

TAVETA CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS IN  
CONNECTION WITH RELIGION,  
BURIAL, AND DISEASE

Religion.

THE Wa-Taveta believe in a God whom they call *Izuwa*. He is considered great and powerful, and has sacrifices made to him publicly and privately.

Public sacrifices are performed by elders of the *Njama* or Council, either :—

(i.) At the *Mti wa Chila* (Tree of Council), a huge tree of considerable antiquity which is the Areopagus of the tribe.

(ii.) At Lake Challa, which stands on the site of an extinct volcano.

The occasion for these sacrifices are times of drought, famine, pestilence, or stress generally. Contributions to the sacrifice are made by the whole tribe.

At the *Mti wa Chila* the sacrifices are of two kinds. The first variety is as follows :—After slaughtering the animal, the elders take the meat from the breast and back. Five pieces of meat from the breast are then thrown up in the air in an easterly direction to *Izuwa Apa* (lit. God-Father), and four pieces to the west from the back of the animal to *Koko-Mwezi* (lit. Grandmother-Moon). To the earth also are thrown pieces of meat from the back as propitiation to the spirits of the dead (*ngoma*).

*Izuwa Apa* and *Koko-Mwezi* are appellations of the same deity, whose power is visibly embodied in the sun and moon. The directions chosen for the throwing of the meat have

reference to the portion of the horizon from which the sun and moon rise.

In the second variety of sacrifice the animal is buried whole in a pit, the legs pointing up. This sacrifice is nearly always performed with the object of averting a pestilence which has laid hold of the country. The idea underlying the rite is that the pestilence should go down into the earth with the animal.

#### Lake Challa Sacrifice.

The elder officiating at this ceremony must be a member of the Wa-umba family, which is of Chaga origin, and formerly, according to tradition, resided on the site of the present lake. When the earth collapsed and the waters rushed in, the majority of the residents were engulfed, except one male, who made good his escape to the Taveta forests and founded the present Wa-umba family. (Mr. Hollis in his notes on the Wa-Taveta, p. 119, has a reference to this.)

Besides this sacrifice on behalf of the whole tribe at Lake Challa, a similar one is performed by five or six representatives of the reigning generation or *irika* on the occasion of the election of the two chiefs.

#### Private Sacrifices.

Private sacrifices are performed by individuals either at the sacred place (*ngomeni*), where the skulls of the married dead of both sexes repose in *nyungu* or earthenware pots, or in the vicinity of their huts.

The supernatural powers propitiated in these sacrifices are usually the *ngoma* or spirits of the dead, but sometimes also *Izuwa* the Deity as well. The *ngomeni* or sacred place of spirits, where the first variety of sacrifice is performed, is usually some shady spot in the forest.

The sacrifice in all cases has some particular object in view, and almost invariably is occasioned by the sickness of some member of the suppliant's family. Previous to the sacrifice the latter usually consults the *mganga* or witch-doctor, who tells the patient, or his relatives representing him, if he is too ill to appear, from the *ngoma* of which deceased relative the

illness has come, and advises him as to the nature of the propitiatory sacrifice required.

A goat, milk, honey, and a mixture of maize and *kunde* beans, called *msanganywa*, are then brought to the spot. They sweep and clean the place, and, after slaughtering the goat, remove the flesh from the breast and back and burn it on the fire. The tongue is also burnt if the sick man is head of the household. The meat is then cut into very thin pieces, and the elder of the family takes pieces of it, together with some of the milk, honey, and *msanganywa* mixture, and puts the offering outside the pot containing the head of the deceased relative said to be the author of the disease. The following formula is pronounced:—

*"Ingerisha twaza kukulasa umwinge zinia uu mundu ahoe, akahoa enekuinga mbuji ingi."*

"First we come to pray you to give strength to this man that he may recover, and if he recovers he will give you another goat."

The remainder of the meat and other offerings are then divided among the elders present and taken away. A small strip of the goat's skin is put on the middle finger of the patient's right hand. Private sacrifices are also commonly performed outside the patient's hut at the *kisoko* or primitive altar which is found outside every hut. The *kisoko* is either a log of wood planted half in the ground, the remainder outside, or a stone.

