

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JBG-11  
Water, and Other Things

c/o District Commissioner  
Biharamulo, Lake Province  
Tanganyika Territory  
East Africa  
13 September 1950

Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 18, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

If you are a native of the Wazinza Tribe in the town of Biharamulo, and a woman, and being over fifteen years old are most likely married, one of your great worries will be the matter of getting water. Your house will need water for cooking the one or two daily meals of posho, or ground corn, and for washing cooking pots, eating bowls, clothes and bodies. If your husband is an educated clerk in the White Bwana's boma, and has left the ways of the tribe, he will need another dipper-full for shaving. Or maybe you will be lucky and he will be a man without hair on his face; or he may shave in the old fashion of the tribe, using a razor made of beaten iron by the tribe of iron-smelters in the West. The iron razor is used dry, and kept sharp by rubbing against the inside of the hand. Usually the man squats on his heels, and looks into a piece of cracked glass wedged between the papyrus reeds of the garden fence. Bodies are washed once every seven days, by laying out the cured skin of an animal and placing a bowl of heated water on it, over which one can squat. If your husband is well off you will be able to afford a slice of brown soap, such as the White Bwana uses for his clothes, which you can buy at the Indian store for ten cents. But the most important part of all this cooking, washing, and bathing is the task of getting the water; and if you are the wife of a young man you will be looking forward to his earning more money and buying more wives. As the senior wife of a large boma you would become exempt from the task of carrying water.

The carrying is done from two places. One is an old, dug-up spring at the base of Biharamulo hill, about ten minutes walk going down and thirty coming back with an eight gallon load. (Only the smarter women of the town know that a debbe or petrol tin is four gallons, four of the glass-fulls on the red motor-car-feeder in front of the Indian store. Or that a half-circle of the long arm on the Indian clock is one twenty-fifth of the sun's trip or thirty white-man minutes!) Years ago, when the German White Bwanas used the spring, they made a square well and lined it with the light-colored White Bwana mud which turns into stone when it dries. Since then the water has changed its flow, going past the stone well and into the mud of a stream-bed. A small pool has been

dug there, and it is agreed that everyone will dip slowly with a halved gourd so that the bottom will not be roiled and blacken the water too much. Two women only can dip at the same time, so there is usually a line waiting, especially during late morning. One can enjoy a good gossip with the neighbor women; the spring is a restful place, shaded by palm trees; and it is close enough to the village and visited by enough women so that your husband will not beat you for lingering there. The young unmarried men of the Wazinza often lurk around watering places, and husbands know what can happen if the place is too private.

The other watering-place is a pool near the bridge on the main road, which receives the overflow from the spring and from a few ooze-springs in the side of the hill. It is hip-deep in the center and perhaps five steps across. The trouble is that it is twice as far away and the water is very black, especially during the grass-burning month of the dry season, when lots of burnt grass falls into the water. Then too, the people who pass on the road are of other tribes, and they often break the understanding and wash their bodies in the pool. If they use soap it puts a bad taste in the water, and drinking it sometimes causes sickness. The flow in and out of the pool is very slow, and the roil and soap takes a long time to go away.

The water carrying loads are usually eight gallons because Biharamulo is on a motor road. The drivers carry extra debbes for fuel which they will sell for twenty cents or sometimes even throw away. Two of these debbes can be hung from the two ends of a pole the length of a short man, so that they will balance when you lift from the center with your shoulder. They do not balance so well as an earthen jug or a large calabash with a banana-leaf ring-pad, on your head, and to carry them you must learn to take short, quick steps in time with the bow-springing of the pole; but they hold a lot more water. If you drop them they do not break like the jugs, and for heating over a fire they do not crack so easily. On the whole they are by far the best, and they should always be used unless there is a baby to be carried. With a single jug or a calabash, of course, it is easy to carry a baby wrapped against the back in the upper part of your sarong; with the debbes a baby will be kept awake and cross by the bouncing step and the noise of splashing inside the tin-metal. Of course if the baby is a girl your husband will not object to leaving it in the house. It is dark inside the mud house but girls do not move around so much and are less likely to get at the spears or poisoned arrows hung on the wall. The bride-price is something to think about, but everyone wants a son. And because of fever and sleeping sickness, in order to be sure of having a son grow up, one must have many boy-babies and take good care of all of them. Most of them die before circumcision age.

