

FETISHISM, A GOVERNMENT.

BY

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In civilisation, under governments other than autocratic, law being made and executed, at least professedly, with the consent of the governed, all enactments find not only their justification, but also the possibility of their enforcement in their support by public opinion. It is the general consensus as to the need of an enactment regarding certain conditions, affecting the lives or happiness or rights of the majority, that crystallises opinions into a form of words and gives authority for the enforcement of the decisions expressed by those words.

This is also partly true even under governments more or less despotic, where the will of the ruler, not of the ruled, is made the basis of law. Few despots are so utterly tyrannical as deliberately to arouse opposition on the part of their subjects. Even a Nero, who would refuse a petition if it happened to run counter to his whim, would grant that same petition if it happened to coincide with his own whim of another day. Even he thought it desirable to pander to the public taste for the butcheries of the amphitheatre, not simply because he himself enjoyed them. Though he could initiate no measure for the real good of Rome, he recognized the necessity of responding to the cry, *panem et circenses*.

In all governments fear is recognized as one of the grounds for the enforcement of law. In even the great nations and under the highest form of civilisation, the public opinion that administers law makes its demand partly in the interest of essential right, partly with the instinct of self-preservation against forces of evil, and partly for the punishment of wrong. Punishment in itself is not reformatory. It is retributive; it is deterrent; it plays upon fear.

In the native African tribal forms of government, while it would not be true to say that there is no justice in the customs they recognize, it is true that the only sentiment appealed to in the enforcement and even in the enactment of supposed needed measures is that of fear. Their religion being one of fear, it is therefore appealed to, to lend its sanction and aid.

Among the negro tribes of the Bight of Benin, and the Bantu of the region of Corisco Island and of the Ogowe River, in what is now

the Congo Français, there was a power known variously as Egbo, Ukuku, and Yasi, which tribes, native chiefs, and headmen of villages invoked as a Court of last Appeal, for the passage of needed laws, or the adjudication of some quarrel which an ordinary family or village council was unable to settle.

In those councils an offender could be proved guilty of a debt, or theft, or other trespass, and when it was no longer possible for him by audacity or mendacity to persist in his assertion of innocence, he would yield to the decision of the great majority against him. But there was no central government to enforce that decision or exact from him restitution. The only authority the native chiefs possessed was based on respect due to age, parental position, or strength of personal character.

If an offender chose to disregard all these considerations an appeal was then made to his superstitious fear.

Egbo, Ukuku, Yasi, was a secret society composed only of men; boys being initiated into it about the age of puberty. Members were bound by a terrible oath and under pain of death to obey any law or command issued by the Spirit under which the Society professed to be organised. The actual, audible utterance of the command was by the voice of one of the members of the Society, chosen as priest for that purpose. This man, secreted in the forest in a clump of bushes on the outskirts of the village, or in one of the rooms of the Council House, disguised his voice, speaking only gutturally. The whole proceeding was an immense fiction. They believed in spirits, in the power of fetish charms, they made such charms as part of the Society's ceremonies; but, as to the decisions, all the members knew that the decision in any case was their own, not a spirit's. They knew that the voice speaking was that of their delegate, not of a spirit. Yet, for any one of them, or for any woman, girl, or uninitiated boy to have said that would have been death. And those men who would not have submitted to that same decision if arrived at in open council of those same men as *men*, and known before the whole village to be speaking only as men, would instantly submit when once the case had been taken to Ukuku's Court. They carried out that fiction all their lives. Let a man order his wives and other slaves to clear the overgrown village paths, they might hesitate to obey by inventing some excuse that they were too much occupied with other work, or that they would do it only when other people, who also used the same path, should assist. Or, if under the sting of a *kasa-nguvu* (lash of hippopotamus hide or manatus skin), they started to do the work, they might do it only partly or

very unsatisfactorily. But let that same man call in the other men of the village, and summon a meeting of the Society, those same women would submit instantly and in terror of Ukuku's voice. Much as they may possibly have suspected it was a human voice, they did not dare whisper that suspicion. Themselves helped to carry on a gigantic lie. They taught their little children, both girls and boys, that that voice belonged to a spirit which ate people who disobeyed him. When the Society walked in procession to or from their appointed rendezvous they were preceded by runners, who, with a well-organized cry and with *kasa-nguvu* in hand, warned all on the path of the coming of the Spirit. Women and children hastened to get out of the way, or, if unable to hide in time, they were to avert their faces. The penalty for a woman even seeing the procession was a severe beating (that, however, might be commuted to a fine).

