, it is believed, the spirit of the animal eaten will attack the baby’s spirit which in believed to be especially weak and unstable for the period immediately following birth.

8. The baby sling (wenik) is a finger woven cotton band. The mother wears it over one shoulder and under the other arm, seating the child at the base where there is additional support from the hip.

9. Akawalo believe that sometimes the ghost spirit of a benevolent relative enters a child for some years and so strengthens and protects it during the crucial years of growth.
responded to this by asking why he, Engwarak, had taken the child’s spirit: they also told him to bring down all the child’s spirits.

At this juncture mule akwalu, the child’s spirit, arrived back and the people of the seance gladly welcomed it with shouts of “come” and “stay”. At the same time came Waluwa bazi, tree resin woman who sang a maruwa song, about the restoration of the child’s spirit. Said an informant:

“The spirit sings that the child must put the maruwa in its ears: when it listens to the maruwa it will get better”.

Leaving the baby for the moment, the spirits now turned their attention to the sick baby’s father, Leonard. Boidotma a mountain spirit associated with charms, came and asked where the parents had got the sickness. People in the audience replied that they did not know. Then Boidotma, referring to Leonard, sang this song:

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\text{atlodo pechip edepedoging} \\
\text{Why at the leg calves stinging ones} \\
\text{Mule kwabunape ezeitma.} \\
\text{Child’s father being got (the child).}
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Leonard, in order to treat his swelling knee and elbow joints had, in accordance with regular Akawaio practice, been stinging himself with monori ants, using the customary ant frames.

“That is why the baby gets sick”, pronounced Boidotma. “The monori ant spirit has taken away the child’s spirit”.

Informants explained, when listening to my tape recording of the seance, that every Imawali (that is, every spirit of the forest), had taken the child’s spirit. That was why the first Imawali, coming down at the beginning of the seance, had said that he was powerless to return the entire spirit. That was why, for a very sick person, the shaman often has to conduct several seances, sometimes all night long. In other words, the shaman’s task was not only to restore every fraction of the child’s spirit but also to coerce each spirit captor in turn since many spirits had combined to cause the sickness.

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10. Waluwa is a tree resin frequently used to make torches. Protium sp.
In a long conversation between the baby’s parents and the spirits a great many facets of the case came to light which explained the reasons for the sickness of both father and child. Listening to my tape recording of his performance of the previous night Joe commented on the seance thus:

“Imawali comes back with the baby’s spirit. While they (i.e. the parents) were walking all about and the child was crying, the lizard (Engwarak) heard the crying and took the child’s spirit. When they had the baby the mother ate some animal (i.e. meat) without giving any to her husband: that is why the child is getting sick. The mother was eating on her own and the animal spirit got inside the child and has been humbugging it.”

Imawali asked the father where his sickness had come from and Leonard replied that he did not know, which was the reason why he had taken the monori ant charm. “When he died and went to heaven he would speak with God and say that he did not know where the sickness was from.”

That Leonard was prepared to swear before God his ignorance of the origin of the sickness, was a strong assertion that he did not know what he had done wrong to bring about his child’s illness. Accepting this for the moment Imawali then asked whether Leonard had been to other villages, thereby implying that evil-minded strangers might have inflicted the illness while he was visiting with them. Leonard’s reply to this was that he had not been to any other place but had stayed in his own village.

People in the audience interrupted this conversation to ask Imawali whether he knew about blowing (taling) to make Leonard better. Imawali replied that he was ignorant of this because he was a tree bark, the tumorenq tree bark. 12 Audience members now confessed that they knew nothing about curative blowing for the purpose of keeping the monoli ant spirit out of the child. They knew only that when a person died their ghost spirit may come and go into a baby: they knew blowing for this only.

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11. The word for ‘animal’ is the same as that for ‘meat’ among the Akawalio. ‘Hum­bug’ is a word picked up by Akawalio at the Government Station at Kamarrang and occasionally used by them with striking effect.

12. Tumorenq is Sclerochobium sp.
“Do ghosts know about blowing?” they asked Imawali hopefully. They recalled that Lydia’s father’s father, called Karaba,13 knew about blowing but nobody now knew, so that although people tried to help the child it was getting no better. Ignoring this appeal to consult a ghost spirit proficient in blowing techniques Imawali sang a gay song about the tying of feathers on the bamboo staff, so making it into a dancing staff which is used by the leader of the circular dances at feasts.

This gay song about the bird feather decorations seems to have reminded the audience that there was one particular spirit who might be able to help them. Someone asked Imawali where the waioura (cadouri)14 bird was. They wanted this bird to bring the spirit of the child. Shaman Joe later explained that there is a waioura kumi, i.e. a reed charm named after the bird.

“It is called waioura because the reed charm (kumi) flies like it perhaps” – an informant hazarded a guess. “Waioura, the bird, talks: in the same way the kumi makes you talk about what you don’t know. Waioura kumi (cadouri bird charm) makes people sing and imitate – like the waioura bird, so this kumi (reed charm) can find the song for them which they don’t know and which will bring back the spirit.”

