

Casting out Anger: Stress, Possession and the Everyday in Taita, Kenya

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Casting out Anger

Histories of the colonial encounter between psychiatrists and local communities are increasingly well-documented for Africa and elsewhere throughout colonial empires. Often, the reports from both doctors and administrators showcase an array of outmoded theories (even for their time) recast as new ways to assert that indigenous people crumble as modernity threatens their traditional way of life and of seeing the world. Doctors' reports, branded by the government in the metropole as authoritative, often incorporated select ethnographic writing about weaning practices, marriage and kinship, witchcraft belief, and various interpretations of African custom and cosmology. Anthropologists, frequently funded by the Colonial office, were not necessarily immersed in imperial politics, and many produced important ethnographies that today serve as foundational texts, and in some cases, eloquent pieces of writing.

This article considers Taita¹, in Kenya's Coast Province (now Taita-Taveta county), as a case study, presenting a unique snapshot of a more complicated colonial encounter. For a brief period in the 1950s, the isolated Taita Hills attracted the interests of the colonial government, two anthropologists from Cambridge, and a Canadian psychiatrist and amateur photographer. The cross-section of competing claims about Taita 'stress' gives us an opportunity to read into everyday Taita life amidst a surge of new economic and political pressures, external interference, and strategies of coping and self-reliance. Government observations that cases of insanity and related outbursts of violence were growing out of control prompted a call to experts and an analytical turn toward local and colonial articulations of the pressures of modern life.

The Taita in Kenya

In the 1950s, the close scrutiny of Taita from outsiders marked a curious endeavour considering the government's necessary preoccupation with higher Kenyan politics and the increasing turmoil of the Mau Mau war. With the State of Emergency declared in 1952, the war in the forests escalated rapidly and tens of thousands of mostly Kikuyu men and women were either incarcerated in detention camps sited throughout the country or had been displaced and relocated as the government sought to 'rehabilitate' the oath-taking terrorists. The Taita seemed far removed from this, although both MacKinnon Road and Manyani detention camps were broadly in their midst. Nonetheless, a province that had been seen as a sleepy backwater began to stand out as a region in flux. Government reports and missionary testimonies suggesting that assistance may be required depict the growing concerns within the district. From 1950 to 1952, two anthropologists, Alfred and Grace Harris conducted fieldwork in Taita for their Cambridge PhD theses, but they also provided the government with several reports to explain Taita life and behaviour in anthropological terms. And finally, in 1956, the newly appointed psychiatrist in charge of Mathari Mental Hospital in Nairobi, Edward Margetts, was summoned to Taita to make his report on the extremely high levels of

¹ Taita refers to the region, but may also refer to the people. Alternatively, 'WaTaita' may be used. The region is sometimes written in colonial documents as 'Teita' as the official administrative district of the government.

insanity occurring there and possible remedies for it. The voluminous paper trail left by these outsiders, including the photographs taken by Edward Margetts, portray a dynamic picture of 1950s Kenya in the isolated Taita Hills.

With serious unrest brewing closer to Nairobi, Taita was quietly navigating pressures of its own. Emerging industries such as asbestos and graphite mines, factories producing cement pipes, and most notably the sisal plantations, drew young men in as wage-labourers, shifting the norms of self-sufficiency, ownership, and adulthood. Witchcraft was a significant player in the area – sometimes handled internally, but in serious cases witch cleansers from the outside (such as Tanzania) were brought in to diagnose and expel sinister activity. Traditional healers, diviners and seers of different specialisations abounded in the Taita Hills and heritage and lineage were revered – most notably in the keeping of shrines (*Ngomenyi*) where the skulls of the departed were kept in the caves that dotted the rocky landscape.² In short, the Taita were religious and reverent with a strong sense of Taita-ness, particularly noting the difference between the people of the Hills and the people of the plains. The sense that the Taita were breaking down psychologically stood in stark contrast to the government's previous assertion that the Taita were generally happy and quite at peace with the world.