About thirty-seven years ago, in the island of Corisco, the then headquarters of the Corisco Mission, there was a long-standing feud between the Benga tribe, inhabiting that island, and the Kombe tribe, dwelling at the mouth of the Eyo River of the Benita country, fifty miles to the north. Benita was also a part of our mission field. The quarrel between the two tribes greatly obstructed our mission work. Missionaries were entirely safe to travel between the two places, respect being given them as foreigners, and their presence in a boat protected their crews; but it was often difficult to obtain a crew willing to go on that journey without the presence of a white man. The difficulties caused by the feud fell heavily also on the Benga people themselves. The island itself had no products for trade. Ivory, dye-woods, and rubber came from the Benita mainland. Many Kombe women had married Benga men and needed frequently to revisit their own country. Finally, to end the feud, it was agreed that the Kombe Ukuku Society, whose power was held in even greater fear than that of Benga, should come to Corisco and settle the affair.

It was a day of terror at the Girls' Boarding School, of which I was then Superintendent. As the long, blood-curdling yell of the forerunners, on the public path that ran only one hundred feet from the school dwelling, announced the approach of the procession, the girls fled, affrighted, to the darkness of the attic of the house, and subsequently, after the procession had passed, they ran away secretly in byways to their own villages, feeling safer in the darkness of their mothers' huts than in the mission house; for it had been reported that Ukuku, besides settling the tribal feud, intended to attack the mission work that had been successfully making converts

among the Kombe, because any native who became a Christian immediately withdrew from membership in the Society. It had, therefore, begun to feel a little anxious about its safety. I stood at my door and saw the procession pass. They saw me, but because of my sex they did not show any displeasure. They were painted with white and other coloured chalks that gave a horrible expression to their faces; their look was defiant; and a hoarse, muttered chant had, even on myself, a depressing effect. I could well imagine that to a superstitious native mind the *tout ensemble* would be terrifying.

The procession on its way chose to pass over a road that had by use become somewhat public, but which was owned by the Mission, and it was only fifty feet distant past the front door of the house of the senior missionary, the Rev. James L. Mackey. Mrs. Mackey was standing at the door of the house. Not being a Benga woman, she saw no reason why she should retire before Ukuku, and she did not. Ukuku went to their rendezvous in a rage, and the Kombe portion demanded the life of the woman who not only had not hidden her face in their presence, but had dared persistently to look upon them. This demand was modified by the Benga portion to a fine; whipping, not even they daring to suggest for a white lady. That demand for a fine was actually brought to Mr. Mackey, who gave a dignified reply, pointing out (1) that, as foreigners, white people were not subject to Ukuku; (2) that Ukuku had trespassed on Mission private property, and was itself responsible for being seen; (3) that, as a Christian, in no case could he recognize the authority of Ukuku to order or fine him. In reply, Ukuku made the point that they were the government of the country, and that even foreigners were bound to obey law. (Corisco actually belonged to Spain, but Spain in no way exercised any visible authority whatever over it.)

They admitted their trespass on private property, but still demanded the fine. Mr. Mackey made no further reply; and, of course, as a matter of conscience, refused to pay the fine. But it transpired afterwards that native friends, fearful lest matters should come to an ugly pass through his refusal, privately paid the fine themselves. The missionary, unaware of this, thought he had triumphed. Really, Ukuku had; but not unqualifiedly, for it was a shock to his power that it should have been disputed at all, even by a white man.

About the same time a young slave man, who was beginning to attend church with desire to become a Christian, was sitting in a village where was being held a meeting of the local Ukuku Society.

The object of the meeting was to alarm and drive back to a more constant performance of fetish observances some of the villages on which heathenism was beginning to lose its hold. In the course of his oracular deliverances the Ukuku priest mentioned by name this young man. In his fresh zeal as a convert he made a protest. Perhaps duty did not call for even that just at that time. But he even went beyond. As he was able to recognize the voice, though disguised, and knew who the owner of the voice was, he made a fatal mistake in saying, "You, such-a-one, I know who you are. You are only a man. Why are you troubling about me?" He was promptly dragged to the seaside and was decapitated.