At this point my recording unfortunately came to an end: a storm was threatening and I was invited inside the house, which was jammed full of people and in total darkness. To have made a successful recording inside meant that previous arrangements would have had to be made. As a consequence the shaman was, on the subsequent day, unable to give more than a general outline of the latter part of the seance.

Nevertheless, the sample I have set out here is sufficient to show the way a complicated enquiry is conducted in seance conditions. Spirit enquiry, with audience participation, had elicited the following combination of misdeeds on the part of the parents of the sick child:

1. The mother had been taking charms in order to break the couvade prohibition on eating meat. This had caused the spirits of the animals eaten to take away the baby’s

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13. Lydia was an elderly woman living in Chiraweng.

14. The Moriche Oriole, referred to generally in the country as cadouri.
spirit. Later in the seance it transpired that the child’s grandmother’s ghost had also taken away the child’s spirit, being displeased at the breaking of the couvade observations.

2. The mother had not given any of the meat to her husband and was eating it in secret. The animal spirit concerned was angry at this greediness and selfishness: the spirit entered the child, was molesting it and making it ill.

3. The baby had been taken on journeys and was heard crying by the lizard, who captured its spirit.

4. The father had taken an ant charm to cure his painful joints and the ants had taken the child’s spirit.

This is not the appropriate place to discuss the detailed requirements of the couvade, which operate at the time of giving birth and embrace the diet and behaviour of both mother and father as soon as the child is born. Nevertheless, some aspects of the control, which extends for many months after the birth, do require comment if the spirit pronouncements are to be appreciated.

The spirits in the seance were referring to the ways in which Leonard and his wife had, by disregarding traditional rules, endangered the child’s life by exposing it to dangerous spirit forces. The mother had not only evaded the prohibitions on diet but had broken a most fundamental rule of conduct — the sharing of food within the family unit. Her husband’s mother’s ghost (her mother in law) was greatly offended by this breaking of the traditional code of behaviour at the expense of her son and, moreover, at the most inappropriate time, on the birth of her grandson. Consequently she was punishing her daughter in law by making the child ill. The father, whose behaviour is believed to affect the spiritual well-being of his child, had treated himself in such a way as to expose his son’s life.

Finally, people had noticed that the baby had not been properly cared for: although it was only a few weeks old it had been taken around on journeys from the village and had been made to cry whilst on the hot savanna trails, so attracting spirit attention by its plight. The traditional code of behaviour enjoins both father and mother to stay at home and rest as much as possible for some weeks after a birth.

Neither in regard to ritual observations of the couvade nor commonsense and practical behaviour had the parents
cared adequately for their new-born child. Through their
detailed enquiries the spirits made this quite plain to the
villagers taking part. Furthermore, the mother was casti-
gated by Imawali for past ill nature and jealousy, when she
had threatened to blow and curse her ex-boy friend. The
taunt was a cruel one, even if deserved; she had threatened
to blow ill to another but had not even the knowledge and
ability to save her own child by blowing and had had to
apply for spirit aid.

The spirits then, through the medium of shaman Joe,
took the offending couple to task publicly and in no uncertain
way. The multiplicity of spirits which had combined to
carry off the child’s spirit (akwalu) and spirit fraction
(ewang), so making the sickness serious and the cure more
difficult, reflected the multiplicity of offences on the part of
the parents. The end of the seance came when the child’s
spirit, in all its parts, had been returned. The parents,
pronounced the shaman on the following day, should stay
quiet!

The seance certainly had some effect for when I was
asking for carriers to help take my equipment on to the next
village, Leonard said that he could not carry for me because
of the baby. He did eventually change his mind of his own
accord and ask to come. His wife, with the baby rapidly
regaining health, remained at home. At that time, in 1957,
a considerable relaxation in the observance of the couvade
was taking place under administrative and mission in-
fluences: in some parts there was a total disregard on the
part of the father. Nevertheless, sickness of a baby
inevitably caused the parents, at least temporarily, to revert
to former customs.

An important outcome of shaman activity is this regu-
lation of community life in its many different aspects. The
case of the sick baby shows a control of both secular and
ritual behaviour, the two being linked in their consequences
on health. Other seances show a major concern with ritual
observances in which offences of omission and abuse are
dealt with. For example, a minor ritual obligation was
upheld in the following case.

5. A Burial Observance.

In March 1952 at Chinawieng village, a family had
omitted to place a dead woito bird in the father’s grave.

15. This bird has not been identified by me.
This particular bird is thought to whistle in alarm when Edodo, a sorcerer, approaches. The whistling bird spirit scares away the sorcerer who, as a ghoul, is believed to try and drink the body juices of a recently buried victim.

Some days after the funeral the daughter of the deceased man was suffering from a severe headache which lasted all day. Joe, the village shaman, was called in to diagnose the cause. After some hours of hard work interviewing the spirits, it transpired that Imawali, the forest spirit, had caused the headache at the instigation of the ghost of the deceased parent: the reason for their mutual vexation was the omission of the woto bird from the grave. Here then, was an instance of sickness caused by a nature spirit inspired by a vexed ghost in punishment for the neglect of a prescribed ritual practice.

The unwise or incorrect use of charms may also lead to sickness: fear of this causes people to exercise some care to avoid immoderate use.

