

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JBG-23  
Voodoo Curse

P.O. Marangu  
Moshi, Tanganyika  
East Africa  
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

During our last conversation in New York you recalled a philosophical query which I have often heard paraphrased in Africa: Can any solution of the problems of tropical Africa be found within the framework of Christian ethics? While routinely checking through some back files of the East African Standard I came upon this clipping, which may illuminate one or two facets of this unanswerable question.

The clipping explains itself. There was an outbreak of hut-burning - the typical form of native terrorism or revenge - in Nyeri district of Kenya Colony. The European-managed police, in attempting to locate the arsonists, ran into a

## **CEREMONY TO CURSE NYERI ARSONISTS**

### ***Sequel to communal fine***

**A** CEREMONY to curse those responsible for the recent arson outbreak in the Nyeri area has been held on the outskirts of the town.

In the ceremony, which is reported to have been held with official approval, a goat was slowly beaten to death.

This ancient Kikuyu ceremony is known as the *thenge* oath, and this is thought to be the first occasion on which it has been carried out since 1921.

In Gatitu market another ceremony took place, in which two dogs were killed in order to overcome the effect of the *thenge* curse.

### **3,000 men**

The Kikuyu decided to hold a *thenge* ceremony after the Governor imposed a communal fine of 50,000/- — equivalent to 12/- per taxpayer — on the inhabitants of five Nyeri sub-locations. A judicial inquiry had established that they wilfully

frustrating tangle of dumb, terrified witnesses giving obvious but protective mis-statements of fact or remaining stubbornly silent. The police learned little. They had strong suspicions, but could not obtain evidence enough to satisfy a European court. One thing satisfactorily proven was that witnesses were withholding important evidence. So the Governor, under appropriate ordinance imposed collective punishment in fines. The ceremony intended to curse the arsonists then was undertaken by tribal authorities. It would be difficult to find out whether or not the ceremony was inspired by European officials, but it was approved or at least countenanced.

The power of a spiritual curse among the Kikuyu tribe is great; it has proved a very good means of obtaining confessions after all routine means had failed. The tribal African's belief in his concept of the supernatural and his fear of supernatural vengeance is perhaps as moving today as was the fear of Hell's Fire at its highest point in Christian history, with the advantage that tribal witchcraft promises immediate rather than postponed next-world punishment, in the form of disease or death to the offender or his family. So this cursing of the arsonists could have been very effective.

withheld evidence when the police were investigating the arson outbreak.

Originally it had been intended that the curse should be uttered by an elder from Kiricu under the directions of Senior Chief Nderi Wang'ombe, of Thिंगи, one of the areas involved in the fine—but when it came to the point he refused. His place was taken by a volunteer from Unjiru, another area included in the communal fine.

The avowed object of the ceremony was to bring about the downfall of those responsible, and those who withheld evidence, and to cause the destruction of their property.

On the morning of the ceremony horns were blown, and some 3,000 men assembled at Kiricu—outside Nyeri. Many of them came from several miles away.

### Silent crowd

Normally the *thenge* ceremony takes place on the boundary of the tribe's land, or on an island in a river, but on this occasion there was a departure from tradition.

As the ceremony began the crowd became silent. Then those who had suffered loss began to ask to be accorded the benefit of the curse, so that those responsible should be destroyed.

But after the officiating elders had signified their acceptance of these requests, and Senior Chief Nderi had called them to take part in the sacrifice of the goat, no one came forward.

Silence reigned for nearly 15 minutes, and although Chief Nderi announced that no one's claim would be considered who did not come forward to take part in the sacrifice, there was still no movement.

Chief Nderi then announced that a sacrifice would be made for the benefit of those who had actually had their houses burned in Aguthi and Thिंगи, but at this point the old man who had been asked by the officiating elders to make the sacrifice refused, saying that his cows had given birth.

A long discussion took place among the elders, and a man from Thिंगи volunteered to make the killing.

The sacrificial goat was brought forward, and the old man tied its legs. It was placed on

But it probably was not, partly because this particular ceremony was watered down or perhaps deliberately sabotaged. In the first place the ceremony was not held on a boundary or river island, thereby losing potency. Further effective-

ness was lost through the ground with its head pointing to the east.

dissipating the power of the curse over many vaguely designated groups, rather than directing it against a specific person or a smaller group. The man who volunteered to kill the goat was old, and therefore spiritually endowed, but he was not among those more specifically offended. (It is very significant, here, that part of his curse was against those who administer the Mau Mau oath to children. The Mau Mau society, which advocates the ejection of Europeans from Africa by force, is illegal in Kenya and the membership is, of course, composed of adults.)

