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Africa, East.

Beech.

The Sacred Fig-tree of the A-Kikuyu of East Africa. By Mervyn **3**
W. H. Beech, M.A.

The *mugumu*, a species of *ficus* akin to the *cafensis*, which has not yet been definitely determined, is the sacred fig-tree of the A-Kikuyu. It is found growing either by itself or as a parasite, and its most noticeable feature is the fact that, if an incision be made in its bark, a white, sticky, rubber-like fluid exudes. From the likeness of this fluid to milk can be traced the origin of the sanctity of the tree.

It is said that Ngai (God) dwells in the clouds above, although it is distinctly stated that his abode is not within it. A Mu-Kikuyu described the tree to me as "the child of God."

These fig-trees are by no means uncommon, but only comparatively few of them are sacred. In the location of the Patriarch Kioi wa Nagi, in the Dagoreti district near Nairobi, there are only two sacred fig-trees. One of these, at Mbagathi river, is a parasite on a tree called *ithare*, whilst the other is situated at Mbuthi, and is growing by itself. The actual piece of ground from which this *mugumu* springs is called *Wamboi*, which, again, is a very common woman's name in Kikuyu.

The question arises as to why some *mugumu* are sacred and others not. The only answer obtained was that all are potentially sacred, but that the special ones favoured of Ngai are only found out by testing them all. If the prayers that are uttered beneath them are answered doubtless Ngai is at hand, but if they are not heard it is obvious that Ngai cannot be present, and that the tree, therefore, is not sacred. Great height is one of the necessary peculiarities of a sacred *mugumu*; for doubtless the higher the tree the nearer it is to Ngai. Its sanctity cannot be decided in accordance with the particular tree on which the fig-tree has decided to bestow its favours, for, as we have seen, it can be sacred irrespective of whether it be a parasite or no.

The *mugumu*, then, is a medium through which prayers ascend to Ngai. Beneath its leafy branches men pray for riches and women that they may bear offspring. Under its kindly shade men pray for the blessings of rain, without which their crops will not grow, nor will there be fresh green grass for their cattle and sheep, and without which nothing but starvation faces them.

Candidates for circumcision on the day before the ceremony that makes them fully and finally adults, break off branches of its leaves and take them to the house where the operation is to take place; for its magic leaves will ensure fertility not only to the women and men but also to their cattle, sheep and goats.

It was first, I believe, discovered by Mr. C. W. Hobley that to ensure pregnancy women smear themselves with the milky juice of the tree. This they do from the feet upwards, finishing on the crowns of their heads. To ensure fertility to the cattle, sheep, and goats, fat is mixed with the milk of the tree. This is then sprinkled on the tree-trunk, and at the same time on the flocks, which have previously been driven underneath the tree for the purpose. For the same reason men also gather the leaves of the tree and sleep upon them, the fertility apparently passing from the leaves to themselves and from themselves to their flocks.

To "make it more likely that a request be granted" sacrifices are made under the tree and goats or sheep are slaughtered. The sacrificer and his friends eat half or more of the meat and leave the rest. Only it is obligatory to leave the breast: sometimes, however, the head and tongue are also bestowed upon Ngai. The fat and blood is sprinkled about and native beer (*njohi*) is poured on the tree-trunk. It is not permissible for the sacrificer to return and see whether the feast has been consumed by the hungry god or no.

Thus it is that the *mugumu* is credited with having an enormous influence on births both of men and animals. It is a manifestation of Ngai as a divinity of fertility.

Originally it is probable that only requests for fertility were addressed to the tree. Nowadays its functions would appear to be extended. All tribal disputes are arbitrated upon by eight Elders, of whom four are chosen by each litigant, provided these Elders have passed the necessary wisdom test and been admitted to one of the various grades of *Athuri* or Elders. These Elders repair to the *mugumu* and slaughter there a sheep or a goat (provided by the parties to the suit) in order apparently that their wits may be sharpened and become "fertile." The litigation, however, does not take place under the sacred tree. This arbitration board is called the *kiamu*, a word equivalent to the Swahili *kikoa* and meaning a "gathering."

In view of the above properties of the tree it is interesting to note with reference to Professor Frazer's *Golden Bough* (third edition, Part I, Vol. II, pp. 249-251), that its wood was, before the introduction of matches, used for making fire. Indeed, it is still so used on one occasion at any rate to the exclusion of all other fire.

The wood of the *mugumu* is used for the fire drill, but whereas one is told that *mtarakwe* (*Juniperus procera*), *mchasa* (a species of *vernonia*), *murika murinditi* can be used as either the female, i.e., the passive stick of the fire drill or for the male or active stick, the *mugumu*, is essentially female, and may on no account be used as the male. This is rather the opposite of what one would expect; but presumably in this case it is the voluptuous female who stretches forth her eager arms to embrace the reluctant male: for the male cannot but be unwilling, since once he has yielded to that fatal embrace his ultimate portion is death. There is just a possibility that the male and female tradition was borrowed, as indeed were many other customs, notably a method of circumcision, by the A-Kikuyu from their neighbours the Masai; for, although the A-Kikuyu refer to the sticks definitely as the male and female, we find that the Kikuyu word for the male or active stick to be *gethi-gethi* or *rurindi*, and for the female or passive stick to be *ghika*. Now *gethi-gethi* is simply a noun derived from the verb *ku-getha-getha*, which signifies "to twirl between the palms of both hands." I cannot find the derivation of *rurindi* or of *ghika*, but it is quite certain that there is no notion of sex in either word.

