

A YEAR in AZIMBA and CHIPITALAND : the CUSTOMS and SUPERSTITIONS of the PEOPLE. By H. CRAWFORD ANGUS, Esq.

LEAVING Blantyre, British Central Africa, in October, 1895, I proceeded to Azimba and Chipitaland for the purpose of hunting and of obtaining labour for the plantations in the British Protectorate. I was away for five months on my first journey and after a short visit to Blantyre I returned and spent six months, again in the same country.

During the period of twelve months or so above indicated, I travelled over large tracts of country; reaching as far as Angoniland in the north and in the south as far as Tété on the Zambizi; I penetrated into Chipitaland as far as the Kapochi River at its junction with the Luia River, a tributary of the Zambizi, returning by Katusa and Kasitu to the Revubwe and thence to Blantyre. A glance at a recent map of Central Africa showing Portuguese territory will explain the route taken.

I found the people warlike and hardy, living, as they always do, at war with some one—fighting is second nature to them, and their deadly accuracy with the bow generally secures them the victory in a fight with either the Angoni or Chikmeda. I found them friendly to the English, and only on two occasions in the whole of my wanderings had I to defend myself from hostile attack. On one occasion my assailants were under the impression that I was a Portuguese, and this cost me one of my men, who was killed by an arrow; but I soon beat them off, and they assumed a more peaceful attitude when they discovered that I was an Englishman, and they brought peace offerings and eventually paid compensation for the man who was killed.

On the other occasion, some Chikmeda from Makanga tried to rob some of my men of their food, and, on their resisting, fired on them, but on our opening fire on them in our turn they soon decamped with some damage.

Large numbers of elephant are killed every year in Chipita and Azimbaland, and game is plentiful, consisting of buffalo, rhinoceros, eland, hartebeeste, zebra, sable-antelope, and smaller buck. Lions and leopards are plentiful and do great damage among the village herds and flocks.

I had some good "bags"; my biggest "bag" in one day consisted of seven buffalo, three eland, one rhinoceros and one leopard.

With regard to the future of trade and commerce in those districts, and the prospect of their proving a source from which

native labour might be drawn, I am of opinion that under the present rule nothing can be done.

The Portuguese within whose territory those districts lie favour the evil system of letting out their different districts to any one who will pay them tribute or taxes, and they shut their eyes to anything and everything that goes on as long as they are regularly paid.

A typical case is Chimsinga, the great Makanga chief. He is supplied with powder and guns by the Portuguese, and is allowed to levy war whenever he wishes as long as he pays a certain yearly tribute to his patrons.

Chimsinga's chief delight is in killing the people who are helpless, and in slave catching, and he levies war on all around him, on every one whom he thinks weaker than himself. He has had, I ought to say, three bad beatings this year, in all cases losing large numbers of men; when he attacked Kotaga this year I was not three miles from the place where he was fighting, and could plainly see his men running for their lives, pursued by the relentless Chipita with their deadly bows and poisoned arrows.

The effects of this evil system of government are, that the natives hate the Portuguese and distrust and despise them so much that I am of opinion that any Portuguese paying a visit to Chimsinga at the present time would run a poor chance of his life.

The price of slaves averages about 4s. to 6s. each, and children from 3s. to 5s. each; the chief market is Tête, on the Zambizi, the Portuguese headquarters there, where a ready sale is found among the Portuguese police and servants, and among the officers even and other inhabitants.

I am certain that until peace is secured to the inhabitants of these countries and the confidence of the people gained by conduct free from deception and treachery, the country must remain unsettled and uncivilized. Who can expect men to turn to profitable work when their absence is seized on as an opportunity of raiding their village, and they return to find their houses a heap of ruins, their relatives fled or slain, and their wives and children taken captive to be sold as slaves among the servants of a nation which in violation of every treaty and at the sacrifice of all honour and humanity, still countenances, yea, even nourishes, the detestable trade in human flesh?

The Azimba are a people inhabiting the country lying to the west of the Shiré river, between the Mwanza and the Revubwe rivers; they can hardly be considered as a distinct tribe, though they undoubtedly belong to the Bantu race; their language is allied to Manganja but is intermingled with Chickmenda and Chipita.