Most likely the antidote ceremony of killing the two dogs in Gatitu market will completely neutralize the curse.

Finally the goat was buried, and a ewe which had not yet given birth was killed, its stomach extracted and the stomach contents scattered.

### Paying up

The *Standard* correspondent at Nyeri writes:

It is understood from official sources that the fine of 50,000/- levied on the four Sub-Locations of the Nyeri Reserve under the Collective Punishment Ordinance by the Governor is being freely paid by those concerned.

The fine was levied on the locations as a whole for withholding evidence from the police in connection with cases of arson tried in court at Nyeri.

It is understood that about half of the 50,000/- has been received and special receipts stamped "C.P.", for Collective Punishment, have been issued to those who have paid.

So far no case where it has been necessary to attach property to enforce payment has been reported.

It is known that Africans from the Aguthi Location working for European settlers have asked for advances in wages to meet the fine.

Since the imposition of the collective fine there have been no further reports of arson in the Aguthi Location.

Some inflammatory factors of grass-roots colonial politics appear in this little clipping: the pagan's fear of his own supernatural; pagan indifference to animal suffering, such as when a goat's bones are slowly broken, one at a time; and the existence of a secret society pledged to drive the white residents into the sea. Some conciliatory factors also appear, which represent a mutuality,

more than a conflict, of native and European aims. These are the native desire for tribal law, security, and peace, and an equally strong European desire for consistent law, order and protection of property.

## Protests at slaughter

Horse-loving Members of Parliament protested against a "most barbarous form of slaughter" by which a stunned horse has its blood drained while it is still alive.

The result is pure white flesh which can be sold in restaurants and hotels as veal.

After the horse has been stunned and its throat is cut, tubes are inserted into the blood vessels and an electric pump switched on. The forelegs are moved back and forth to assist bleeding. The whole process is over in 15 minutes.

A Correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*, asserted that he had been told this practice went on at a London abattoir as well as abroad.

Sir Robert Cary (Conservative) asked whether there was any power to stop this "most barbarous form of slaughter," and Mr. Tom Williams former Labour Minister of Agriculture, asked if the practice really happened in this country.

The Food Minister, Major Lloyd George, replied that he gathered so from what he had heard that day. Amid cries of "get it stopped!" he said he was asking the Minister of Agriculture to make inquiries.

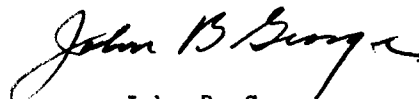
Between 20,000 and 30,000 Irish horses are said to be exported for slaughter every year. (Reuter)

Professedly, the ideals of British colonial policy are expressed from inside the "framework of Christian ethics." When European practice follows policy, then, the parallelism of ambitions - except the ambition, frequent in Africa, of native and European to possess the same acres - can represent areas of possible native-European accord. In theory this could allow the solution of particular problems within the limitations of Christian ethics.

Practice does not follow policy, however. In some cases practice is more narrow, in other instances it is much more liberal. Here (unless endorsement of witchcraft is inside the framework of Christian ethics) we see an actual readiness on the part of Europeans to step far outside the boundaries of Christian ideals. The people actually on the ground in East Africa, thousands of miles from the headquarters of the British Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, permit and politically profit from the slow cracking of a goat's bones in order to bring voodoo power to bear on some natives who have broken the law. And in less spectacular ways the local governments here have been accepting the reality of the power of witchcraft for years.

When I later discovered this second clipping about slaughterhouse technique in Europe the pixie temptation was too much. I put it up to one District officer, Oxford trained, and got an answer something like this: "The problem is not one of Christian ethics. We've been outside them since the suppression of the slave trade. The real problem is to keep most of this empire tied together in some sort of a Commonwealth arrangement by any workable means. We may be able to do it, if we can acquaint people at home with the facts of life and have them elect a House of Commons whose virgin ears would not be shocked over the wringing of a chicken's neck. The idea is to try to have a world-wide community of nations - a full range of cultures and colors - economically entangled but culturally and politically each minding their own censored business. Most of the time I think it's impossible, and stupid to try, but the Laborites got it moving, and we've got to go ahead with it."

Sincerely,



John B. George