6. Immoderate Use of Charms.

At Walbaima, Mazaruni River, in April 1957, a young shaman, Freddy, conducted a seance for his mother in law Hemmy. She had become afflicted with increasing deafness and her eyesight was getting worse. In addition, she complained of being "hot inside".

First, Imawali, the forest spirit, arrived and sympathized: then he sang that she should not feel sad, for although her spirit (akwalu) had strayed far away he, Imawali, would nevertheless fetch it back. Then followed the diagnosis: Kaiaba, a charm plant, had made the patient deaf and sad. He himself came and sang to this affect.

Mamago chipanabuluida, mamago neboigoiyumai.
Grandmother has made deaf, grandmother has made sad.

Similarly, kaiaba had caused the pain that Hemmy sometimes felt at the bridge of her nose and at the temples. He it was who had made her eyes dark. Having confessed this, Kaiaba advised the old lady to take care of herself, rest a lot and eat little when she did not feel well – otherwise he, Kaiaba, would kill her.

This danger from the spirit of the kaiaba charm arose after the death of Hemmy’s son Miguel; she had put a root of this charm in his grave, in preparation for a future seance when Kaiaba spirit would come and say who had killed the
boy. There had been no shaman in the family at the time but the charm could work as soon as one came. It did — with the marriage of the young shaman Freddy to Hemmy’s daughter. Said Freddy:

“If kaiaba is put in a grave you must not eat much for two weeks, just cassava and a little fish, but no meat is allowed, otherwise Kaiaba will come and make you sick.”

Hemmy plainly had not used her charm carefully enough and so her eyes and hearing had suffered.

At this same seance, turning his attention to another patient, a woman who was “hot inside”, Freddy brought down a series of spirits who encouraged the patient and finally one who affected a cure. This was Kawai bazi akwalu, tobacco woman spirit, who said she was going to give Imawali, the forest spirit, a drink of tobacco juice (kawai). Then she blew on the patient and whistled, “swee — ish: swee — ish”, and so took Kaiali, the lily charm, from her that she might get better. The giving of tobacco juice to Imawali, representing the chief order of nature spirits, was no doubt a means of placating the hostile Kaiali, who is regarded by the Akawaio as an Imawali - type spirit — one of the countless spirits of the forest and of vegetation.

At a later seance, for someone with stomach disorders, Kaiali was diagnosed as the cause of the sickness. In all the river areas of Akawaio territory at that time, stomach troubles and mild forms of dysentery were experienced, such as often occur when the long wet season begins and the rivers start to rise. The belief rapidly gained ground that the sickness troubling the people was caused by their “sickness charms” which they had been taking in immoderate quantities. At Jawalla village, up the Mazaruni River, the situation was expressed in this way:

“They scratch their arms and legs and rub in plant juices. These are turning on them and going to the head. They call it Kaiali, who is a sort of Imawali (Imawatile). Kaiali, Imawali-like, (Imawalibe) is said to have killed Margaret’s sister.”

16. Quantities of decaying vegetable matter and rubbish from the river banks and forest are swept into the rivers at this time of the year, so entering the supply of drinking water.

17. This is a description of how people utilize plants with medical properties. As cures they are called ‘medicines’ (ebik) but as they act in a manner similar to charms they are also frequently referred to as ‘charms’ (murang). All plants fall into the major category of Imawali — type spirits (forests spirits). Margaret was an old woman living at Jawalla.
The seance may act as a regulator of ritual and health matters: in the particular ones I have quoted the shaman sought to control the reckless use of the various charm plants for purposes of divination and cure, asserting professional knowledge and authority over unwise home-doctoring.

Care over what is eaten, especially what is eaten at certain crucial periods, is also emphasized through seances.


A seance was conducted in August 1957 by Ernest, at Emakmu village on the Kwatin (Upper Cotinga) River. He had two patients: an old man with a great weeping sore covering his shoulders and back, called tulima by the Akawaio: it was probably a form of yaws. The second patient was a young boy with a sore on his testicles.

Spirit diagnosis for the latter patient was made by Aiyuk, a tree spirit, who said that the sore was due to the boy having eaten fire ashes.

"Not just a little", said Ernest in explanation later, "but a lot". The eating of earth and ashes by children occurs occasionally and is probably the result of some deficiency in the diet. If it becomes a regular habit and is excessive, then the child is severely punished. One of the few occasions on which I witnessed the thorough spanking of a child by its mother was when its earth eating habit had just been discovered. During my research one child was said to have died through excessive earth eating.

The old man with his open sores had, at a previous seance, been diagnosed as the victim of a spirit stone (wata) attack, conveying the sickness. It was said to have been sent into him by an evil shaman of the neighbouring Patamona tribe. Although this spirit stone had been removed by Ernest, he still had not recovered. The reason for this, the spirits pronounced at the following seance, was because he had followed the stone's removal by eating hog tannia, a large taro-type root (Xanthosoma sp.). This had made the illness worse again. The argument behind this was that when people are ill they should rest and "starve" (jeluma); that is, they must eat very little. The patient had broken this observance, with unfortunate consequences.