Offerings of meat, honey, or native liquor are made at various times to the spirits at the *kisoko*, e.g., if a woman has dreamt at night that her deceased husband has given her a thrashing, after the native doctor has been consulted she will make an appropriate sacrifice at the *kisoko*. Tiny quantities of meat, honey, or *tembo* (native liquor) are sufficient to appease the *ngoma*, e.g., a spoonful of milk or a piece of meat as small as a finger-nail. The offering is placed on the ground near the *kisoko*, and the following formula is pronounced:—

"I give you, father, or mother or brother, this goat or honey or milk, etc. Now give me strength that I continue in strength all my days."

Sometimes, though rarely, the doctor decides that both *Izuwa* the Deity and an *ngoma* require propitiating. In this case the elder of the household takes some ashes from the fire-stones and makes a dividing line on the animal's back from head to tail. The idea underlying this rite is to divide the animal between the *ngoma* on the one hand and the Deity on the other.

The elder then takes a mouthful of milk and honey and spits the mixture on to the head of the animal while it is still alive.

He then addresses *Izuwa* as follows:—

*"Izuwa, umwokoe uu mundu wangu: umwinge zinia: nakuinga mbuji ii; kila kifwa kikikoma mundu uu wangu kitonge na mbuji ii."*

"God save this man of mine; give him strength: I give you this goat: if that spirit slays this man of mine may he go with this goat."

The *ngoma* is then addressed:—

*"Nawe, ngoma, nakuinga mbuji ii utangare na Izuwa mumuhoje mundu wa wangu."*

"And to you, spirit, I give this goat, to divide with *Izuwa*, that you twain may heal this relation of mine."

It is noticeable that in the first prayer the attitude of the suppliant towards the *ngoma* is distinctly hostile and contrasts with the equally respectful attitude to the latter when its turn comes to be invoked.

After these invocations, the elder slaughters the goat, roasts the tongue in the flames, and cuts it into nine pieces, which he scatters, some to the east and some to the west, as described on another page. This constitutes the offering to *Izuwa*. The breast and back meat are also cut into tiny pieces and offered to the *ngoma*, breast meat being given to male, and back to female *ngoma*.

A combined thank-offering to both *Izuwa* and the *ngoma* is always made after the birth of a child for the safe delivery of the mother, and after escape from great danger, e.g., a falling tree or a charging rhinoceros or lion.

Propitiatory sacrifices are always made to both *Izuwa* and the *ngoma* on all occasions when animals are slaughtered

at feasts and ceremonies, both public and private. Otherwise the jealousy of these powers will be incurred.

#### Animism or Belief in Spirits.

The belief of the Wa-Taveta in *ngoma* or spirits of the deceased is far more vivid and real than their belief in *Izuwa* or God. The *ngoma* of a man is represented during his lifetime by his shadow or *kivuli*, which departs with him at death. The spirits of the dead go down into the earth, and live in all respects like human beings on the earth, eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage.

A curious custom illustrates this: if a youth has died before being able to marry, and his surviving brother is afterwards taken ill, the latter consults the *mganga* or medicine-man, who probably tells him that his deceased unmarried brother is troubling him because he wishes to marry in the other world. The patient then thinks of a suitable girl who died before she was married, and proceeds to build a miniature hut in a spot chosen for the purpose. To this hut he brings a tiny piece of goat meat and tiny offerings of honey and milk. A marriage, or *ngaso* ceremony, is then performed on a miniature scale. The phantom bridegroom is addressed and told he is to be married to a certain phantom girl; four banana-cuttings, purple in colour, are put inside the little hut, one to represent the bridegroom, one the bride, one the old man customarily presiding over marriage ceremonies, and one the customary old woman duenna.

The person officiating then covers the hut with *migomba* or banana leaves, and the party leaves the spot.

If an elder brother dies before marriage, his younger brother cannot marry until he has observed the above ceremony.