Before the arrival of the Angoni (Zulus) in the country now known as Angoniland, the district which I have above indicated and which may be called Azimbaland was inhabited by a tribe of unmixt Manganja under a very powerful chief named Kasuza. Soon the Angoni began their attacks and after some years of brave but fruitless struggle the chief Kasuza and his people resolved to seek a home elsewhere, and set out with all their belongings for the territory of the great Makanga chief Kankemi, to whom they made submission, and by whom they were for a time well treated; but Kankemi soon began to fear their numbers and power and finally disposed of the difficulty by an indiscriminate slaughter of his guests. Old Kasuza and most of his people were killed, but his wife and two children and a few others escaped and returned to their old country, where they found many of their old tribe and numerous aliens settled and able to defend themselves from the Angoni. These people elected Kasuza's wife Nyangu to be their chief, and she remains so to this day, though now old, and blind, and a cripple; but her son is the virtual chief and rules in her stead.

The comparative peace enjoyed by the people under Nyangu and their ability to hold their own against the Angoni, has induced the settlement of many aliens among them from time to time—Chikmeda, Chipita and runaway slaves from Angoniland and others, and the consequent intermarriages have produced a race very different in language and customs from the old Manganja tribe.

Customs, Superstitions, etc.

"Mzimu"—*Spirit Worship*.—Mzimu is the name given to that unseen power which the natives believe in, but cannot understand. There are, in every village, small houses consecrated to the use of this spirit, and in these houses are placed grain, flour, pipes, tobacco, mead and beer, the offerings being generally accompanied by prayer or thanksgiving for some prayer granted. There is in the native idea evidently a multiplicity of spirits, and the houses built for their use vary in number according to the number of spirits which the builder believes in or worships. One house may have in it two temples, and another may have five or as many as eight; the worship however is the same for all.

In each village or collection of villages, there is a high priest or *mambu* whose duty it is to propitiate the spirits and to forward on all prayers and supplications. A man wishing for success in hunting, or for children, or for a good crop, or for rain, will make his wife brew beer and will call up the *mambu* and all the villagers, giving the beer into the hands of the

mambu. The *mambu* pours a small quantity of the beer into a receptacle in each temple and a quantity is spilt on the ground, and he then recites a form of prayer in accordance with the wishes of the supplicant, all the villagers joining in a kind of moaning chorus. The *mambu* then distributes the rest of the beer among the suppliant and his friends—he is supposed to give an immediate answer to the prayer.

A man returning from a journey, before he enters his house or the house of a neighbour, will go with his wife and kneeling and clapping hands in front of the *mzimu's* house, will return thanks for his safe arrival.

A man wishing for the death of an enemy will go to the temple with an offering before taking any steps to carry out his wishes.

The *mambu* is generally a pretty wide-awake sort of a person, and is quick to take advantage of any power he may obtain over a suppliant.

In the native mind this unseen power appears to be divided into numerous spirits each with special attributes, and whose numbers are not known. There is the spirit which presides over crops and rains, the spirit which protects against witches, the spirit of hunting, the spirit of health, the spirit of child-bearing and numerous others. A man may perhaps have only two temples erected, and on a calamity befalling him he will go to his *mambu* and seek advice in his trouble; he will most likely be told that he has forgotten one of the spirits.

The worship is inextricably mixed up with sorcery, sensuality and crime.

Ula.—The oracle. The *ula* plays the most important part in native life of any belief existing in Central Africa; it is in close alliance with spirit worship, and is worked by the *mambu* or high priest only.

The *ula* is a small cup round the edge of which are fixed a number of lumps of beeswax at intervals; in the cup is placed a small horn, the base of which is covered with beeswax coming to an oval point, and inside the horn is placed some supposed powerful medicine; the cup is held in the left hand and the right grasps a small rattle; the cup and rattle are then shaken slowly and rhythmically with a circular motion, the result being that the horn in the cup wobbles about, now striking this side and now that side of the cup, the *mambu* professing to foretell the future by the number of times it strikes certain spots of beeswax on the side of the cup.

The *ula* is used principally to discover whether a certain event has been the act of a spirit or the act of the *mfiti* or witches.