18. Aiyuk: Virola sp. Taiugu is said to be the forest spirit's name for the tree.

19. Jeluma means 'diet' but the Akawaio translate it as 'starve'. The word refers to the period of food restrictions at the time of birth, at a girl's puberty and
A good deal of the shaman's advice, conveyed to his audience in spirit pronouncements, is based on sound common sense. Although expressed in elaborate images of spirit activity the message nevertheless strikes home: the more so, perhaps, because of the associated imagery and the spirit authority behind it. In this respect, the seance is a powerful sanction for the maintenance of correct behaviour and the observance of customary procedure.


_Lato_, the water spirit, is the natural defender of proper behaviour relating to his domain. Those who offend this category of spirits may get sick when they travel on the water or swim in it. An angry _Lato_ may drag people down under the water to eat them.

When, in 1951, I was suffering from stomach pains and asked Francis of Tagalkapai to consult the spirits on my behalf, it was _Lato_ who eventually arrived and admonished me. Addressing me as grandmother (_kokoi_), out of an exaggerated respect, he stated his annoyance that I had ventured to swim about his rocky home so freely. Although vexed at such an intrusion he had now come to blow a cure on me and make me well again. The next day Francis advised me to keep close to the bank when swimming, in case the water spirit should catch me one day and I should drown.

What had happened was this: Francis had seen me, most afternoons, swimming and diving round a pile of rocks just off the Tagalkapai shore: I had also gone out into mid-stream. Akawaio women, like the majority of men, rarely swim more than a few yards from the bank. My unusual and unwise type of bathing, according to Akawaio customary ideas and practice, together with the fact that _Lato_ was believed to have his home under one of the rocks where I was swimming, had been associated in Francis' mind with the fact that I was sick. All these factors in association suggested a chain of causation which the seance revealed.

In April 1957 Freddy held a seance at Walbaima in which one of his patients was a boy of about 13 or 14 years, called Moley. Moley was, I judged, ill with influenza. In the course of the seance the lily charm spirit, _Kaiali_, arrived. Hearing of the boy's sickness he went off to find _Lato_ bazi, water spirit woman, knowing her to be responsible. Water spirit woman arrived, but her fright was such that she flew
away almost immediately. She was dragged back and made to confess that she, having intended to take Moley as her husband, had stolen his spirit. Taiugu, the powerful tree bark spirit, came next and joined forces with Kaiali, the lily charm, in order to subdue the guilty one. A loud scuffle followed: lily charm and tree bark had set upon and were fighting water spirit woman. At this stage Freddy’s own spirit flew away and the success of his spirit flight was shown by the arrival of Moley’s captured spirit, which now reentered the boy’s body. The shaman’s cure ended with the arrival of a succession of water spirits coming to the seance, led by Imawali himself who was, in this instance, a forest spirit attached to one of Freddy’s spirit stones (wata). Possibly this illustrated the autonomy of Imawali – of the forest sphere, over the category of river spirits personified in Lato. The succeeding spirits, each restoring a fraction of Moly’s spirit after the defeat of water spirit woman, included these: first came Mabalwa, the otter or “water dog”; then came “the otter’s child”, another otter called Uruturu; Tunagok arrived, a water insect, perhaps a water spider; Yapopa, the water spirit connected with the rainbow snake; finally, Twengarong came, a female water spirit with long hair.

What had happened in this seance was as follows; Moley, ill with influenza, was declared to have spent too much time “walking all about” in the dry season, camping at night on exposed sandbanks during fishing expeditions along the rivers. This had allowed water spirit woman the opportunity of carrying off the boy’s spirit. Kaiali, a charm utilized by the shaman, had found this out and had forced the culprit to come to the seance. The power of the two charms, Kaiali the lily charm and Taiugu the tree bark charm, was used by the shaman to overwhelm the offending water spirit: at the same time, the shaman performed a spirit flight and retrieved the captive spirit from Lato’s home. He was helped in this by the spirits of various water creatures who, under the supervision of one of the shaman’s spirit helpers, an Imawali attached to a spirit stone, all came to the seance singing that they were bringing back the boy’s spirit.

20. The rainbow is agoima, meaning ‘big snake”. It is associated with the boa constrictor.

21. Akawalo shamans possess a number of spirit stones (wata). These are pebbles and quartz crystals believed to have inside them a powerful nature spirit of some sort.
The empirical basis of the shaman’s verdict shows clearly in this particular seance. Although Lato may be an ultimate cause of influenza only if one happens to believe in water spirits and the spirit causation of sickness, everyone knows that to rush about getting hot and then to sleep in the open, on sandbanks where a cold night breeze can strike, leads to the possibility of a severe chill. The seance was a salutary lesson to the patient and the audience, for it showed them the necessity of taking sensible precautions to guard their health when active in the vicinity of rivers.

Shamanism as a Procedure for Exercising Social Control.

F. W. Kenswil, who knew the language and had the closest contacts with the Akawaio over many years, wrote this of the Akawaio shaman: 22

“They stir up old feuds causing many a murder and thus promote racial suicide. Should a Medicine-man have an ill feeling against a man or woman, and he is called to treat a sick person, he tells the family of the sick one, through the spirits, and they are implicitly believed, that his enemy, naming the one he is against, has caused the illness. Should the patient die, his family, in many cases, revenges his death by murdering his supposed assassin.”

