Name_____ Global History and Geography 9H

Period_____

Discussion Questions: Africa; Altered States, Ordinary Miracles

-Richard Dowden

Instructions: This excerpt is from the chapter entitled "Dancers and the leopard men: Sierra Leone." Read the excerpt and answer the questions below.

1. How does the author compare Africa to Europe in terms of "science and spirit"?

2. How did activist and writer Steve Biko describe religion in Africa?

3. What is the role of the ancestors in African life?

4. According to Ben Okri, Homer, Jesus Christ and Shakespeare would have been more at home in Africa than our modern Western world. Explain this analysis. What do you think of his evaluation?

5. What is a witch doctor?

6. Provide two explanations of cannibalism in Africa.

into Africa on a tide that is now retreating. The strange imports lie like rusting and rotting flotsam beached on an alien shore. Africa is strewn with buildings and machinery that were supposed to bring development but somehow got adapted or transformed into something else or now lie broken and useless in the sun. And it is not just things. Sometimes the very nation states themselves, with their borders, flags, airlines, presidential palaces and government offices, seem to be disintegrating and dissolving. I hear a wise old African saying with a polite smile: 'Thank you for these things but they do not last long and they really are not suitable for Africa. It is better we rely on what we know: mud and wood, fire and a little smelted iron.'

As if to confirm Mr Bindi's apocalyptic view of Africa, a furious drumming and blowing of horns start up. Around the corner comes a group of swirling devil dancers. In the midst of them a frenetic figure swathed in grass and a fierce mask leaps and stamps. He dances towards us, advancing and retreating, coming closer and closer. A look of unconscionable fear and horror spreads across Mr Bindi's face. The grass figure steps right up to him and then stands stock still. Slowly he lifts his arm and runs his forefinger down Mr Bindi from the top of his peaked cap to his shining brown shoes, as if cutting him in half. Then the figure leaps violently into the air, spins round and rejoins the other dancers. Mr Bindi is pale and shaking.

'What did that mean?' I asked.

'Nothing. Nothing,' he says faintly, but quickly says goodbye and hurries off home.

Mr Bindi and his generation have spent their lives trying to stamp out these practices in Sierra Leone. He wants to be proud of Bo, its mayor and his gold chain, its clock tower and offices of administration, its churches and schools and the hospital, shops, football team and markets. It even has a Rotary Club and a Cheshire Home. How these savages from the forest have dared to come to town, parade

through Bo and brazenly affront him. It is clear he is not frightened of what they could do to him physically. He already proved his courage when he rebuked the child soldier at the roadblock. But he is afraid of their supernatural power, their spirits.

If that betrays more than a residual belief in the power of the traditional religion, Mr Bindi is not alone. Belief in God and the world of spirits is universal and powerful in Africa. In all the years travelling in the continent I have met only two Africans who said they did not believe in God. These days most Africans are enthusiastic followers of the Koran or the Bible, but before they discovered these texts, most believed in an all-powerful creator who made and controls the world. Interpreting that figure as the Christian God or Islamic Allah was not a difficult leap of faith. Most however did not lose all trace of traditional religion. In addition to Jesus Christ and the Prophet Mohammed, many also still believe in powerful local spirits who control destinies and inhabit special rocks, trees, rivers, springs and animals. At the heart of Africa with all its physicality, immediate in its pain and joy, close to life and death, lies a deep sense of the numinous and supernatural.

Some might say this is simply a product of the universal African predicament: the uncertainty of life. But it is not only rural people at the mercy of the weather and nature who believe these things. The fastest growing religious movements in the world are evangelical Christian Churches and preachers in cities and African communities in the rest of the world. They offer health and wealth in this world as well as salvation in the next.

Traditional African religions were denigrated by the European Christian missionaries and imperial rulers who frequently saw them as devil worship and tried to stamp them out. In West and Central Africa and in South Africa these religions or their offspring sects are strong and open, but in East Africa they are hidden, not spoken of in public.

