

## A note on ash symbolism in Africa

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**Abstract.** Beginning with some observations of the ritual uses of ash among the people dwelling in the Ingessana Hills in the region of the upper Nile in the Sudan, the article then notes that the use of ash in ritual techniques is in fact widespread in Africa. The ethnographic reports, however, are deficient as regards accounts of the symbolic motivation but this probably corresponds to a relative absence of any explicit verbal articulation among the people themselves of the meaning of ash. A comparative examination of the more detailed reports, rather than indicating as many significances as there are cultures, reveals instead a single integrated configuration of implicit symbolic dimensions defining the significance of ash.

It is reasonable for the ethnographer to look for guidance about what matters in a particular culture by considering what excites and interests the people themselves. However, it has also to be noted that certain cultural features which seem to attract little explicit interest in any particular society may, nevertheless, be found persisting in a great number of societies. On such rather different grounds apparently insignificant elements may also be worthy of attention.

This article is about the symbolic use of ash and it originates in observations of certain of the rites of the inhabitants of the Ingessana Hills on the margins of the upper Nile in the Republic of the Sudan where it was repeatedly explained to me by spectators, participants and ritual experts that the purpose of the rituals, rituals in which ash was conspicuous, was the promotion, even sometimes the procurement, of life. Although the people were quite articulate about their intentions and willing to talk about them no one explained to me in general terms why ash, and not some other material, was used for these purposes. Perhaps the most telling response to my questioning came from a man who took some wild honey bees, which had apparently drowned, from a dish of water. He smiled at my affirmative answer to his question, were the bees dead, and called for some fine powdery ash from the fire. One by one he took the bees, rolled them in the ash and within seconds they stirred their wings and flew off. I did not think I could have asked for more.

There are, on the other hand, reports about the use of ash in the ritual techniques of numerous other people in other parts of Africa and it seems worthwhile, despite certain difficulties, extending the enquiry to include information from other cultures. This article presents the results of such an enquiry.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I have concentrated on the north east of Africa, especially the upper Nile because of my own interests in the area, but I have also referred to reports from eastern and southern Africa. However no ethnological sig-