While converts felt the propriety of abandoning their membership in the Society and any participation in its ceremonies, the Mission had not required of them nor deemed it desirable that they should make a revelation of its secrets.

But it had occurred in the early history of the Mission that one young man, Ibia, a freeman, member of a prominent family, had felt that in breaking away from heathenism and becoming a Christian he should cast off the very semblance of any connection with or even tacit endorsement of evil. He knew the Society was based on a great falsehood. As a lad he had believed Ukuku was a spirit. On his initiation he had found that this was not so. But, loyal to his heathenism and to his oath, he had assented to the lie and had assisted in propagating it. He was known for the fearlessness of his convictions, and in his conversion he, to a rare degree, emerged from all superstitious beliefs. Few emerge so utterly as he. He, therefore, publicly began to reveal the ceremonies practiced in the Ukuku meetings. At once his life was in danger. The two pioneer missionaries, Rev. Messrs. Mackey and Clemens, were men of exceptional strength of character and wise judgment, and had obtained a very strong hold on the respect and affection even of the heathen. Their influence, united with a small party of Ibia's own family and a few of the more civilized chiefs, was able to save his life; he being guarded in the mission-house until the fierceness of heathen rage should abate. But, though his enemies presently ceased from open efforts to kill him by force, they proclaimed that they would kill him by means of the very witchcraft power he was despising. They said they would concoct fetish charms which would destroy the life of his child, and that they would curse the ground on which he trod so that it should sicken his feet. Not long afterwards his infant child did die; and one of his feet for more than a year had a painful ulcer. The coincidence was startling, and somewhat tri-

umphant for the heathen. But infant mortality is large even among natives; and phagedenic ulcers of the leg are very common. Ibia recognized his afflictions as a trial of his faith permitted by God. He came out of his fiery trial strong, and his life since has been that of a reformer, uncompromising with any evil, earning from his own people their ill-will by his scathing denunciations of anything that savours of superstition. He is now the Rev. Ibia j Ikenge, member of Corisco Presbytery, and pastor of the Corisco Church. And Ukuku has long since ceased to exist on the island.

Like all government intended for the benefit and protection of the governed, Ukuku, when it happened to throw its power on the side of right, was occasionally an apparent blessing. It could end tribal quarrels and proclaim and enforce peace where no individual chief or king would have been able to accomplish that same result.

On one occasion the Rev. William Clemens took a young Benga man to locate him as evangelist in the bounds of a mainland heathen tribe, where there was some doubt as to the young man's safety. The village chief, though a heathen and entirely uninterested in the religious aspect of the case, was alive to the fact that the presence among his people of this young protégé of the white man would increase his tribal importance, and that his people themselves would derive a pecuniary benefit from even the small amount of money that would be spent on the evangelist's food. He therefore voluntarily offered to call an Ukuku meeting and have a law enacted that no one should machinate against the Benga's life by fetishes of any kind. Mr. Clemens declined the offer. If he accepted Ukuku's authority to defend him he might some day be called on to submit to that same power as an authority to punish him. He wisely avoided an entangling alliance. He told the chief that he preferred to entrust his protégé to his care and to rely on his promise rather than on Ukuku's. This compliment put the chief on his mettle; the evangelist's protection became to him a case of *noblesse oblige*.

The power of this Society was often used as a boycott to compel white traders as to the prices of their goods, using intimidation and violence after the manner of trades unions in civilized countries. This was true all along the west coast of Africa wherever no white government had been established. It ceased at Libreville, in the Gaboon country, after the establishment of a French colony in 1843, with a white governor, a squad of soldiers, police, and a gunboat. Also at such trade centres as Libreville, Ukuku early lost its position, for the population was too heterogeneous and there were too

many diverse interests. At the trading-houses were gathered native clerks and a large staff of servants as cooks, personal attendants, boatmen, etc., representing a score of tribes from distant parts of the coast. Whatever obedience they gave to similar societies in their tribes they did not feel bound by the local one, to which they were strangers; and they were disposed under a community of trade interests with their employers to disregard the society of the local tribe, to whom many of them felt themselves socially superior.