Africa never went through the philosophical and social revolution of Europe in the eighteenth century which sought scientific explanations for the world and put science and spirit in separate boxes. The modern Western view of the world distinguishes between the physical world and the spiritual world, some would say 'real' and 'unreal'. This view is actually quite new in Europe – only about 250 years old. Before that, most Europeans would have thought – and acted – much like Africans when it came to religion. Europe has lost that sense of the numinous, the spiritual. Africa has not. Life remains one in Africa and life includes the divine and the mystical as well as the objective physical world. In Africa body and soul are one and the soul lives on.

While Christianity teaches that only humans have souls, African religions hold that all objects, animate or inanimate, can be moved by spirits. Africa senses spirits in animals, trees and rocks as well as people. So the river and the spirit of the river are one and the same. The spirit allows the substance to change, the person to become something else. A friend in Port Harcourt in Nigeria told me that one day in 2001 a noisy crowd gathered under a tree and he went to investigate. There he found a man being roughed up by the crowd. When he asked what the man had done, they claimed he had been a bird sitting in the tree and when a young boy threw a stone at it, it fell down. The bird hit the ground and turned into man. The crowd wanted to kill this witch, this skin changer. A policeman appeared and my friend assumed the man would be saved. In a way he was; the policeman stopped the crowd killing the man and arrested him instead. When my friend asked what he was being charged with, the policeman said, 'Changing his skin.'

Steve Biko, the South African writer and activist, wrote that religion in Africa was not a specialized function observed only on one day a week special building, but 'it featured in our wars, our beer

drinking, our dances and customs in general'. That is something the Western world has lost. So is belief in the power of ancestors. The importance of the ancestors, who can be traced back to the first man and woman in most belief systems, seems to be universal to sub-Saharan Africa. If the ancestors are angry they must be placated. Traditionally that means keeping them in mind all the time, living by their rules and, in some parts of West Africa, pouring the first drops of palm wine for them. Libations and animal sacrifice are common elsewhere too. Christopher Ejizu, a Nigerian religious scholar, says in an article on Igbo rituals that ancestors are the connecting mechanism between the ordered objective world and the spirit world, the world of the past and the future. The present, objective world also bears a relationship to the spirit.

Modern Westerners regard spirits and myths in our culture as somehow psychological, real only in the mind. As the Nigerian novelist Ben Okri says, Homer, Jesus Christ and Shakespeare would have been far more at home in the African world of spirits, gods and mystical powers than in our modern Western world. Africans have no problem with the stories of Homer when he writes of gods turning into birds, the sea rising up on the command of a goddess or a man's destiny being fixed by an enraged spirit. Shakespeare would have found it easier to talk with modern Africans than modern Europeans and Americans who have no sense of anything beyond the physical realities of Western urban culture. Africans understand Shakespeare's woodland inhabited by sprites and fairies or by ghosts of dead fathers and other mystical apparitions. Living in harmony with the other world is important.

The spirits of Africa are usually morally neutral. Africans tend not to be Manichean and divide the world into good and evil. There is no hell in African religions, but a rather detached God is the source and controller of everything in this world. The spirits are erful

but can be assuaged or placated by offerings. In a world ordered b destiny and spirits, it is important to know who is employing whic spirits and how to counteract their influence. Everyone wants t know the future and obtain charms and fetishes to bring success an happiness, to honour the ancestors, gain the love of someone, pa exams or win at football. They also want to ward off evil or bring upon their enemies. Spirit mediums, marabouts, the holy men West Africa who mix Islam with African traditional relgion, and wh are called witch doctors have become big business. (The wor 'witch' and 'witch doctor' are common in Africa, but they me something different from the images they convey in Britain. The witch doctor is the finder of witches who are generally regarded as evil. The witch doctor can provide protection against witches a their magic.)