When a man is taken ill, however slightly, his friends will go to the *mambu* and request him *Kuombesa ula* (to consult the oracle), and tell them the cause of their friend's illness, its remedy, and whether he will recover; the *ula* is then consulted and the answer given. If the answer is that some one has bewitched the patient and it is such and such a man, the man named is instantly accused and is made to drink *mwasi*, ordeal poison; if he dies the sick person is supposed to recover, if not the *ula* is said to have lied, and another *ula* is consulted. In case of the answer being the "spirits have afflicted him, he has offended some spirit," an offering of beer is generally placed in all the temples and sometimes a new temple is built when the spirits are supposed to be propitiated.

In all cases of perplexity or a wish to know the future, the *ula* is consulted. A man going fishing or hunting will consult the *ula* as to his prospects of success; or going on a journey he will inquire as to his safe return, and his actions are irrevocably guided by the answer received.

I may mention my own experience of the *ula*.

I was at a village on the Revubwe awaiting the return of messengers whom I had sent to a distant chief and about whom I was becoming anxious, so more in the hope of catching a high priest "tripping" than anything else I consulted the *ula* as to when my men would return; the answer was "send two men to-morrow to Chuwali" (a village about fifty miles distant and quite away from the route which my men would have to take), "and they will return with your messengers in four days."

I sent the two men as directed, and in four days they returned with my messengers, who had arrived at Chuwali on the day that they had arrived there. I asked my messengers why they had gone to Chuwali, as it was quite out of their way; their reply was that they had heard that there was "war" on the direct road and they had avoided it accordingly; so I did not catch the high priest "tripping," and without further comment I present the episode to the Society for Psychical Research.

Witchcraft—"Mfiti."—Witchcraft, as in all parts of Africa, is much believed in, and all sorts of charms and medicines are used to ward off the *mfiti*, which in the native's imagination dog his existence.

The *mfiti* is believed to be an eater of human flesh, and all deaths are attributed to the desire of the *mfiti* to devour the bodies of the dead. In the case of a number of deaths in a village a council is called, and the existence of *mfiti* is declared. *Mwasi*, or ordeal poison, is produced and drunk by all the

inhabitants; should no death result from this, the *ula* is then consulted as to the location of the *mfiti*, and another village is probably indicated, and again *mwasi* is produced and drunk by the village so denounced and so on until the *mfiti* is at last supposed to be discovered.

On a death occurring, the body is carefully guarded against *mfiti*; the body is allowed to lie unburied in the house attended by watchers until it is much decomposed and in a state unfit for even the *mfiti* to consume; it is then buried. While a body is lying unburied, people will not walk out at night except in bands, as the *mfiti* is supposed to be abroad.

Every house has its *mfiti* medicine, generally over the door of the house to ward off evil, and in case of a death occurring in the house, the medicine is supposed to have lost its power, and a new supply is obtained.

"*Mwasi*"—*Ordeal Poison*.—*Mwasi* is obtained from a tall grey-barked tree with dark round leaves which is to be found high up in the mountain gorges, frequently at the side of a stream; from the bark of this tree the *mwasi* is produced as follows. The accused person or persons and their accusers and their friends proceed in search of the bark, and when a sufficient quantity has been collected it is pounded in a native *ntondo* or mortar, the pounded bark is put into a small cup and water is added; a small stone heated to redness is then dropped in and the poison is then drunk, the accused man, before drinking, saying, "I am innocent of that of which I am accused. If I lie, may this *mwasi* kill me." If the swallowing of the poison is succeeded by vomiting, this will generally occur within four hours and the man is safe and *therefore innocent*. In fatal cases death generally ensues within twelve hours, but in some cases not until eighteen or even twenty-four hours.

In order to account for the fact that while one man may die of the poison, another may escape, it has been said that the quantity given is varied by the witch doctor, or that he in certain cases only adds some other ingredient which has fatal effect, but to any one who has seen *mwasi* administered, such an explanation will not hold good, and the only conclusion to which I can come on the subject is embodied in the old saying, "What's one man's meat is another man's poison."

Deaths from *mwasi*, I should think, average as low as ten to fifteen per cent.

"*Maliro*," or *Death Ceremony*.—On the death of a man, his relatives and friends collect outside his house and mourn for a period extending over four or five days, singing dirges all day and at night firing guns and beating drums, all the time keeping a careful guard over the body. The near relations mourn apart,

walking up and down, wailing and beating their breasts and throwing ashes and dust on their heads.