Casting out anger

At the heart of the analysis of Taita life are the PhD thesis and published ethnography by Grace Harris, as well as her influential article on 'possession hysteria' published in the journal *American Anthropologist*. Although her fieldwork, government reports and article all appear in the 1950s, she would not publish her ethnographic study of Taita religion until 1978. Thus, her encounters with the government, the travelling psychiatrist, and the Taita themselves do not incorporate fully the analyses she employed in her later years as a professor in the United States. However, Harris makes clear in her preface what she revised from her thesis and, to some extent, we can consider her fieldwork notes to be largely frozen in time. Ultimately, Grace Harris became a faculty member in anthropology at the University of Rochester in New York as a spousal hire. She remained at Rochester until her retirement when she was made emeritus professor. Harris' written corpus remains fairly sparse, but she did embark on new research mid-career, publishing on aspects of stress and decision-making amongst hospital patients (Harris 1989: 3-21).

We consider first the place of Harris' ethnography, *Casting out Anger*, which concerns itself with Taita religion and the centrality of the ritual *kutasa*; the spraying of liquid out of the mouth while uttering phrases or exhortations to 'cast out anger' from the heart. *Kutasa* was not merely a symbolic act, but a way of altering a wrong path provided that the performer was indeed sincere with a 'clean' and 'cool' heart (Harris 1978: 26). This means of stabilising harmony in the heart within individuals, families, and the community was intrinsic to *KidaBida*, the 'Taita way' or the 'way of the Hills'. Today, *Casting out Anger* is a critical text for any historical grounding of the region, particularly when speaking of the Taita Hills. Ethnographies of surrounding regions will present similar themes and practices in a very extensive literature on healing, possession, and ritual along the East African Swahili coast, but much of the work on Taita will touch on the quite reflective identity politics in a region marked by migration and mixing for many years. Bill Bravman's *longue durée* approach to Taita in his

² Skulls were procured by exhumation of bodies after a year's burial. The skulls were kept for the males of large lineages, but the shrines were not themselves sites of ritual practice (Harris 1978: 20).

monograph, *Making Ethnic Ways* (1989) makes use of oral history to illustrate dynamism and change across and inside generations. Bravman's interviews reveal, for instance, the *Ngomenyi* skull shrines, while representing a profound symbol of Taita ancestry, reverence and security, were by the 1950s, contested or neglected as competing concerns about education, economic independence, and Christianity began to hold sway (Bravman 1998: 202). Bravman shows that while the strains of colonial era life may have fractured some communities, what came to be a staunch 'Taita ethnicity' coalesced in its place (Bravman 1998: 139). Like Harris, Bravman recounts that this notional sense of 'being Taita' or *KidaBida*, was a central expression within daily life.

James Smith's *Bewitching Development* also makes use of Grace Harris' foundational work to provide an illuminating account of modern development practice and aspirations in Taita as it was filtered through the language of witchcraft. Struggles during Smith's fieldwork in the 1990s depict familiar generational, gendered, and economic stresses in the Hills. These tensions may feel removed from the economic and labour conflicts under colonialism, but are echoed in recent decades by the legacy of heavy-handed structural adjustment policies. Like Harris' ethnographic accounts of 'being Taita' and Bravman's memoirs from the mid to late colonial period, the Taita are seen to be a people who have continually memorialised, reinvented, and reengaged their history as even the most potent 'Taita' symbols required new responses, or even abandonment, with successive generations.

When *Casting out Anger* finally appeared in print, Harris acknowledged that she was not writing in the then fashionable 'ethnographic present' but suggested that her work was a 'picture' of Taita religion as observed in the middle of the twentieth century (Harris 1978: vii). The time-lag between field work and publication allowed Harris to come to conclusions about anthropology's turn to what she saw as an 'overuse of semiotically-inclined searches for meaning' and a troubling 'view of symbolism as representing what somehow 'really' exists outside the rituals' (Harris 1978: viii). Harris differentiated her own approach as showing 'the forms making up rituals as *presenting* realities that are lived in ritual itself' (Harris 1978: viii, emphasis in the original).