In Africa every apparent accident or illness is attributed to bad spirits who have been employed by another person, dead or alive, who is trying to inflict the evil. When people fall sick with AIDS, the first port of call is not the clinic; more often it is the spirit medium to find out which enemy has sent the deadly disease. I am frequently struck by the immediacy and directness of the power of spirits in Africa. The spirit world is closely linked to the practical world. People contact the spirits to know what the future holds. If some evil such as a death has befallen the family, spirit mediums or witch doctors are consulted. These mediums will discover the witch who has used his or her powers to cause misfortune or death and who has employed them. The eye specialist at the hospital in Bo working on a river blindness campaign told me that he thought he had achieved a breakthrough when he persuaded some villagers suffering from river blindness that it was not caused by an enemy employing a witch but by the little black fly that comes from the river. Then someone asked, 'Ah but who sends the little black fly to bite me?'

A poem by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe describes how a car knocked down an old man and apparently killed him as it passed through a village. The enraged villagers pulled the driver from the car and beat him to death. Then the old man regained consciousness. The villagers promptly beat the old man to death too, because he had 'made' them kill the driver of the car. Such stories are not uncommon.

In *The African Child*, the Guinean writer Camara Laye described the phenomenon in his childhood:

> *In the past, in the great overgrown villages of Kouroussa in Upper Guinea, there is no doubt that the air, water, earth, and savannahs were really and truly inhabited by genii who had to be propitiated with prayers and sacrifices. There really were people who could bewitch you, and there were formulas for averting the ill effect of their charms. There were innumerable amulets that could be worn for protection. There were tellers of hidden things, there were healers, some of whom really did effect cures . . . All these things were current yesterday in Africa and they have greatly astonished the Europeans, although they then possessed their own mysteries, which, though they were different, should nevertheless have taught them to accept the existence of ours.*

Laye talks of yesterday, but such beliefs are prevalent today and are now being absorbed by the evangelical Churches who find plenty of stories from the Old and New Testaments to match these beliefs. So laying on hands, casting out devils, speaking in tongues and hearing the voice of God talking directly to people are used to subdue or placate the traditional spirits that still possess people and cause pain and suffering. Nowadays this is done in the name of Christ, and some pastors demand substantial fees for their ministry.

In many cases such 'pastors' are crooks exploiting the vulnera-

bility of societies under great strain. Seeking answers from the spiritual world sometimes results in terrible consequences. In Angola and Congo there has been a spate of 'child witches': difficult children or children who have been brought into a new family from a previous relationship. They are often accused of witchcraft or of being possessed by devils that bring evil on the family. Unscrupulous 'pastors' charge fees to drive the devils out, often by stigmatizing the child or inflicting horrifically painful treatment. In South Africa witch doctors are believed to be able to smell out witches, and there has been a number of witch burnings as a result.

Given the prevalence of traditional religion, it is strange that few prominent Africans identify with it in public. How different from Japan where Shintoism – in many ways similar to aspects of African religions – is widely practised. In Japan respect for the ancestors is expressed by millions of Japanese visitors to ancient temples to salute the ancestors. Many Japanese proudly display in their homes the souvenirs of the holy shrines they have visited. Tourism? Partly. Busloads of Japanese descend on the famous shrines and take photographs of each other. But they also come to stand before the temple gate and bow and clap their hands together, and make an offering of a few coins as tradition demands. In Africa religion may be central to beliefs but its leaders and rituals still remain in the background. Only in South Africa are there shops in the high streets selling *Muti*, traditional medicine, and only in South Africa does a traditional *Sangoma* – priest – take his place at state functions along with Christian archbishops, Islamic mullahs and the Chief Rabbi.

Africa's spiritual feel for the world gives it great strength – the feeling that the ancestors will always be with you, their spirit reborn with each new child in the family. It helps people to live in harmony with the world around them, welcome visitors and strangers. It makes th[illegible]lividual part of a universal spirit. That numinous feel fo

the world has given us the extraordinary writings of authors like Wole Soyinka and Ben Okri. But a belief that the power of spirits is greater than physical reality can be used for all sorts of ends. While it creates a majestic acceptance of fate, it can also mean that people do not have to take personal responsibility for their actions. 'A bad spirit made me do it' is a common defence.

