

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JBG-9
Prohibition in
Tanganyika

c/o District Commissioner
Biharamulo, Lake Province
Tanganyika Territory
East Africa
19 August 1950

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Early in the morning on Wednesday the 8th, my host Ronald Smith, the District Commissioner, rapped on my door. He wanted to know if I knew the Morse code; and because he is a man with a sizable sense of humor I thought he was joking. But when he came in and I saw his face I knew he was in earnest. I got up from the writing table and, with him to the Post and Telegraph Office, one of the smaller rooms in his boma, or headquarters compound. On the way he told me that his native Postmaster was seriously ill, perhaps dying, and that a message had to be got through to Bukoba, 110 miles north, where the nearest European doctor, the Medical Officer for this area, lives.

Inside the tiny post office a number of Africans were crowded. One was leaning over and cranking a telephone, alongside a dusty set of shelves decked with ancient galvanic cells wired in series. The telephone was an "emergency" instrument, not normally used and obviously not very dependable. No one was bothering the equally old but more reliable telegraph key and sounder. The trouble now was that no one in Bukoba would answer the telephone. There was enough current from the cells for speaking, but the hand generator would not ring through. In Bukoba the telephone and telegraph set were jointly tended, and the telegraph set was watched over during working hours. I suggested that we try to remember enough Morse characters to spell out the word TELEPHONE, and then keep sending it, leaving a man on our phone all the time. I started counting the letters off on my fingers. T, I knew, was ___; E was .; a guess at L would make it . ___ . .; P, I had no idea; H was; O, being part of SOS, I remembered as ___ ___; but it was no use trying, neither Ronald nor myself could remember the others.

While we were puzzling over this a messenger came to the door with a written slip for the D.C., asking that he come at once to the hospital to record the dying statement of the African Postmaster. At the same time there was an answer on the telephone. Ronald grabbed the instrument and, by shouting loudly and repeating each word several times, made it understood that a man was dying here and that the Medical Officer in Bukoba should be brought to their phone. Bukoba answered that the Doctor was out on a call, but that they would get him by the phone inside an hour or two. Ronald then handed the phone to his chief messenger, and asked me to drive him to the hospital. While I was starting the car he hurried across the way and picked up some foolscap sheets and two pencils off the desk in his own office.

The hospital buildings are only a few hundred yards down the hill, an odd group of whitewashed huts, some of mud and plaster, others of stone laid in clay and mortared only on the outer surfaces; some with roofs of thatch and others with the more costly galvanized iron. The narrow spaces between were crowded with natives whose faces seemed to show no expression at all other than mild curiosity. As we walked from the road to the hut-ward where Dr. Patel, the Indian local M.D. was working, they parted ranks and made way for the D.C., showing deference in one way or another as we passed. The Doctor was in the female ward, at the side of a corner bed where a woman was lying, her arm tubed to a hoisted bottle of saline. The Doctor, hugely obese like so many Asiatics become in sedentary employment, tried to rise to his feet as the D.C. came near. Ronald told him to go on with his work, and asked him where we could find the Postmaster. He sent us to a round, native style hut several doors away.

This hut (which despite its lack of windows and the falling decay of its thatched roof had been used as an operating theater until recently) had only one bed; and patients knew the implications of being brought there. A priest from the local Catholic mission was inside, and the man's close relatives. The man on the bed, his black skin turned gray, could not move and could only speak in a barely audible, groaning whisper.

From the conversation that followed, among the dying Postmaster, the D.C., and the Priest, I learned that another African, the Hospital Assistant, had died and that the woman being attended by Dr. Patel was also dying - making three in all - of alcoholic poisoning. And in the process of visiting another ward where the hospital microscopist was almost dying, and in returning to the lone hut to see the Postmaster in the final, floundering stages, I heard that five natives had been drinking Methyl alcohol and that only two had a chance of living. The three who were dead or dying were not ordinary natives, but were trusted, educated civil servants who wore European type clothes and were looked up to by the village people. One of them was second-in-charge of the hospital.

A little before noon we went back to the Post Office, and the Bukoba line was through. The Medical Officer agreed to get in his truck and make the four hour journey over the dirt road; and for the time being, the D.C. said, the matter was out of his hands. There was nothing more he could do until the inquest, when the whole story would be pieced together from the testimony of the surviving two, the relatives, and the Indian Doctor. The Medical Officer would certify the deaths.

On the 7th, Bank Holiday Monday, the D.C. had taken the day off to visit a small port, and Dr. Patel had planned to leave also. The Doctor had turned the hospital over to his assistant, named Mahiku Mungaziji, and had given him the keys to the Native Authority drug store (the "store" being a locked room containing hospital medicines and supplies purchased with native funds). The only Europeans left at Biharamulo were the Agricultural Officer

and his wife, who live away from the D.C. boma.