Casting out Anger was widely reviewed, albeit with a range of contrasting opinions about what it had truly accomplished. Paul Spencer, the British social anthropologist of the Samburu and the Maasai, was perhaps the most critical in his disappointment that such an important subject with fieldwork carried out during 'a vintage era for anthropological field work on African indigenous religions' fell short in terms of intellectual depth or theoretical purpose (Spencer 1979: 587). Meyer Fortes, as one of Grace Harris' mentors at Cambridge, found the ethnography a 'treatise of fundamental general and theoretical import' and 'written with admirable economy of language and conceptual clarity' (Fortes 1979: 569). Fortes' cogent and generous summary of the book praised the sidestepping of the usual thick description for an analysis of the core cosmological and ritual significance of 'casting out anger'. In Taita, kinship obligations and entitlements were interwoven with the dangerous anger that festers in the heart and threatens the harmony and stability of the community. Lucy Mair differentiated anthropology's familiar interpretations of witchcraft's embodiment as the enmity or envy of neighbours with a more unique Taita perspective that eschewed a 'special category of witches whose anger can do harm' with the ubiquitous seeking out of 'angry hearts' that could be found everywhere and in everybody (Mair 1979: 571).

Harris stressed that central to the act of casting out anger was not the ritual performance but the inner state of the performer. Anger from the heart could only be expelled when the participant was without 'inner reservations' (Harris 1979: 46). In fact, insincerity when practicing *kutasa* could result in not only the ritual's failure, but the faker's 'words hidden in the heart' might also lead to sorcery and a counter-effect to what was intended (Harris 1979: 47). The practice of *kutasa* was integral to managing the danger inherent in the 'angry hearts' of individuals particularly toward members of their close family. Harris likened this to a more universal human concern with what she called the 'potentially dangerous psychobiological individual 'inside' the social person' (Harris 1979: 175). However, it was not this potential for hidden anger that made itself most visible to outsider observations and interest.

Watching Taita

In the mid-1950s, various district and medical officers, missionaries, and local politicians weighed in on the alarming rise of insanity and violence in Taita. The District Commissioner, R.A. Wilkinson sent a memorandum to the Provincial Commissioner to insist that the incidence of insanity in Teita District was 'incomparably greater' than in any other district he had seen during the last twenty years of his service. He buttressed this claim by consulting 'responsible African opinion' which concurred that insanity was 'definitely increasing'. The Provincial Commissioner wrote to the Secretary for African Affairs to highlight concerns about 'mental instability among the Teita', suggesting that the new psychiatrist in charge of Mathari might shed light on; whether the rate of mental instability was higher in the Hills than elsewhere in Kenya; whether madness was, indeed, on the increase; and what the causes might be and what steps might be taken to reduce the insanity.³

The local Catholic mission also weighed in on 'lunacy in Teita'. Father Madigan wrote to his local district medical officer situating the crises within the context of the worsening social problems that accompanied a rapidly modernising population:

Drink: The old Teita law in this matter must be restored if we are to avoid serious social upheavals. The old custom forbade young men to drink until they got married. Then they were initiated by the drinkers, and were only allowed to imbibe through a reed, until they were accustomed to restraint in the matter....Now with the advent of the public beer shops and partially fermented brews and tilting bottles as long as one can pay, [this] is really responsible for mental disorders...Drunk tonight, incapable of work to-morrow, further quenching of the thirst to-morrow night.....denying the wife and family money for household expenses – hunger, rags, disease – stealing from the wife's shamba and selling to get more money; robbing others; unpaid debts....worry, worry, worry, and the mind snaps.

Father Madigan commented further upon the rising tensions caused by 'materialism' amongst the Taita – a trait that appeared to be supplanting the traditional very religious values of the region:

³ Kenya National Archives (KNA): BY/9/335: Annual Medical and Sanitary Reports, Wesu, 1955; Mental Disease – Teita, 21 April 1956; Mental Disease – Teita, 27 April 1956.