On the day of burial, the burial party collects, and all the dead man's effects are burned; the body is then carried to the grave amid more firing of guns and wailing. On the return of the funeral party from the grave, the deceased's house is pulled down, his pots broken and pieces of cloth hung on sticks over the ruins; but this frequently does not occur till some time after the burial.

About a month after the funeral, a beer drinking takes place, and all the friends of the deceased shave their heads and the proceedings are at an end.

During the mourning, large quantities of food are supplied to the mourners, but no beer is drunk.

Human sacrifices.—In Azimbaland the custom of sacrificing human victims on the graves of the dead still exists.

When a chief or any one of importance dies, presents of slaves are sent in by all the neighbouring chiefs as an offering to the spirit of the departed. The women slaves must be young and comely and the men must be youthful or middle-aged. On the eve of the ceremony the victims are all gathered together and carefully washed and their heads oiled and painted red; they are then dressed in all the most gorgeous clothing available, prints, blankets, beads, brass wire, red cloth, etc.

On the morning of the burial the victims are led out and feasted, fowls, goats and other food being prepared for them; they are then marched off to the grave marching with an escort in front of the body of the dead chief; on arriving at the grave they are led forward to the brink, and after a blow on the head with an axe their throats are cut and they are thrown in.

When all the victims are despatched, the body of the deceased chief is laid on the top and the grave is filled in. Should the victims be too numerous to allow of their being placed in the grave, they are killed on the top of the grave and their bodies left exposed.

Native law.—Native law is in many respects wise and just; based upon the opinions and desires of *the people*, it is undoubtedly popular, and though of course much entangled with superstition, it is wonderful how in some points it comes up to the standard of European justice. The accused is allowed to plead for himself, and witnesses are called to establish and prove a point.

False evidence is punished by death or a heavy fine. Though the chief is the superior power, yet his headmen and people really form a sort of jury, and the chief, however powerful, dare not act against their verdict. A man accused of murder

has the choice of several courses should the case go against him. If he knows he is guilty he will either give himself as a slave to the heirs of the dead man, or, if he has any human property such as a wife or a child, he can give one of them instead. If he is innocent, he will appeal to *mwasi* (ordeal poison), which will never be refused him, and in case of his surviving the ordeal, he can claim compensation of three goats from his accusers. A guilty man will not drink *mwasi* because the native idea of the power of *mwasi* to distinguish between the guilty and the innocent is so deep-rooted that, to a guilty man, it would be like choosing certain death.

Theft by night is punishable by death. Theft by day is punishable by a fine. Adultery is punishable by death, unless the accused has property sufficient to satisfy the law, but he can claim the ordeal *mwasi*, or the ordeal by hot water, in which case he plunges his hands and arms into a pot of boiling water slowly three times up to the elbows; should the arms blister and peel he is guilty; should those symptoms not appear he is innocent, and compensation is paid him.

Petty misdemeanour and even impertinence are also brought to trial, and punishments for such breaches of the law inflicted. While the question of guilty or not guilty is decided by the native jury, the final decision as to the punishment lies with the chief, who has the right to mitigate the punishment in any case at his own discretion; and a man confessing his guilt, and throwing himself on the mercy of his chief, *Kupata myendo* (to catch hold of his legs), is rarely denied mercy.

A wise and merciful chief will have a thousand men ready to defend him in an emergency, while a brutal and cruel chief will have no one to rely on in time of trouble. I give a case of a chief's justice. I happened to be at the village of Kasuga, one of the biggest Azimba chiefs, when some men came in, and falling before him said, "We are your children, you are our father, and we come to appeal against your brother at the Dwenilo River, whose slaves we are." Their story was that this brother of Kasuga, one of Kasuga's headmen, had that day sold some people to another chief for salt; among those sold was a child of one of the complainants. The man was a slave, but he had married a free woman, and therefore his child was by law free. In spite of this, however, his child had been taken and sold. Kasuga instantly sent a messenger calling in his brother, of whom he promptly asked why he had done this thing. The reply was, "Oh, my brother, what does it matter, the complainant is a slave; you are surely not going to take a slave's part against me who am so powerful." Kasuga looked at his brother and said, "Unless the child you have sold is delivered

to me to-morrow, you leave my land and I place another headman there in your stead; also you shall give your own child as a slave to the man whom you have wronged." The brother went away, and next morning brought back the stolen child and his own child as ordered. Kasuga took the stolen child, and returned it to its father; then he said, "Oh, my brother, you are wise; take away your own child. I let you off the punishment, but don't do it again; how can I be strong in war, if my people are treated unjustly?"