All is not peace in the realm of the departed spirits. Fights and quarrels are frequent. Evidence of these quarrels is obtained when the stomach of an animal sacrificed is found to be diseased. For instance, the spirit of a deceased father may be quarrelling with that of a deceased mother, being envious of the latter because sacrifice has been made to her and not to him.

Departed spirits have plenty to eat and drink, because the shades of all cattle and sheep slaughtered by the living are eaten by them. It is believed that shadows or spirits of all animals slaughtered go down to the realms of the dead. Sacrifices, therefore, are not made to appease the hunger of spirits, but to remind them that they are not forgotten. Spirits are not happy, and are, on that account, vindictive towards the living. The idea is that all men hate to die, and when dead envy the state of the living. They are therefore capable of causing the death of living beings unless adequately appeased.

Spirits make their presence known in the following ways : through the cries of birds called *vitaga* and *ngunguma* heard at night time, or through the laugh of a hyæna. Both these visitations are unlucky, and sacrifices must inevitably be made by the person experiencing them. Spirits also appear in dreams and make their power felt by sending disease.

A review of the above evidence shows that the spiritual beliefs of the Wa-Taveta, like those of most primitive peoples, approximate to superstition rather than religion. They conceive of *Izuwa* not as an ethical Deity, but rather as a power who must be propitiated. Similarly the *ngoma* are vindictive unless appeased. Fear is therefore the motive inspiring all their spiritual beliefs.

#### **Disease and its Connection with Superstition.**

The Wa-Taveta do not attribute a physical cause to a disease, even in the most obvious cases. The causes of disease are invariably ascribed to *ngoma*, or to *uchawi* (witchcraft), or to the will of *Izuwa*. The *mganga* is resorted to in all cases and decides on the remedial steps.

Similarly in witchcraft cases the *mganga* is consulted. His remedies are twofold : if he decides that the person bewitching the sick man has been inspired by *ngoma* to do so, he will counsel sacrifices to the latter.

If the wizard has cast the spell on his own initiative, the doctor will give the patient various medicines to eat or drink, with a view to curing the affection. A man may be bewitched (*ku-logwa*) in various ways :—(a) By an enemy casting a spell

on his food as he eats it. (b) By placing medicines or spells of various sorts in his path as he walks.

Witchcraft is practised only in secret, as detection means death to the guilty person.

Every kind of disease or accident is explained by reference to either of the above causes, *e.g.*, if a man is mauled by a lion, the animal is considered to have been inspired by a *ngoma*. Similarly the murder of a man by his enemy is supposed to have a spiritual reason.

Diseases sent by *Izuwa* are usually in the shape of a pestilence which lays low a large number of victims at the same time.

#### Divination or the Native Practice of Medicine.

As stated elsewhere, the *mganga* or doctor is consulted by the person troubled with spirits. He proceeds to divine from what spirit the visitation or disease has come. The implements of his trade are a calabash (*kiwo*) or a *kizembe*, a box made from a small piece of stump of which the inside is hollowed out, the top and bottom being bound with hide.

Into the *kiwo* or the *kizembe* are put *zaro* or odds and ends, comprising teeth of a lion, white stones from a riverbed, dried fruit from wild trees, an old bullet, etc. He then shakes the contents together (*kubiga zaro*) and takes out a portion in a handful, which he divides into groups of five. His divination is then made by the aid of the odd pieces in the following manner:—

One odd piece after the first handful means the pole used for digging a grave, and is therefore interpreted to refer to the death of someone in the hut or family of the consultant, and the doctor will then recommend the sacrifice of goats, etc., to avert the evil. An odd piece remaining after previous handfuls have been divined to mean that the sacrifice of an animal is required, signifies a knife for sacrificing the animal in question.

Two odd pieces mean the shoes of the consultant, *i.e.*, that he will be able to walk away and therefore recover.

Three odd pieces mean the fire-stones used for cooking purposes, and a goat will have to be sacrificed,

Four odd pieces signify that the disease is the result of the influence used by female deceased relatives of the consultant, who are ready to restore strength to the latter, but must be helped to this good end by sacrifice.