The African caught up in this individualism is not capable of adjusting himself, becomes a super-materialist, a living lie to what is traditional in him. Then, when the material world withdraws its support (in times of poverty or family trouble) the mind snaps.⁴

Despite frequent descriptions of bhang and alcohol use on the rise as well as the associated violence of young men, other reports referred to the Taita as 'pleasant drunks' who, unlike some regions, had a traditional abhorrence for violence. According to one district officer; 'any dispute which leads to physical violence is looked on with amazement and horror, and the assailant is rapidly hauled before the African court'. Witchcraft was implicated for specific forms of derangement and for a unique act of violence called 'kuloga' or 'kuroga' which involved hiring a sorcerer to administer a slow poison that then caused both derangement and a decline of general health to the point of death. Lastly, medical officers felt compelled to document the seemingly absurd political aspirations of the Taita, noting: 'It would appear that [the Taita] have taken to the slogan of "Self-Government by 1960."⁵ Despite such sentiments making their way into annual reports, Taita grievances about land, the most traditional form of wealth, seem not to have been taken very seriously and the population was seen as not particularly adept at organising itself. Grace Harris recalled that the Taita land use system was poorly understood by the Colonial government 'some of whom thought that the Taita made an unduly large amount of fuss over the alienation of relatively small pieces of land' (Harris 1978: note 24, 179).

While district officers might have been instrumental in procuring anthropological and psychological reports of what they saw as rampant mental illness in Taita, there is evidence that Kenyans from neighbouring communities also wanted the madness in Taita to be addressed. Prominent Kenyan politician Ronald Ngala wrote to the Medical Officer in charge of Wesu, Taita on behalf of his worried constituents in Kigombo, suggesting that the government conduct a 'special investigation' into the matter.⁶ What stands out from the Taita district records is the insistence that rates of insanity and chaotic behaviour was not only new to the area but that it was a far greater problem than existed anywhere else in the Colony. This was an extraordinary claim as far as the Colonial government was concerned as Kenya was full of not only the Mau Mau in this period, but widespread anti-government sentiment, rebellious prophets, charismatic diviners, bewitchers and nomadic witch cleansers. Taita's mild reputation was becoming more unstable, and the severe spike in lunacy and hysteria was pulling it out of the shadows.

A psychiatrist comes to Taita

In November 1955, a Canadian psychiatrist arrived in Kenya from McGill University in Montreal to take up the post of Chief Psychiatrist and Medical Superintendent of Mathari Mental Hospital in Nairobi. In what proved to be a decades long habit, Edward Margetts began a personal diary – recording his travels, notes about colleagues and contacts, and impressions of his new environment including any and all customs, rituals, healing practices and local stories he might collect. The diaries are full of both insight and the mundane, but they are wonderfully meticulous in recording names of places, people, and terminologies the doctor

⁴ KNA: BY/9/335: Catholic Mission Bura, Lunacy in Teita, 22 July 1956.

⁵ KNA: BY/9/335: Annual Medical and Sanitary Report, Wesu. 9 February 1955.

⁶ KNA: DC/TT/3/9/5: Increase of number of mad people Taita – disturbing inhabitants [sic]. 29 October 1959.

encountered. It was not long after his arrival that Margetts was invited most urgently to the Coast Province to deal with reports from district officers who insisted that they had never seen such high levels of 'hysteria' anywhere in Kenya as they had in Taita. In advance of his first trip to the region in 1956, Margetts had at his disposal all available district administrative and medical reports, correspondence with local officials, a list of people to interview, and the reports to the Colonial Office written by Grace and Alfred Harris. He sometimes recreated these conversations or excerpts from reports in handwritten notes in his diary – amending official observations with sceptical comments or questions of his own. Local observations noted the seasonality of some of the hysteria, hitting the Hills between June and September – roughly corresponding to higher incidences of malaria as well as the use of easily obtained anti-malarial drugs such as Mepacrine which was associated with psychosis. Bhang and alcohol consumption were also said to be worryingly on the rise as traditional values about drinking (by whom and how much) were under assault. In-breeding was said to be common due to Taita's isolation and preferred sense of separateness. But overall, there was a feeling of foreboding in the Hills and a presumed weakening of Taita moral codes as economic pressures and hyper-materialism increased.

Amidst this correspondence, it becomes quickly apparent that Dr Margetts soon developed an agenda of his own. His letters indicated that he would forego tours of the hospital – showing little interest in the actual diagnoses of medical cases. Instead, he asked to tour the district for general impressions and to be present at some of the rituals and ceremonies for which the Taita were well-known. In particular, he asked to observe a ritual dance called 'pepo'. He also came armed with a camera.