Poisons, medicines, and native surgery.—Among the numerous trees and shrubs which grow in the country, many valuable drugs may undoubtedly be obtained. Many are known to the natives, and are used by them in cases of sickness. This knowledge is, however, guarded most jealously; but by feigning sickness, and in some cases being really ill, I have collected a few of the most important. One of these is, so far as I can discover, a powerful anæsthetic, and I have on more than one occasion used it with great benefit. The drug is a root which is boiled in water, and the decoction is then applied to the part affected; the application continues till pain ceases.

In a case of toothache which had given me several sleepless nights, I found this drug most efficacious, the pain, after several applications, ceasing, and in a few hours a small quantity of pus issued from the tooth. The sensation produced is much the same as that produced by cocaine, but rather more powerful, and the fingers when immersed in the liquid become quite numb.

Another much-used drug is that for procuring abortion, and I have collected a small quantity of it. The action is quite harmless, and it generally takes effect in course of two or three days; the effect is said to be lasting, inasmuch as a woman, having taken this drug and at some future period desiring to become a mother, will go to the medicine man and obtain another drug which will counteract the effect of the one taken perhaps years before. I was unsuccessful in my attempts to obtain a specimen of this antidote.

There are several efficient blisters known and sometimes used, but the native is much averse to making use of a remedy which will give him pain, however beneficial its effects may be.

Cupping is much resorted to. The instrument used is generally a small horn open at the tip as well as at the base, the tip being surrounded with beeswax. The part to be cupped is first lanced with a small knife, and the base of the horn placed over the part affected; the operator then places his mouth to the open tip of the horn and sucks out the air, closing the hole at the tip by forcing the beeswax over it with his tongue; a considerable quantity of blood can thus be drawn off.

There are many poisons in use among the natives, the most powerful being obtained from the gall of the crocodile, and also from the gall of the hartebeeste. Death generally takes place within half-an-hour after drinking either of these poisons.

A chief, who had designs on my life, sent me a present of a pot of native beer, but luckily I was warned when about to drink it. I administered a portion of it to a fowl, and death occurred in fifteen minutes. The poison used was from the gall of a crocodile. There are two kinds of poison used for the tips of arrows, the one and only kind known among the Yaos being used for killing game; the part touched by the arrow being cut out, and the rest used for food.

But in Azimba and Chipitaland a much more deadly poison is used, namely, the "war poison." The action of this poison is most powerful, and there is no known remedy for it; the slightest scratch by an arrow tipped with this poison means certain death.

This poison is known only to the chiefs, and the secret is most jealously guarded; the poison is collected by them only and served out to their men, who pound it, and cover the points of the arrows with it.

I was fortunate enough to see a man who had been wounded by one of those arrows, and I watched the symptoms till his death.

The doomed man had been wounded slightly on the lip, the arrow having just grazed him and raised the skin. In about fifteen minutes after being struck he began to tremble, and at last fell to the ground, his limbs twitching violently; in about six hours his arms and neck began to swell, and assumed a dark and puffy appearance; shortly afterwards sores began to break out and his whole body assumed a swollen and unwholesome appearance, the sores increasing in size and exuding an unhealthy matter.

In about twelve hours after severe struggling and violent paroxysms, death ensued. Strange to say, the wound on the lip where the arrow struck had a quite healthy appearance, and did not swell or present any abnormal condition. The temperature during the whole time was high, 103° to 105° , and the pulse fast and feeble; towards the end the pulse was not noticeable at the wrist, and the temperature fell considerably below normal. A few hours after death the body was so decomposed that it was impossible to touch it, the skin peeling off wherever a finger was laid.

I have obtained two of those arrows, their points covered with the poison.

To attempt to describe the manners, habits, and etiquette of the people would be a labour which I am not at present able to undertake, and would occupy a much greater space than would probably be at my disposal.