But at Batanga, in what is now the Kamerun Colony of the German Government, the Ukuku Society forty years ago carried itself with a high hand. Batanga was not then claimed by any European nation. Its trade in ivory was one of the richest on the west coast of Africa; so rich that the Batanga people became arrogant. Some of them despised to make plantations of native food supply, and lived almost entirely on foreign imported provisions, taking in exchange for their abundant ivory, barrels of beef and bags of rice and boxes of ship's biscuit. It was a case of demand and supply. The native got what he wanted in goods, and the white man obtained the precious ivory. But, in the competitions of trade, fluctuations in the market, and the growing demand of the natives for a higher price, there came days when some white man, seeing the margin of his per cent. or gain becoming too narrow, would refuse the current price. Doubtless, often the white men were arbitrary, not only in prices but in other things also. Doubtless, also, the natives were often exorbitant in their demands. When the differences became extreme the native chiefs called in the aid of Ukuku. The phrase was to "put Ukuku" on the white man's house. The trader was boycotted. He stood as under a major excommunication. No one should buy from or sell to him. No one should work for him. He was deserted by cook, steward, washerman, and all other personal attendants. Sentinels stood on guard to prevent food being brought to him or even to prevent him lighting a fire in his own kitchen if he should attempt to cook for himself.

The white trader generally succeeded in breaking down the interdict put upon him by three several means, viz.: (1) He had in his house a supply of canned goods and ship's biscuit, with which he would not starve. (2) His negro mistress almost always remained faithfully with him, secretly assisting him, divulging to him the plans of her own people—as in the history of Cortes and the conquest of Mexico. She dared to do this, being tacitly upheld by her own family. The position of "wife" to a white man was considered by the natives as an honourable one, and was sought by parents for their

daughters. It was an exceptional source of wealth for them. (3) If other means failed, the trader could almost always break the boycott by bribes of rum. Time was money to him. Often, indeed, in a malarial country, it was life to him. Though time was worth nothing to the native, the rum he had learned to love became a necessity to him. In cutting the white man from their ivory they had cut themselves from that white man's rum. A judicious expenditure of demijohns, in proper quarters, generally enabled Ukuku to revoke his own law. Then, perhaps, the white man would make some slight concession.

I had an experience of this kind in the Benita country in 1868. I had been there several years. There was growth in the desire for the good things that money can buy, but wages and prices had remained unchanged. I was obtaining all I needed of both labour and food without difficulty. Had I any difficulty I should, naturally, have offered more inducement. I was not aware that there was any discontent. None of my employees had asked for a rise, nor had people, in selling their vegetables, etc., complained of the price I gave.

Suddenly, one morning, a company of about twenty men, led by an ambitious heathen, whose manner had always been dictatorial to me, and to whom I had shown no favour, filed into the public meeting-room of our mission-house. I knew them all; none were in my employ, nor were any of them Christians. As if they thought it was hopeless to attempt to obtain anything from me by petition or respectful request, they seemed to have decided to stake all on a demand and threat. They suddenly and harshly began, "We've come to order you to change prices." Naturally, I felt nettled, and replied that I saw no reason why I should take orders from them. They rose in a rage and said, "Then we'll put Ukuku on you—(1) No one shall work for you. (2) No one shall sell you food or drink. (3) You shall not go yourself to your spring." And, with a savage yell, they left the house. Instantly, a great terror fell on the native members of my household. Those who were heathen dropped work and went to their villages. Those who were Christians came to me distressed, saying that they desired to obey me, but they feared the interdict. I relieved for them the situation by excusing them from farther work "'till I should call them." And I refrained from ringing the call-bell at the usual work hour.

With me were Mrs. Nassau, our child's nurse, my sister, Miss J. A. Nassau, and two native girls, members of another tribe. Nurse was a foreigner, a Christian Liberian woman, who was not amenable to