Pepo ngoma

In the first instance, Margetts noted that there might be difficulty in differentiating pepo in Taita from true 'psychosis' meaning that the ubiquitous reports of an increase in hysteria might represent a 'manifestation of an unstable, hysteria prone population' or might be an 'acceptable form of tribal behaviour.' He often couched his various reports in the language of anthropology, but he also considered a quasi-experimental approach, suggesting that finding another nearby tribe to act as a 'control group' might be interesting. In total, Margetts made three medical 'safaris' to Taita accompanied by his translator and senior medical assistant, Henry Mwariri. He wrote up his findings after each visit, and titled his investigations as 'anthropological – psychological notes' on the Taita. He situated his own findings alongside the anthropological reports of Grace and Alfred Harris, as well as previous work on the region such as the ethnographic survey of Dutch anthropologist, A.H.J. Prins (1952) whom Grace Harris described as 'inaccurate' due to the short nature of his visits to Taita (Harris 1978: note 15, 179). Published accounts by the Rev. P.G. Bostock (1950), a CMS missionary in Kenya from 1935 to 1958, and C.W. Hobley's early accounts of travelling through Tsavo and the Taita highlands (1895) rounded out his background on the region. He indicated in his notes that he intended to correspond with the Harrises, and he commented on the 'very good work' in their government reports. However, he added the caveat that he wished the anthropological reports had contained more information about 'witchcraft, poisons, pepo, and other subjects which tie in with the problem at hand'.⁷ Finally, Margetts interviewed district officials and four Wataita employees of the district hospital in Wesu. He recounted that the Taita were

⁷ KNA: BY/9/335: E. Margetts to R.A. Wilkinson, DC Taita. 15 August 1956.

described to him as 'very emotional, rather unpredictable, theatrical in behaviour, friendly and polite'. He rejected previous characterisations of Taita men as 'effeminate'.⁸ The report summarises the key problem as defined by the district; the rise in violence, and particularly cases of murder. The possibility of associating such violence with an increase of mental illness needed differentiation, he wrote, noting that relevant categories for analysis might be; the general functional psychoses (such as mania or schizophrenia), toxic-infective states (such as advanced neurosyphilis or malaria), and finally, 'emotional or neurotic illness' which he classed as 'particularly hysteria – the "PEPO" of the Wataita'.⁹

Margetts reported the descriptions of 'pepo' as given by his informants; 'hysterical outbursts and dances and rituals involving hysterical mechanisms are said to be unusually common amongst the Wataita'. The fact that cases of pepo might be mistaken for psychosis seemed likely to falsify the contention that psychotic behaviour was a unique and increasing problem in the region. He surmised that pepo should not, in itself, be considered a psychiatric problem. Margetts concluded his report with the suggestion that if it can be shown that mental illness (and related violence) was on the increase, it was likely due to factors such as significant increases in alcohol and bhang consumption, the 'in-breeding' known to occur in the Hills, and endemic diseases such as malaria. The doctor also gave his broad impressions of the increasingly unstable religious life of the Taita and questioned whether the long-standing missionary efforts to Christianize the already religious Taita was the 'right thing'; 'there are some things which the missions brought which were of universal appeal, such as help in time of need and of bright clothing etc., Whether they brought the spiritual conversion they wanted is another story, certainly not a universal one.'¹⁰

Margetts took no photographs of the hospitals in Wesu or Voi or any of the other towns in the district, but there are myriad photos of pepo as performed both in Taita and in the surrounding areas of the Kamba people. He grouped these photographs together but did differentiate the unique practices of distinct groups. He interviewed and photographed dance leaders (*vilongozi*) and local healers and documented key terminologies including the mistakes made by previous observers such as A.H.J. Prins. He wrote descriptions in his diaries of the ceremony, dress, the types of props employed in the pepo dances, the skill and the drunkenness of the drummers, and the reaction of the crowds. He took special interest in the actions of the women dancers who he described as convulsing rapidly before falling into a trance state, if not completely unconscious. These were attacks of 'saka' – the pepo spirit that made its demands on those women it visited – or more to the point – made demands of the husbands of the afflicted women. Margetts noted the 'attention-seeking motive' of pepo and thought it often 'based on sexual conflicts which may be quite subconscious'.¹¹