Kenswil acquired most of his knowledge of shamanism from Francis, (Cases 1, 2 & 8), with whom he founded the settlement of Tagaikapai: he well knew the type of spirit pronouncement and the influence which a skilful shaman could exercise over inter-relationships and individual behaviour. It is not Kenswil’s knowledge which I query therefore, but his and similar interpretations which have been put forward relating to the shaman’s role in society.

Those who condemn the shaman’s activities have usually done so by interpreting the activity of one society in terms of the concepts of another – their own very different one: but to understand the role which the shaman plays it is necessary to consider shamanism in its native setting, as part of the system of thought and of action of the particular community in which it operates. Although this is a commonplace procedure in social anthropological analysis there are many – administrators and missionaries in particular – who do not follow it.

Shamans are not irresponsible people, nor by any means the unscrupulous menace to peaceful relations within the community or between communities that many have suggested. Their critics have failed to appreciate, perhaps, that shamans themselves believe a certain enemy to be the cause of trouble in each case of sickness and death. Shamans appear to believe this as firmly as does the sick person and the rest of the community. Although accusations against other tribes may normally be issued with impunity, for distant peoples are unlikely to hear about it or even to care very much, shamans consciously run the risk of retaliation whenever pronouncements are made which directly involve a fellow tribesman. The case of King George versus John Charlie (Case 1, pp. 154-8), shows this. Unless a fellow tribesman, even more so a fellow villager, is already under suspicion for good reasons and condemned by a large section of popular opinion, the shaman would be unlikely to consider him guilty in the first place: if he did not consider him guilty it is even more unlikely that he would dare to make a direct pronouncement against him, out of sheer personal malice: even vague allusions and hints couched in spirit terms would be a dangerous move to make.

We might take the view that, after all, it would be better if the shaman, for the sake of the peace of the community and good relationships, suppressed his findings and spirit pronouncements. To assert this possibility is to misunderstand the judicial implications of the shaman’s role, as well as to ignore his medical duty. On the one hand it would be the equivalent of suggesting that a judge, in his summing up in court, should disregard the evidence presented and declare an obvious culprit innocent, simply in order to try and make out that no cause of friction or dispute actually exists. On the other hand, it amounts to a suggestion that a doctor should ignore the symptoms on which he bases his diagnosis. In terms of Akawaio thought and action the shaman following such a course would be turning his back on social reality, to betray both his patients and the community at large.

Without specialized research into the affects of induced trance on processes of thought, it is difficult to know how far pronouncements at a seance are deliberately and consciously made and how far they are the outcome of the subconscious working of the mind along customary patterns of thought. If the seance is a genuine experience of the
mind, or spirit, and the semitrance into which the shaman falls creates a sense of exaltation and detachment causing pronouncements to be made without deliberate effort, it might well prove difficult for a shaman to direct his pronouncements consciously, without resorting to a thoroughgoing imposture.

In either case we have to appreciate that the beliefs and actions of the Akawaio shaman make up a complementary pattern for the organization of human relationships within their particular type of society. Although the shaman’s accusations, expressed during the course of his seances, may not only state but also exaggerate tensions, they are in fact the beginning of a process whereby these tensions will eventually be reduced and even, perhaps, eliminated. The very statement of an accusation during a seance marks the time when a trouble case has become a matter for public concern and requires resolution.

Shamanism should therefore be seen as a mechanism which helps to preserve the form of the society and to maintain it in working order.

"Disease is a Social Sanction." 23

W.E. Roth came much nearer to a true statement than Kenswil when he sagaciously emphasized the point that although the infliction of sickness might be out of pure malevolence, it might also be:

"... by way of punishment for transgressions committed against the recognized rules of law and order as understood in Indian society." 24

On another occasion he recorded that for the Amerindian:

"Disease or death is not a ‘natural’ phenomenon, so to speak, but is usually due to one of two agencies. It may be the work of some Spirit, perpetrated either judicially or of mere malice, as some affirm, or through the importunity of a votary. An evil Spirit, one who causes an evil, might send an animal to bite or sting a person, or cause a tree to fall upon him, his axe to cut him, water to drown him, or some other calamity." 25

Among the Akawaio at least, maliciousness of spirits never seems to occur without some reason, while some judicial or moral connotation is always present, reflecting the state of social relationships or behaviour in some way.

Sigerist has pointed out that in many tribal communities disease is the most important social sanction they know: through this, he said, disease plays an extremely important part in society and the task of medicine is very broad:

"primitive healers, in addition to their medical functions, had to assume parts played in civilized societies by judges, priests, soldiers, and policemen." 26

Sickness among the Akawaio is frequently such a sanction, for infringements, omissions and malpractices relating to the customary procedures and practices of every day life in both ritual and secular spheres. Many of the cases which I have described show clearly that a wrong action or moral offence, whether petty or serious, is likely to bring sickness to the perpetrator who is thereby punished. The sickness goes when matters are righted, when harmony in nature and society has been attained once more.