the interdict. Some of my Christian employees, though not working, remained on the premises. A few visitors came in the afternoon to sympathize; some in sincerity, some to see how we were feeling, and some as spies to see what we were doing. The interdict, except as an expression of ill-will, and a possible check to my mission work, did not trouble me. As to food, I had an ample supply of canned provisions, sufficient for a long siege. In refusing to sell me of their native products the people would miss more than I should. As to work, the cleaning of the premises was not pressing, and could safely be neglected. As to drinking-water, enough could be caught from the roof in the almost daily rains. Food and labour were their own, to refuse if they chose to. But the spring was on my premises, and belonged to me. Refraining from going to it might be deemed cowardice; at least, it would be obeying an order of what Ukuku claimed was a spirit. An order from men I might submit to under compulsion; to submit to this spirit went against my conscience. After prayer and consideration overnight, Mrs. Nassau fully agreed with me that it was right I should make a demonstration at the spring. In parting with her next morning, as I took up a bucket to go to the spring, she knew I might not return alive. A sandy path led through low bushes to the spring, several hundred yards distant. I saw no one on the way nor at the spring. I filled the bucket and was turning homewards, when a spy, armed with a spear, jumped out of his ambush and ordered me to leave the water. As I did not do so, but started to walk over the path, he stabbed at my back. I thrust the spear aside and faced him, but walking backwards all the time. He feared my eye, and did not attempt to stab me in front, but tried to spill the water in the bucket and stab from behind me. But the bucket, and its contents, I guarded as he struck at it from right to left, by rapidly changing it from left to right with one hand and warding off the spear with the other; still walking backwards, and keeping my eye on him, the bucket and I reached the house in safety.

He hastened to the native villages, whence soon I heard a great outcry. A company of Christian natives came in haste, saying that Ukuku was on his way to assault the house, and that they, and other young men, even some who were not Christians, would fight for me against their heathen parents, if I could provide them powder. I supplied them. Then they bade me hasten fasten all doors and windows.

The Mission dwelling consisted of two houses joined by a covered veranda; one, a one-storied bamboo, the other framed of

boards, one and a half story. Mrs. Nassau was in the latter, closing it. Before I had finished closing the former the enemies came, and I was alone in the bamboo house. Shots rattled against the walls. Through the chinks I could see the young men were guarding all entrances, and were firing. I think that, in this difficult situation, defending me against their own people, they purposely fired wide, for no one was even wounded. But their standing armed checked the enemies, who then soon retired. In after years these were ashamed of their assault, and tried to minimize it when it was related to new missionaries by representing that they did not intend to kill me. I accepted that as a kindly afterthought. Certainly, that spy at the spring did intend, and tried hard, to kill me. Certainly, also, their gunshots left their marks on the walls of that bamboo house, and, for aught they knew, had penetrated the thin walls, and might have struck me.

That their interdict had been successfully broken, and that, too, by the aid of their own sons, was a great blow to the Ukuku party. It was the beginning of the end of its power. Four years later, while I was absent on my furlough, the number of the church members having largely increased, two young men, themselves of strong character, and imbued with the courage of my able successor at Benita, deliberately determined to "reveal Ukuku." They walked through a village street openly shouting to the women that "Ukuku is only a man." At once their lives were demanded; but so many of their companions stood up for them, and said to their own fathers, "The day you kill those two you will have to kill all of us, for we all say also that Ukuku is only a person." Nevertheless the Society met. But when the members looked in each other's faces, each one knew that in voting to put to death the other men's sons he was voting also against his own son. The Society could have dared to kill one or two. But to kill a score! They shrank from it. Everyone thought of his own son thus involved, and the great lie was exposed, and died.

In 1879, on the Ogowe River, at my interior station, Kangeve, near the town of Lambaréné, 130 miles up the course of the river, I had a similar experience with that same Society, known there in the Galwa tribe by the name of Yasi.

In my new work on the Ogowe I pursued toward that Society the same course I had followed with Ukuku at Benita. I preached simply the Gospel of Christ. But it is true that the Gospel touches mankind in all their human relations. I, therefore, was not silent about such sins as slavery and polygamy, any more than I would be