Ultimately Margetts wrote up his findings, clearly differentiating between hysteria in individuals who might be viewed as hysterical personalities, and the group hysteria as seen in the ceremonial dances which are socially sanctioned and populated by 'quite normal people'. Some hysterical reactions, he noted, were triggered by traumatic events such as one woman who went into 'hysterics' at the scene of a suicide. The doctor was clearly intrigued by the

⁸ KNA: BY/9/335: E. Margetts to R.F. McKnight, re: PEPO. 12 May 1958.

⁹ KNA: BY/9/335: re: Alleged higher incidence of mental illness in the Wateita. 13 August 1956.

¹⁰ KNA: BY/9/335: 1956. Ibid.

¹¹ KNA: BY/9/335: 1956. Ibid.

props on display during the dances, including; whistles, staffs, the ubiquitous red fez, and one woman 'who was seen dancing with a whisky bottle balanced on her head – no mean feat considering the activity of her movements. This was obviously a pure show-off.'¹²

Photographing pepo

Margetts' photographs appear in multiple forms as they were often repurposed within correspondence and district reports (with strict demands for their return), in publications (chiefly medical journals or text books, but also newspaper or magazine articles), on display in exhibits at international psychiatric conferences, in teaching slides, and in his personal photograph albums. In all of these cases, the photographs are accompanied by captions which he altered to suit his intended audience. Margetts often commented upon the process of taking photographs, including where he was met with hostility or indifference, what he gifted or paid to people who agreed to pose, and technical matters of light and exposure. He specifically requested to visit pepo dances (or have them organised for him) early in the day when the light was best, although Grace Harris noted that dances were generally held around 9 pm and continued late into the night. In some cases, he took film footage. His intent early on was to publish, and he made references to articles he was writing about Taita in his correspondence which often included clarifying questions about things he had witnessed. In some cases, he differentiated the pepo dances with *cases* of pepo (as illness), including one woman he photographed at Mgangi Dawida who 'was feeling pretty ill with malaise and headache, and readily accepted an offer to be taken to hospital where malaria was diagnosed. She is one of a family in which pepo is prevalent. Rag around forehead and medicine cuts above eyebrows had been administered for headache.'¹³

Photo 1:

Original caption for photograph: Pepo. Mtaita. C. 35. M. Also Pepo. Rag around head, medicine cuts above eyebrows, for headache (she had malaria). Mgangi Dawida. 1957.

Margetts included in his report a lengthy description of pepo as experienced through possession and characterised by 'shaking, or shivering, or shrugging, rhythmic chatter, whistling in an isolated and irregular manner or in a tune. The afflicted one generally expresses a desire to have something (which may be very peculiar) to eat or drink eg. Sugar cane juice, sea water, sweet smelling soap, kerosene or may ask for a shirt, a buckle, or some other article.' He added that the dance or 'ngoma' centred around the afflicted but that with the drummers and other onlookers and participants it became 'quite a party'.¹⁴ The rest of the report engages with Taita notions of mental illness with terms differentiating different types of anxiety states (and their causes), illnesses or actions, including suicide and murder.

Pepo dances became a key interest with photographs taken along the route through the province. One of his reports takes the form of the article he hoped to publish, 'Pepo Ngoma of the Wataita', which he would illustrate with his photographs. The draft incorporates existing anthropological literature on the Taita from Harris and others, but also included grander references to Aldous Huxley's *The Devils of Loudun* (1952) and Harrer's *Seven Years*

¹² KNA: BY/9/335: re: The pepo ngoma of the Wataita. 27 June 1958.

¹³ KNA: BY/9/335: Anthropological – Psychological Notes on the Wataita, 21 November 1957.