**Disease as a Manifestation of Social Strife.**

The Akawaio believe that sickness may come upon a person because he or she has done wrong. They also believe that sickness may result from inter-personal animosity, such as that which King George was believed to have inflicted on John Charlie (Case 1). In addition, sickness may result from inter-group animosity, between river groups or tribes. In this latter instance, the sickness is the result of disharmonious relationships implicit in opposing groups of people, giving rise to evil thoughts and intentions on the part of those involved. The victim of such a situation may not have done wrong, nor the people of his community: his sufferings do not constitute a sanction on behaviour but arise out of a particular form of social order, a set of structural relations and accompanying sentiments. In such situations the shaman has a political role to play which I describe elsewhere. 27

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(27) Other roles played by the shaman have been described in general terms in "Trances" by Wavell (Ed.) Epton and Butt, to be published by Allen & Unwin in the autumn of 1966.
To cure both mind and body, therefore, it is necessary to sort out social problems of one kind or another and to restore a proper, moral order in community life. This is the link between the medical and legal role of the shaman. He is the specialist for the cure of illness: he is who, working within the patterns of thought and belief of his culture, provides the details of the connection between the sickness and the disruptive circumstances in the society. He begins to investigate the relevant factors, the links in a chain of causation, before the seance when chatting informally, listening to gossip and to the views of the patient and relatives. What he learns he will amplify and work out in trance condition.

A seance then, is a mechanism for enquiry and investigation during which relevant evidence is extracted and re-presented. A skilful shaman will use it as the occasion for considering all the strands of thought and modes of behaviour which have any possible bearing on the case. He will, in spirit guise, formulate the entire situation. Finally, he provides an explanation of the illness and so a remedy. By this procession of events the shaman succeeds in translating illness and the causes of death into comprehensible, social terms. The agency through which the sanction of disease works is thus the shaman in his role of consultor and summoner of the spirits for purposes of diagnosis of sickness: the occasion is the period of trance when it is believed that contact with the moral order of the spirit world is achieved.

Discussion.

It is the shaman's task to battle with evil forces by using benevolent and good forces. His object is to restore harmony and health in the individual and in society. If the individual has done wrong or become involved in contentious actions then the shaman aims to adjust relationships between the individual and his fellows. Some of the methods the shaman adopts during the seance have already been mentioned. These are now listed in order that a proper assessment may be made of the importance of the seance as a legal mechanism.

The Seance as an Open Court of Enquiry.

The Akawaio have no specific law courts or judges. Although the village leader (ebulu) and his helpers, the heads
of families (boidoludong) talk together, discuss and arrange village affairs, they do no formally investigate cases of wrong doing or disputes. The seance, on the other hand, is a public assembly which frequently provides the occasion for the working out of social problems of which a case of illness is believed to be only the outward symptom. Therefore it sometimes fulfils the functions of the court of justice.

The fact that the general public can listen and take part by questioning and discussion is most important. During the seance there is a continual process of taking evidence and cross-examining everyone concerned — processes described by Gluckman as "essential in the analysis of law". Gossip is confirmed or denied: actions can be explained and justified: confessions can be forced and retractions made. A well conducted seance provides an occasion for bringing into the open all the troubles and problems of the group of people assembled, the petty disputes and malpractices as well as major sources of disruption. By exposing them in this way, in a controlled social setting, the path is open for settlement and a general restoration of good relationships and group unity.

The Seance as a Source of Social Pressure.

No one person or group has authority sufficient to force their will on the rest in Akawaio community organization. Moreover, personal confrontation is extremely unpleasant and embarrassing to an Akawaio who will do his utmost to avoid it. Efforts to impose unwelcome pressure on others within the village community cannot in any case last long, for families will assert their independence by simply going off and living alone or with relations, in a more congenial atmosphere (viz. King George's stated intentions in Case 1). If there is trouble of any sort the first action of an Akawaio is to remove himself at a distance from it, to retreat. In these circumstances the seance is ideally suited to the control of disputes, obtaining an acceptable verdict and imposing good conduct, without, in the process, paying the price of complete social disruption.

First of all, the very darkness enveloping the seance, which always takes place in pitch blackness at night, is an aid to enquiry. No one can witness the expression of another,

see embarrassment or dislike or any visual expression of an emotional reaction. By excluding all but sound, with his audience in their hammocks, suspended as it were, in time and space, the shaman achieves a sense of intimacy and yet, at the same instant, a feeling of disassociation from physical reality.

The placing of the enquiry at a spirit level also helps to remove the personal element which may offend. The shaman is the medium only: the spirits use him to question and probe, at times mercilessly. The spirits uncover all the intimate and sometimes disgraceful details of a culprit's actions. They are the ones who are sarcastic, condemning, amusing and witty at the culprit's expense. A spirit may reveal and say things with impunity which no Akawaio would dare even hint at on other occasions – even in private conversation. In this way, the shaman, who automatically takes on the responsibility for solving disputes and cases of wrong-doing when he undertakes to heal, shifts the burden of responsibility onto the spirits, utilizing the accepted belief that it is not he but the spirits who pronounce. In spite of this he does run risks from times to time, as did Francis in the case of King George versus John Charlie. In this respect he shares the same disability as interpreters and messengers who, in translating or bearing unpleasant communications, also endure rebuke as though they were the originators of unwelcome news.