African leaders – especially in West Africa – have their spirit mediums and marabouts close at hand and consult them regularly. The man or woman who can harness the spirits is powerful indeed. Wherever you go in Africa you hear the word 'power' again and again. But in Africa the essence, the origin of all power, physical, political, even economic, is seen as spiritual. 'He is powerful. You must be careful,' people say of a rich man or a leading politician. He may be a chief, a businessman or a politician but his strength does not derive from his office or his status, but from within him. It means he is full of power and that means he is supported by spirits that have given him this position. And a Big Man likes to demonstrate that he is strong and fat with many wives and children and an army of dependants. His wealth, his power, must be on display for all to see.

One reason that African traditional religion and beliefs are hidden is that in many parts they are still associated with evil. Today hardly a week goes by without some report from Africa about witchcraft or the killing of witches. Africa's local press is full of them, the details reported as factually as a politician's speech or the football scores. Witchcraft and suspicions of witchcraft are not limited to backward rural areas. Any materially successful individual risks being denounced as a witch, another reason why some parts of Africa are hostile to the successful entrepreneur. Fear of being pulled down by the community keeps everyone in line, quiescent and conformist. In a village in Zambia I came across the story of a man who had been driven out of the village because he had become too successful and

created jealousy. He was a teacher, married with children, whose wife died. He married a younger woman and then became an entrepreneur, breeding chickens and extending his farm to grow food for the nearest town. He bought a new truck. But then the rumours started. They said he had killed his wife by witchcraft. His new wife was a witch, that was why he was successful. The man was forced to flee, abandoning his businesses.

Cannibalism is another favourite theme of African newspapers and street gossip. Interviewing opposition politicians takes up a huge amount of a journalist's time. Often, having listed the President's economic follies, political failings and repulsive personal life, his opponent will lean towards me and say – *sotto voce*: 'and another thing. You know he is a cannibal. He eats people.'

So Idi Amin, Jean Bedel Bokassa, Charles Taylor, Daniel arap Moi and scores of others have been denounced as cannibals. Who can ever know the truth? Cannibalism was practised in Africa, but largely for spiritual reasons. It was not about eating people as if they were animals. This may not affect the morality of it, but cannibalism's spiritual aspect shows that, far from being an act of contempt for the victim, it showed respect. It was not a question of chicken, beef or human for dinner. To eat the vital organs of someone is to absorb their spirit into you. The nutrition is spiritual, not physical. So, traditionally, a warrior might eat the liver of his dead enemy to absorb his spirit, become part of him. There is also a belief that a spirit will not haunt itself, so if you eat part of the body of a dead enemy, his spirit will not come back to haunt you. It is not so far from the Aristotelian Catholic belief in transubstantiation in the Eucharist: eating the real body and blood of Christ but in the form of bread and wine. The idea is the same: eating ordinary food makes it part of you, eating God – or another person – makes you part of the devoured.

As I left Sierra Leone I took the ferry across the harbour to the road which leads to the airport. The ferry was packed with petty traders taking back city goods packed in boxes and bags, and noisy families on their return from a trip to the capital. I looked back on Freetown nestling like a very English town under the great peaked range of mountains that gave the country its name. And I looked across to Bunce Island with its history as a slave fort and then as the base for the anti-slavery patrol. From Hawkins's visit onward Britain had done terrible things and a few good deeds here. For good or ill, my country had moulded Sierra Leone over the preceding 400 years. More than any other people in Africa, Sierra Leoneans still look to Britain for friendship and support. The tragedy to me is that only a handful of people in Britain have even heard of it, let alone could point to it on a map.

As I looked down into the water, a woman shouted to me from the cabin door, 'Don't look into the water. The river devil will see you and pull you in.'