As hinted above, there is one occasion, at any rate, when the *mugumu* and no other tree must be used as the female and the *mtarakwe* (*Juniperus procera*) as the male. This is the occasion of kindling afresh the domestic fire after rebuilding a house. A Kikuyu Elder will have, say, six wives. Each of these wives has a house. The Elder himself has a seventh. The houses are built altogether in a cluster. When the Elder has built his new house, fire may not be obtained in any other way except by kindling it with the firedrill composed of *mugumu* (female) and *mtarakwe* (male). Before doing this a goat is sacrificed and a prayer is uttered, "Ngai eat this meat and drink this blood, and let not this fire be quenched."

The women of the other houses may take from the fire thus kindled, but on no account may fire be taken from any of the other huts and be brought to the new one. The fire is supposed to be kept always alight in at least one of the cluster of huts. If the fires in all were to become extinguished at the same time the same ceremony would have to be performed as on the occasion of erecting a new house.

As far as I could discover there are no traces of ancestor worship connected with the *mugumu*, nor are there any restrictions as to who may or may not make fire from it. Nor again could I find out why in making fire a number of trees could be used both actively and passively. Old fire sticks—even those made of *mugumu*—

are, when used up, merely thrown away ; but, in the case of the A-Kikuyu, time, that ruthless destroyer of the picturesque and romantic, may have stripped the *mugumu* of much of the mysterious sanctity with which it was formerly adorned.

MERVYN W. H. BEECH.

Africa, West : Folk Stories.

Talbot.

Two Ekoi Stories. By P. Amaury Talbot.

The Ekoi live in Southern Nigeria, within the bend of the Cross River, and stretch over into the German Kamerun. A vocabulary of their language, a short grammar, and full details concerning their customs and beliefs will be found in my book, *In the Shadow of the Bush*, recently published by Heinemann.

I.—THE EKOI ADAM AND EVE.

Ka edogha ndipp, Obassi aiyemm 'ne num na 'ne-nkai, abopp etim
In very beginning, God made person male and person-female, built hut
 akak abaw afaw. 'We atong abaw kpekpe akap ati ma aiyim na onyamm abikk
put them in. He showed them all fruit trees for eating and animals able
 aiyim. Man ajak ka osaw. Ane mba abai are ti-ti aka menge njum
eating. Then went on high. Persons these two lived long time knew not thing
 aiya ma na ndipp, mfonne-mfonne eehiri man 'ne-num asuk kpekpe ofu
to do with secret parts, most ignorant that man washed every day
 ndipp 'ne-nkai owe, atuba se are egyemm, aboba njann ka njinni.
secret parts (of) wife his, thought it was wound, tied medicine on it.
 Obassi ojok ofu b't oji ienn abaw, aienn 'ne akisu. Obassi ataw abaw se egyenn
God went day one go see them, saw man washing. God told them it wound
 asik. Se abaw agi ka enong, 'we tikk atonge abaw nga aiyima Abaw atak
not. He told them go to bed, he will show them how use. They went
 ka enong. Obassi ataw 'ne-num, se kak njum aji ere anaw ka ebun ka
to bed. God told man, he said put thing that is there by the waist in
 egyemm nkai oa. Kpekpe ebu 'we oiyima anaw. Ka ami ma
wound (of) wife your. All times he (should) do so. In months few
 achingi 'we ako Oiya. 'Ne-num aienn oiya 'ne-nkai awwe okifang
past she took belly (conceived). Man saw belly (of) woman his bigger
 kpekpe 'mi, atupase are emange. Kpekpe ofu 'we agbe ejing nkemm ka
every moon, thought (she) is sick. All days he cut plenty cuts on
 oiya 'ne-nkai. Achomma ajann afu se nonge kui ngun.
belly (of) woman. (he) rubbed medicine hot (he) told (her) lie down near fire.
 Agbe ejing nkemm are oiya okwa obak. Ka ofu etad auma nga
(he) cut plenty cuts was belly grew big came. On day another he wanted how
 aiyima oiya awsang. Obassi ojok se 'we ajienn abaw. Aienn
to make belly finish (be as before). God went that he see them. (he) saw
 nga oiya 'ne-nkai ore ejing nkemm agbe na ekemm. Ataw
how belly (of the) woman was (with) plenty cuts cut with razor. He told
 'ne-num se ka-pe anaw oiyemm, se tikk oiyuwi 'ne-nkai na nyenn.
man, told not indeed so do, he say you will kill woman and good
 njum nji 'we afonni ka oiya obe. Obassi amaghe abaw. Ka ami achingi ukai
thing which she had in belly her. God left them. In months past wife
 oe aji 'monn. Ebu aji na monni, 'ne-num abup 'ne-kai se
his bore child. (At the) time (was) born child, man asked woman that
 nyenn njum nji Obassi ataw na se tukk ebagha. We
(if) (it was) good thing which God spoke of (and) told (it) would come. He