silent about the sins of drunkenness or theft. All these were practices the evil of which, in serious moments, most natives would admit, however much they chose still to persist in them. But witchcraft was their religion; they believed in it. To attack it openly would only offend, and I would lose the personal influence which I was able to exercise in quiet, private discussions. Yasi, though a falsehood, was their government. To attack it would have simply emptied my church of every heathen auditor, and to have debarred any women or children being allowed to receive further instruction. I could wait, bide my time, for the entering wedge of Christian principles to overthrow what I could never have removed by direct onslaught. In conversations with my heathen friends, the native chiefs, in their own houses, when no women or children happened to be present, I would expostulate with them against such a mode of government. I told them I would render them respect and even obedience if, as persons, they should enact laws affecting me as a person, but that I could give neither respect nor obedience to what they knew I knew was a lie. They looked troubled, and replied, "Yes, that's so, but don't tell it to the women." And I did not. Nevertheless, in my untrammelled conversations in the mission-house with my own Christian male employees I was not careful to be silent if our schoolboys happened to be present. And these same employees, in their own dormitories, deliberately and intentionally told the boys of the falsities of their tribal superstitions. They were right. This was Christian principle, working as I desired it should. Inevitably there grew up a generation of lads who began to deride Yasi, and said that they would never join the Society.

There came one day a delegation of them, led by two Christian young men, Mamba and Nguva, asking my permission to play a mock Yasi meeting. I asked them, "Will you dare to play that same play in your own villages?" "No, we would be afraid." "Then don't do here what you are unable to carry out elsewhere. I cannot defend you in your own villages. You are safe here. Wait until you are stronger and more numerous. Just now your play will create confusion." Nevertheless, they did play, with the result of which I had forewarned them. The chiefs were enraged. They "put Yasi" on my house, which meant that I was not to be visited nor sold any food. There was a report, also, that the mission premises were to be assaulted with guns. The loss of food supply was a serious difficulty. I did not need any for myself and sister, nor for the two young missionaries, both of them laymen, who were

visiting me from a sea-coast station, and who could not understand the case in all its aspects, for they had never met with the Society's power; it did not exist at their station, having been broken before they had come to Africa. But how was I to feed thirty hungry schoolboys? I had to send most of them away to their distant homes; down the river; and my canoes returned with a temporary food supply, that they had been able to buy at places on the route where news of the interdict had not as yet been officially carried.

The dozen young men who remained with me I armed with guns obtained from a neighbouring trading-house, and I posted sentinels every night to guard against sudden assault. I went to the native villages and met a council of several of the chiefs. They seemed desirous to keep on friendly terms with myself, but they were angry at their own children. But they took me to task for my warlike preparations. These I told them were for defence; that I would use the guns only when they compelled me to do so. Then they complained that I had taught their children to disobey them; that one of the greatest of God's commands, which I had taught them, was to honour their parents. I said that the Father in Heaven claimed priority even to an earthly parent; and how could children really honour parents who were persistently deceiving them about Yasi, who they knew was only a person? They winced, and looking towards some women who were passing by, said, "Don't speak so loud; the women will hear you." They made another complaint, viz., that I was trying to change their customs; I could keep my white customs, and they would keep theirs. I frankly told them that I would be pleased to see some of the customs changed which were evil, but that neither I nor any other missionary could compel them to change; nevertheless, these customs would be changed in their and my own lifetime. They were terribly aroused and swore, "Never! Never! You can't change them." "No, not I, but they will be changed." "Never! Who can or will do it?" "Your own sons." "Then we will kill our own sons."

They seemed to transfer their anger against me to their own children. The interdict against my house was not formally removed, but it was not enforced. I no longer felt it necessary to post sentinels at night. And secretly—at night—a sister of these very chiefs sold me food for my family. But the heathen rage spread down the river to the villages of the disbanded school children and native Christians. One of these, Nguva, was seized, chained, and offered to Yasi "to be eaten." He was rescued by a daring expedition made by my two lay missionary visitors, who

went in my six-oared gig with my twelve enthusiastic young native Christian workmen. They went fifteen miles down river; were secretly directed by one of the little schoolboys to the village where Nguva was chained in stocks, assaulted the village at the mid-afternoon hour, when all the men were away, cut Nguva from the stocks, and brought him in triumph to my house. But in the retreat up the river they had for a distance of five miles been subjected to a fusillade of guns from both sides of the river. The river was wide, and they kept in midstream, and no one was injured. But the consequences of that resort to arms made me much trouble after my visitors had safely returned to their seaside station. According to native law I, and not my guests, was held as the responsible party, and it was not satisfactorily settled until some months afterward.

My prophecy came true; less than ten years later little children were playing Yasi as amusement in the village streets. Nguva became an elder in the church. He is now dead. His chain is a trophy in the Foreign Board's Museum, 156 Fifth Ave., New York City.

BATANGA, WEST AFRICA.