¹⁴ KNA: BY/9/335: *ibid*.

in Tibet (1953), as well as snake handling ‘cults’ of the southern United States and European dancing manias —a tendency of Margetts to reference the universality of human behaviours particularly those that could be considered ancient.¹⁵ He then prompted the district medical officer, Robert McKnight, to rewrite his previous medical report in article form and titled ‘Hysterical behaviour (pepo) amongst the Wataita’ to be submitted at the same time. Margetts suggested that McKnight could focus on the general medical impressions of hysteria he witnessed as a medical officer in Wesu and that he should include a ‘detailed description of the individual case of pepo at the suicide [observed] at Upper Mbale.’¹⁶ There is no indication that either Margetts or McKnight succeeded in publishing their articles on pepo in the ensuing years, although Margetts did display his photographs in exhibits for various international psychiatric conferences. He also made reference to his experiences in Taita in broader publications including one for a volume of *Psychiatry – State of the Art* (1985) where he described pepo as a ‘highly ritualized dance (ngoma) in order to encourage the manifestations of spirit possession (saka, Sw[ahili], pepo) usually trance, fit or automatic running’ (Margetts in P. Pichot 1985: 701).

Photo 2:

Original caption: Possession – Taita; Saka (pepo) possession, Mgangi, Taita Hills, 2nd February 1958; women with Fez hats. This photograph was also reproduced in Margetts’ personal photo album with the caption: THE FEZ.

Photo 3:

Original caption: Possession – Taita; Saka (pepo) possession, Mgangi, Taita Hills, 2nd February 1958. This photograph is duplicated in Margetts’ photo album with the caption: By 7 pm, most of the men and a few of the women are intoxicated. Women are jovial enough, men inclined to be a little hostile, so we move out.

The saka complex

While the psychiatrist engaged with a form of self-styled anthropology in his assessment of the Taita way of dealing with anxiety, the anthropologist, from the vantage point of two decades passing, indicated that she would like to have paid more attention to the ‘psychological formations’ surrounding saka possession (Harris 1978: note 2, 178). Grace Harris first described pepo (or saka) in her article, ‘Possession “hysteria” in a Kenya Tribe’ in *American Anthropologist* in 1957. She differentiated the saka or pepo dances from ‘saka attacks’ which happened most frequently to married women as part of everyday life in the community. The dance and the ‘illness’ (which saka is considered to be) are linked, as the dance was intended to relieve the visitation of the spirit that makes its demands known through the trance and speech of afflicted women. This entanglement of pepo, the afflicted, the family, the community and relief is termed the ‘saka complex’ by Harris, and comprises ‘the set of symptoms to which people give the name saka; the distribution in the population of susceptibility to attacks; the immediate causes of the attacks; the form of treatment; and Taita notions about saka’ (Harris 1957: 1047).

Harris remarked that women who are susceptible to saka may show signs of ‘generalized restlessness and anxiety’, and she described a typical case:

¹⁵ KNA: BY/9/335: The pepo ngoma of the Wataita. 27 June 1958.

¹⁶ KNA: BY/9/335: E. Margetts to R.F. McKnight. Re: “PEPO”. 12 May 1958.

sometimes without any obvious warning a woman begins the characteristic convulsive movements. The upper part of the body trembles but often the head and shoulders are more affected so that, while the shoulders shake rapidly, the head is moved rhythmically from side to side. As the attack continues the eyes may close and the face become expressionless. Some women perform certain simple acts in monotonous repetition, or they repeat strange sounds which are supposed to be foreign words (Harris 1957: 1048).

The remoteness of the Taita Hills in the early 1950s meant that the unfamiliar accoutrements of European life could act as a trigger for individual women who might then enact their own expressions of a saka attack at 'the sight of a motor car, the sound of a train whistle, the sight or smell of a cigarette, the sound of a match being struck, the sight of a bright piece of cloth, the smell, sight, or taste of bananas' (Harris 1957: 1048). This last trigger is not European as such, but represents a male cash crop rather than a food staple and clearly delineates the distinct realms of men and women.