Knowing the sensitivity of their people, shamans often couch their enquiries and their strictures on behaviour in more subtle forms. In this respect they have to judge the character of the participants and to assess the most effective means of dealing with a case. If offences have been committed which involve some shame at their public exposure then the spirits may be content with thinly disguised references sufficient to draw attention to the situation and to cause the culprit to mend his behaviour. Such was the procedure in Case 2 (pp. 158-160). Here a careful selection of appropriate spirits helped to reinforce the lesson. Another method used by the shaman is to pour scorn on someone who has failed to fulfil his obligations: under guise of joking the shaman seeks to cajole him or her into conformation and a proper mode of behaviour. The vagueness and the impersonal pressures exerted are important virtues of the seance in respect to the social milieu in which it functions.
In obtaining comments from his seance audience the shaman is enabled to sound out public opinion before bringing a case to a conclusion. Sometimes members of the audience stand up to the spirits (Case 2) and this may mean that the shaman has to bring fresh evidence and renewed pressure by summoning more spirits who will comment afresh. Gertrude Dole points out that the shaman's tactic of exchanging opinions with the audience is a device which "makes it possible for him to formulate a verdict which they will accept." (29) Certainly a skilful Akawaio shaman, in a case of wrong-doing or dispute, will endeavour to take his audience with him, through a series of stages of opinion, with the object of arriving at a suitable conclusion in which spirits and audience are at one. This process may take more than one seance. Over a period of time, in the case of a long illness, a number of seances may reflect the changing state of public opinion as to its real source. This in itself is often the result of a changed set of social circumstances. Case 1 shows this, for when the cause of social upheaval was removed with the retreat of King George from the village and the abandonment of this claim to leadership, the cause of the continuing illness became assigned to a ghost and, finally, to sorcery (edodo).

The shaman's power of clairvoyance, whereby he perceives spirits - guilty ones as well as spirit helpers - sometimes makes the seance something of a deterrent. It is generally accepted that the spirits know everything and that therefore it is no good hiding from them. Since it is the shaman's duty to interrogate the spirits who will speak through him, everything will become known at the seance. Absence from the seance on the part of a culprit does not prevent the spirits from revealing what they know. Cases 1 and 2 show this. To protest that the spirits have made a mistake, as King George did with great indignation, does not convince public opinion, provided there are good reasons behind the spirits' pronouncements. King George was too deeply involved in a quarrel which could have led to village disruption: the illness of the village leader provided a convenient occasion (from an outsider's point of view at least) for bringing a dangerous and unpleasant situation to a head. Clearly King George would have to change his attitude or go, if the village were to remain at peace. The seance mechanism achieved this more effectively and with less

disturbance than a face to face row between the two families would have done.

Thus, there are functions of the seance which can be labelled legal, if by legal is included measures for the regulation of community relationships, a powerful sanction for correct behaviour and the enforcement of customary procedures, ritual and other. The shaman, utilising spirit possession where other legal functionaries use the police force, law courts and penal service as means of investigation, rectification and coercion, is in this system the interpreter of the moral basis of the society and the guardian of social order. Consultation of the spirits, as a form of divination, is a method of social control comparable in this respect to forms of divination in other parts of the world.

The shaman, then, has a central role as the conductor of judicial processes contained within the seance. Exactly how much individual freedom of action has he? This is a difficult question. He is certainly bound by the system he operates, in some ways strictly so. He cannot, for example, alter the basic facts which are believed to bear on a case, for they are known to too many people and the seance enquiry is public. Personal prejudice cannot operate too blatantly, otherwise his shaman practice would be in question and his personal relationships suffer. His pronouncements, as they affect his own people, are always related to strife, quarrels and friction of some sort, or they take into account wrong and ill-advised behaviour. He does not instigate these causes of social disharmony, but where they exist he brings them into the open and to a climax by seeking to resolve them. Throughout the seance proceedings he has to take public opinion into account since this is freely expressed in conversations between members of the audience and the spirits speaking through the shaman.

These processes which the shaman conducts and the framework of action and concepts within which he works, form a set pattern. He cannot throw these aside and go his own way, any more than a lawyer or judge can ignore the accepted legal practices of his profession. Like his legal colleagues in more complex, differentiated societies, each shaman will differ in skill and personal judgement in his handling of cases. A young shaman is unlikely to show the same perspicacity and subtlety as an older, experienced one. Some may never show the ability to deal with wider issues and they confine themselves to simple healing techniques and
to handling family matters only. Others, like Francis, show a wisdom and integrity which gains them respect throughout the tribe; people come from a distance to consult them; they are asked to undertake long journeys to treat the more helpless. The Akawaio themselves speak of the penetration and understanding of mature shamans but they express it, as we have already seen, in spirit terms: they are the ones who have ability to penetrate what is hidden from others, for “the ones who perceive” are eneögei, clairvoyant.

