

MAJORS AND CUSTOMS IN CENTRAL AFRICA

Sambanza next morning performed the ceremony called Kasendi, for cementing our friendship. It is accomplished thus:— The hands of the parties are joined, (in this case Pitane and Sambanza were engaged) small incisions are made on the clasped hands, on the pits of the stomach, and on the right cheek and thumb, and a small quantity of blood is taken from these points in both parties, by means of a stalk of grass. The blood from one person is put into a pot of beer, and that of the second into another; each then drinks the other's blood, and they are supposed to become perpetual friends or relations. During the drinking of the beer, some of the "Pitane" continues beating the ground with short clubs, and utter sentences by way of rousing the treat. The men belonging to each then finish the beer. The principle in the performance of Kasendi are heretofore considered blood relations, and are bound to disclose to each other any impending evil. They now presented each other with the most valuable presents they had, and then returned to their camp, with Pitane's suit of green baize food with red, which had been made in Loanda, and Pitane, besides abundant supplies of food, obtained two shells.

All the Bakota tribes follow the curious custom of knocking out the upper front teeth at the age of puberty. This is done by a physician, and then the under teeth being loosened by the attrition of the upper, grow long and some, what bent out, and thereby cause the under lip to protrude in a most disagreeable way; no young woman thinks herself accomplished until she has got rid of the upper incisors. This custom gives all the Bakota women an uncouth, old-man like appearance. They are so much attached to it, that they will undergo the most excruciating pain to eradicate the practice. He issued orders that none of the children living under him should be subjected to the custom by their parents, and disobedience to his mandate was usually punished with severity; but notwithstanding this, the children would have been made to undergo the operation, and no one would consider it a disgrace. When questioned respecting the origin of this practice, the Bakota reply that their object is to be like oxen, and those who retain their teeth they consider to resemble apes. Whether this is the true reason or not, it is difficult to say; but it is noticeable that the veneration for oxen which prevails in many tribes, should here be associated with hatred to the teeth, as among the Bakotians; that this operation is performed at the same age that circumcision is in other tribes; and that the ceremony is unknown. The custom is so universal that a person who has his teeth cut out is considered ugly; and occasionally, when the Bakota borrowed a working glass the disparaging remark would be uttered respecting boys or girls who still retained their teeth, "look at the great teeth!"

Some of the Makololo give a more fanciful explanation of the custom: they say the wife of a chief having in a quarrel, bitten her husband's hand, he, in revenge, ordered her front teeth knocked out, and all the men in the tribe followed his example; but this does not explain why they afterwards knocked out their own. The women were not in the habit of piercing the upper lip, but gradually enlarging the orifice until they could insert a shell. The lip then appeared down beyond the perpendicular of the nose, and gives them a most ungainly aspect. Sekwe remarked, "these women want to make their mouths like those of ducks; and indeed, it does not appear as if they had the idea that the beauty of the lip had been obtained by the Ombakotians' paradox alone. This custom prevails throughout the country of the Maravi, and no one could see it without confessing that fashion had never led women to a freak more mad. We came among the Monia's village, a witch doctor, who had been sent for, arrived, and all Monia's wives went into the fields that morning fasting. There they would be compelled to drink an infusion of a plant named "goho," which is used as an ordeal. This ceremony is called "muavi," and is performed in this way:—When a man suspects that one of his wives has been bewitched, he sends for a witch doctor, and all the wives go forth into the field, and remain fasting till that person has made an infusion of the plant. They all drink it, each one holding up her hand to Heaven in attestation of her innocence. Those who vomit after considered innocent, while those who purges are pronounced guilty, and put to death by burning. The innocent women, to their homes, and a thank offering to their guardian spirit, slaughter a cock. The practice of ordeal is common among all the negro nations north of Zambesi. This summary procedure excited my surprise, for my intercourse with the natives here had led me to believe that the women were held in no such estimation, and that they would be glad to get rid of them thus. But the explanation I received was this: the slightest imputation makes them eagerly desire the test; they are conscious of being innocent, and have the fullest faith in the most detecting the guilty alone; hence they go willingly, and even eagerly, to drink it. When in a quarrel, and put to death by burning, who is in the most successful merchants in that country; and the mother of this gentleman, who was perfectly free, went, of her own accord, all the way from Ambaca to Cassembe, to be killed by the ordeal, her rich son making no objection. The same custom prevails among the Barotsa, Sababana, and Bakoto, but with great variations. In some, the women pour the medicine down the throat of a cock or a dog, and judge of the innocence or guilt of the person accused by the vomiting or purging of the animal. I happened to mention to my own men the water test for witches formerly in use in Scotland; the supposed witch, being bound hand and feet to a tree, and taken off if she floated, but if she sank and was drowned, she was pronounced innocent. The wisdom of our ancestors excelled as much wiser in their lands as their custom did in us.

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