There is a third way of getting water, by going to the little stone hut in the center of the town and filling your debbes from the curved spouts that stick out of the wall, hollow like bamboo but made of iron. This water comes down to the center of town from a big square iron hut on the very top of the hill, by means of a long piece of the bamboo-iron laid on the ground. The iron hut is kept full of water by a witchcraft-device down in the valley, which makes noises like the firing of many hunters' guns and pushes a stream of water up the hill through another mile of the bamboo-iron, after first pulling it up from a pipe that goes into the ground. When the water reaches the top of the big iron hut the shooting-noises stop, and the witchcraft-device rests until some of the water is used up. This water is good and clear, and is given out once a day, the spouts running for the whole day when there is rain and for at least ten minutes each day when the weather is dry. But the big trouble is that this water costs money; you have to give the clerk in the stone hut a penny before he will let the water run through the spout. For a man who earns only half a shilling each day, whose family needs ten debbes of water, this is too much. Sometimes the witchcraft-device fails, like now, when, as the wife of the White Bwana's chief messenger explained, the right arm of the device broke. Now it goes weakly, with only one arm, making only half as many noises and pushing only half as much water. The broken iron arm cannot be mended, and a new one will have to come from the tribal home of the White Bwana, a hundred days journey by motorcar and white-man-ship.

There is some talk that some day a bigger witchcraft-device with a bigger iron box might be brought to Biharamulo, and that water then would be given out for nothing all day long. The wife of the Postmaster said that the White Bwana had sent to the White Bwanas in the East to ask for one. But this is just talk, like the Elders saying that Bwanas would come with spray-guns and kill off all the tsetse flies. And even if the water-carrying is hard, it is one of the marks of a married woman. If there were no water to carry the husbands would lay out larger cassava fields, to keep the women busy planting and cultivating.

A good, clean house needs a lot of water. The long boiling of posho for the big evening meal uses up a lot, especially if there is a piece of meat. Long boiled posho squeezes firm in the hand, and when you mark it with your thumb to make a cup for the gravy the dent stays in. You can scoop it through the gravy-bowl and it will stay in one piece. Most husbands had only the one big meal at night, and munched raw sweet potato or cassava at noon. On the road-gang, working under the White Bwana, they were made to eat three times a day. They felt stronger and could work harder this way. But when they came back to their homes they always wanted the one big meal only.

If your husband earns more than 15 shillings a month, he would not drink much water except when out walking in the middle

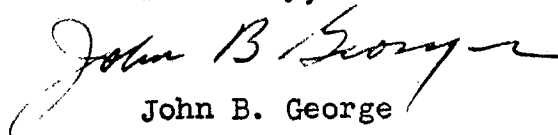
of the day. Instead he would drink two or three calabashes of beer each day, which of course took water as well as corn to make. When men did drink water, after a march in the sun, they would tilt up a debbe and drink a gallon at a time. Wazinza men can go all day without wanting a drink if they are on safari, and at the end take one big drink of water or beer.

The White Bwanas are different, and do not like to walk far in the sun without water, and they have strange ideas about what kind of water they will drink. The guest of the Big White Bwana always has a bottle of water with him on safari. Four days ago the bottle was forgotten and the Bwana had to walk from sunrise until almost sundown with no water. When he arrived at the camp of Ntare, the Big Chief, he was very cross, and he asked the servant of Ntare for some water. The servant got a glass and wiped it with his turban and filled it from the Chief's water-bag. The Bwana held it up and looked through the glass.

It was good water, from a pool near the camp. Of course since the stream was not fast flowing the water had a few doodoos in it, the little ones that you can see through; and there was one larger doodoo of the kind that jerks when it swims. The Bwana looked at the water for a long time, after he was told that it was the only water in camp. He moved his tongue inside his mouth as though he wanted badly to drink it. But he gave it back, and was very cross with everyone until his own water bottle was brought up by the last porter in his safari.

The White Bwanas are queer. They refuse to drink fresh water because they can see a few live doodoos; yet they say it is all right to drink the same water after the doodoos are cooked dead and when the taste is spoiled with smoke-ash from the fire. It is a good thing the men of the Wazinza have not picked up many of the White Bwana habits. What would the women do if they had to gather wood and keep fires going all day, boiling the drinking water?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John B. George". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

John B. George

Received New York 10/6/50.