Early this Monday evening Mahiku went with his friend the hospital microscopist, named Charles Badokufa, to the house of Saidi Kibwana the Postmaster. Someone suggested that it would be a good thing to have a drink. Mahiku returned to the hospital and brought back a glass capped medicinal bottle, which he said contained excellent drink. The bottle was three-quarters full. The three shared the contents of the bottle, mixing it with orange juice, sugar, and water. And when that bottle was finished a second was obtained in the same manner. The microscopist poured some into a cup and sent it home to his wife, Birigida Chule, who in turn had shared it with another woman.

The microscopist knew that methyl alcohol was spoken of as poisonous; he had used it to clean his slides, and he could read the labels as well as the others; but he believed what the Hospital Assistant had said. After all, the Europeans had passed a law that Africans could not drink anything stronger than beer in Tanganyika. Methyl alcohol was really very good to drink, and the saying that it was poison was just a trick to keep the African from getting good liquor. It was even better, this hospital alcohol, than the maize-spirit which Africans had to brew in secret and to keep hidden from the police. In some places this maize-spirit brewing and selling had become a very profitable business, if you did not get caught. He could remember that the D.C. was always trying to catch the brewers or the drinkers; and once the D.C. had fined one of his own clerks. It all fitted in, just to keep the African from getting a good drink, while the Europeans could drink all they wanted. Of course, some Africans - chiefs and educated special persons - were granted special permission to drink spirit liquors as well as beer, but not very many.

On Tuesday morning both Mahiku and Charles were feeling very ill. Even the day before, Mahiku had complained of a very bad headache and had been examined by Dr. Patel. But both had thought it to be just a bad hangover; and of course they could not confess to having stolen the alcohol and having violated the anti-drink law. The Postmaster too, was feeling ill, and the wife of the microscopist.

On Wednesday morning Dr. Patel found Mahiku dead in his quarters, lying across his bed, apparently having died during the night. Saidi Kibwana, the Postmaster (official title Sub Postmaster) died Wednesday afternoon; and the wife of the microscopist, Birigida Chule, also died that day.

The microscopist himself, Charles Badokufa, was the only one, of the known number who had drunk appreciable amounts of the alcohol, who survived. He fortunately was not blinded, and apparently has not suffered any other permanent effects. The several others who presumably drank smaller amounts have not been found or reported ill.

The D.C. does not plan to charge (or to have his Sub Inspector charge) the microscopist with any of the several specifications of

the law which he has broken. The D.C. considers that the loss of his wife and the Scare were perhaps enough; and if he were tried and found guilty he would lose his job. Hospital technicians are very short in Tanganyika.

To the white visitor, the incident has not changed the face of this mud-and-stone-hut minor settlement. The only difference is that now a European must go in person to the Indian shop when he wants to buy methylated spirit for pre-warming his mantle kerosene lamps. The store will not sell it to his native servant.

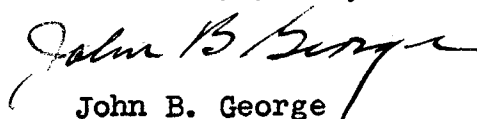
Ronald Smith, however, is a little more deeply entrenched in his cynicism regarding the African. He can probably be counted on now to speak a little bit louder, and to rise and ask for the floor just a little bit faster, whenever he may hear an academic or Secretariat person talking about the African's ability to govern himself. For him this is just another bit of evidence, another straw heaped on the accumulated pile.

He said, Wednesday evening, that there would be a reaction to this - that the natives would lose faith in the hospital, and that the local witch doctors would do an increased business until they killed off a few. The next morning this seemed borne out by the action of the wife of his cook. The cook caught her pouring out medicine on the ground, from a bottle given to her at the hospital dispensary. She told her husband that she, being several months pregnant, would not risk the lives of herself and her child by taking this medicine - not when the two important black men at the hospital had poisoned themselves and died. The cook appeared at the breakfast table with the bottle, just as we were having a last cup of coffee. And I could see the D.C. looking at his humble, henpecked stance and listening to his please-Bwana-won't-you-do-something-about-it explanation.

The incident had a double edge, sharp on either side. It made the African suspicious of Government, and it made Government (in the persons of the D.C. and other officials involved) suspicious of the African.

I think most Americans, who lived in the United States while the Volstead Act was still in effect, might be able to write off the whole thing in terms of a demonstrated human fallibility which has been often expressed in "European" history, too.

Sincerely yours,



John B. George