I have considered the virtues of the shaman system in its functioning as a legal mechanism which well fits the equalitarian, simply organised society of the Akawaio and which helps to compensate for (or substitute for) the lack of specific legal and political institutions. In this, my data bears out the hypotheses which Dr. Gertrude Dole has put forward in her excellent article “Shamanism and Political Control among the Kuikuru”. The Kuikuru, Carib speakers like the Akawaio, have a very similar organisation to the latter – in which formal leadership is weak and few special obligations and privileges are attributed to the headman. Not only does the headman not control social behaviour but Dr. Dole points out that the ceremonial system provides few regulations and the Kuikuru generally, have few restrictive rules for social behaviour. Her first postulate is this: 31

“In view of the lack of effective social control in political and ceremonial structure, the possibility suggest itself that the Kuikuru may resort to other and less direct mechanisms to reinforce norms and preserve social cohesion. Such a mechanism is in fact to be found in shamanism”.

At the end of her article, having demonstrated such a correlation among the Kuikuru, Dr. Dole put forward this hypothesis: 32

“... a comparative study of societies with very permissive social behaviour might reveal correlation between the absence of strong political leadership and the use of shamanistic divination to reinforce social norms.”

My Akawaio data does, I think, go a long way towards supporting the conclusions which Kuikuru material suggested.

(32) Ibid. p. 61.
Nevertheless, although the seance meets an important and indispensable requirement there are some spheres in which it cannot act and where other processes intervene. The focal point of Akawaio legal apparatus is not always the shaman. 33

Nowadays at least, not every community has at its disposal a seance mechanism. Where there is no shaman living in the community, or within a reasonable distance, then this avenue for enquiry and resolution is closed, at least temporarily. Years ago when, according to the Akawaio there were more shamans, the situation may have been different. To-day, it might be argued, the smaller population and the presence of missions, a hospital and a government administration all help to replace the shaman. I would query this assertion: the type of dispute and social friction which the shaman deals with does not usually come to the notice of an administrator, or even a missionary. If it does, it often comes too late to be healed without some disruption: moreover, many of the cases are such that they are unsuitable for any outsider to settle competently — or indeed to attempt to settle at all. A direct enquiry of an official sort is too heavy-handed a procedure to unravel the intricate web of minor misdeeds with a complexity of motives, intentions and fears surrounding each. Any imposed punishment would be unsuitable in such circumstances of wrong-doing as occurred, for example, in Case 4 (pp. 161-8). A District Officer would scarcely feel able to rebuke and punish a woman for eating meat after a birth or for uttering mystical threats against an ex-boy friend. Any long suffering Akawaio leader (ebulu) could tell him of the futility of lecturing the culprits in public. A sense of shame induced in the culprits by this procedure would be nullified in its effects by general public discomfort and indignation, aroused by the combination of outside interference and the inappropriately direct method of direct accusation and face to face encounter. Petty and misguided as they may appear to outsiders, such cases represent frictions and troubles which could grow to considerable proportions, by sheer repetition and accumulation, if not effectively dealt with by diplomatic manipulation, indirect pressures and a public opinion suitably mobilised by the shaman in the conduct of his seances.

It must not be forgotten that the basic shamanist occasion is always a medical one, in which the most obvious

(33) Ibid. p. 60.
need is the protection and assistance of the spirit world for the restoration of health in an individual. As a consequence, the shaman's judicial functions relate to those types of cases which contain hidden elements: cases in which surpressed animosities are nourished, in which tensions exist as the accompaniment to certain forms of inter-relationships, in which wrong doing is intended to be secret or is without conscious realization. In contrast to these cases are those of open violence, when quarrels are actually seen to occur as frustrated and angry individuals seek to resolve their differences by the traditional form of wrestling match, by fighting, or even assassination. The shaman in his professional capacity has no part to play on these occasions. The resolution of them lies in the action of individuals supported by their kin.

The shaman's role therefore, is not open intervention at any time when open hostility occurs but the revelation during the seance of the smouldering enmity which may one day lead to violence or to accusations of sorcery (edodo) and cursing (taling). It is this type of development which, if unchecked, will suddenly disrupt community life and perhaps the community itself, breaking up its component parts by scattering the family units into isolation or, at least, into a completely new alignment. In other words, the shaman in his seance, from time to time, provides his group with an unrivalled means for the exposure and resolution of all the tensions to which any small, closely knit community is prone. In performing this service he is an important figure in the promotion of unity and a desirable state of mutual cooperation between families – a state on which a satisfying economic, material and social life depends.

Conclusion.

In Akawaio belief illness is a pointer to a state of disharmony: it may be disharmony in certain types of social relationships within the community or it may derive from the structural relationships between groups: wrong behaviour of any kind also causes disharmony as do evil thoughts and intentions in people's minds. Although evil intentions and spirits are not admitted in scientific medicine the effects on health of social environment and state of personal relationships are. Strife and unhappiness, maladjustment in some form, can create the conditions for sickness to enter and take a hold, where in happier circumstances it might
not do so. The social factors in medicine, the aim of social medicine to adjust an individual to the social as well as the physical environment, are, at their very broadest, similar in both the Akawaio shamanist system and that of modern medical science.

In societies in which there is a lack of specialized political and legal personnel and in which specifically legal institutions are wanting, the shaman is a much a social worker as a medical doctor, for in his efforts to heal the individual he also helps to heal the community.

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