If the pieces divide exactly into groups of five the interpretation is that the disease is from the deceased male relatives, who are ready to restore strength to the consultant, but must first be appeased.

#### Burial Ceremonies.

The Wa-Taveta bury their dead in a sitting posture at a depth of about three feet. The soil is removed first of all with a pole, and then the digging proceeds with a hoe.

When the soil is returned, the pole used for the first digging is cut in half or into three pieces and put on the top of the earth, which is covered first with cowdung.

Four days after in the case of a woman, five days in the case of a man, ashes from the hut of the deceased are taken to a public path and placed there. If the deceased is a man, the ashes are taken in a *nyungu* or earthenware pot. If a woman, in banana-leaves of a particular variety of banana-tree called *ndiji*. In addition to the ashes, two sticks used for supporting the bed of deceased are placed in a standing position on either side of the ashes. It is unlucky to place the ashes near the path that leads to a hut or cluster of huts.

When the flesh of the deceased has left his bones, *i.e.*, after about six months, a goat will be taken to the grave and the body exhumed. If the deceased is a male, a he-goat, if a female, a she-goat, is taken and eaten by the members of the deceased's village. The head of the deceased is then removed from the body, and in the place where the head lay is placed that portion of the goat's bowel which the natives call *kitachia*. They then wrap the head in fresh *migomba* or banana-leaves and place it high up in the hut where the deceased died. After a month a little tembo or native liquor and honey and an old jar (*mtungi*) are taken to the sacred place of the family (called *ngomeni*), together with the head of the deceased wrapped as it is in banana-leaves. The head is always carried by a woman, and if the deceased is a married



man by his wife. The head rests on the woman's back, and during the journey to the *ngomeni* she must speak to no one, and not even reply to greetings. The head is then removed from the leaves and placed in the old jar. The woman and the relations accompanying her then drink the liquor and the honey, leaving only the dregs, which are sprinkled in the spot containing the heads of previous family dead. The following formula is then spoken to the spirits of the dead:—"Mundu wako nakuetiwe mwekae nae andu a mweyu."

"I have brought you this member of your family that you may rest together with him."

"*Unitania na mbole-mbole; uninge nikae na zinia.*" "Don't frighten him; grant me to remain with strength."

"*Muku uninge zinia.*" "Ancestor, give me strength."

The head is then placed in the jar and the jar placed on its side. The front of the skull looks outwards. The jar is then placed among the heads of the male dead if the deceased is a man, among the female heads if the deceased is a woman, there being a dividing line between them in the *ngomeni*.

The relatives of the deceased then retire without looking back, and a few yards away they stop and bend the knee.

They then leave the spot altogether. Ten days later, sacrifices such as are described elsewhere under the heading "Private sacrifices" are made to the deceased so as to reconcile him to the rest of the spirits of the *ngomeni*.

The only dead whose heads are entitled to repose in the *ngomeni* are married men and women. Unmarried maidens and youths are now buried outside the huts. Before the advent of Government they were thrown out into the bush.

The Wa-Munene clan bury their male dead inside the hut. With the other clans burial of a married man inside the hut takes place only if he has expressed a wish to that effect before decease. Female dead are always buried outside a hut. No ceremonies take place subsequent to the burial of an unmarried youth or girl.

A year after the death of a father of a family, a feast is held, to which are called representatives of all the four clans. Tembo or native liquor is provided for all. On this occasion

the Wa-Shome beat a drum called *Merigo* (Hollis, p. 121), and dance and sing until the morning. They also kill a goat, male or female, according to the sex of the deceased commemorated, and the bones and skull of the goat are left at the deceased's grave. Other clans like the Wa-Rutu, Wa-Munene, and Wa-Zirai do not kill a goat on this occasion.

If a Taveta goes away from his own country, and his skull is not recoverable, the skull of a goat is placed in a pot and taken to the *ngomeni* (Hollis, p. 122).

The Wa-Rutu clan does not observe the custom of taking the skulls of the dead to the *ngomeni*. This circumstance is perhaps due to its Wa-Kamba origin.

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