Harris gave examples of saka attacks in her own midst describing a remote part of the Hills where the rare sighting of a European might trigger saka (although she personally does not seem to trigger attacks). Observing a Taita woman who came upon a parked car: she 'went into convulsions. She began to dance back and forth, apparently trying to make herself go around the car and continue on her way. Trembling and with her head shaking in the saka fashion, she danced toward the car and then away from it, seeming to find it impossible to approach slowly and go around. Eventually someone else held her arm and helped her to get by' (Harris 1957: 1048). The strike of a match sent another woman into a convulsion whereupon a child was sent to bring her a toy concertina. The woman strolled about 'playing the concertina's two notes over and over and making sounds which were supposed to be English words. The only intelligible ones were 'sit down' and 'thank you.' These she repeated in monotonous tone, interrupting herself only to assure the two Europeans present, in Kiswahili, that 'nothing was wrong'. When we left the village an hour or so later she was still walking about, jerkily playing the concertina and intoning the same words' (Harris 1957: 1048).

Like Margetts, Harris noted the centrality of objects in the saka complex. Pepo spirits speaking through women may demand things from their husbands such as household needs like sugar, but pepo may even demand a husband's blood. Symptoms are relieved when demands are met. Harris groups such objects of demand into three categories: items that are normally forbidden to women (such as cigarettes), or items of clothing that women do not normally wear, or men's 'skills' such as playing the concertina. A second category included purchased items such as sugar or cloth. And lastly, foreign things like cars, train whistles, foreign words, and the fez (Harris 1957: 1051). Everyday objects, which those of 'foreign' extraction *became*, were dynamically employed in both shared and individual expressions of saka. Harris' accounts echo early twentieth century reportage from colonial administrators (often dealing with potentially subversive prophet movements), travellers, and ethnographers. Similarly, there is a wealth of literature on the Swahili coast (and elsewhere) about the incorporation of symbols such as the fez or foreign objects in rituals. These may also act, as Harris describes, as a 'trigger' for emotive expressions of possession. Katherine Luongo's article on prophet

and possession movements in the neighbouring Kamba region describes the frequency with which British observers recorded the alarming reactions of the Kamba to foreign objects or items of clothing such as the fez or the pith helmet (Luongo 2012: 191-216). Gerhard Lindblom described these 'psychical disturbances' in terms of 'epidemics' that spread throughout the Kamba country (Lindblom 1920: 238-39). These early twentieth century colonial encounters documented these swathes of 'madness', not in a clinical sense, but nonetheless 'psychologically' and as evidence of the dangerous excitability of Africans particularly when under the influence of 'fanatical' leaders (Mahone 2006: 241-58). However, within the context of the day to day, what all of these demands, symptoms, objects and relief have at their core, according to Harris, is the 'differences between men and women'. 'Wage-labour, inheritance, ownership, and land rights sit outside the purview of women in Taita. Even access to towns is largely forbidden as the male presumption is that women who go to the towns succumb to prostitution'. Thus, Harris writes, Taita women 'have far less experience of the world outside the Native Land Unit...Their familiarity with European machines and equipment is slight, and to many of them a camera is still an exceedingly sinister object (Harris 1957: 1052).

Harris' 'diagnosis', if we are to use that term, of women within the context of saka are 'caricatured as uncontrollable consumers; as persons without experience of the outside world; and as persons who, acknowledging the prestige attaching to masculine activities and possessions, can feel toward them any emotion except the calm and dignity consonant with an indisputable claim, which they do not have. In short, they are shown as contrasting in every way with men, and the contrast is symbolized as a personal malady' (Harris 1957: 1060). However, Harris notes the crucial difference between the 'attack' on the individual and the dance in a community of women; 'the saka dance turns the saka attack on its head' (Harris 1957: 1060). Comportment in the dance is far more composed and dignified. Male garments are worn proudly, community drummers are present to support the dance and are paid for by husbands, onlookers are respectful and attentive. If the saka attack is a form of illness demand, the saka dance is an expression of women's rights to make such demands in a dependency relationship that speaks to the imbalance of property ownership and access to the outside world. Attack and dance, according to Harris, are 'two manifestations of a single situation'. So interwoven are these expressions that women engaging in a saka dance might *also* experience the uncontrollable convulsions of a saka attack as 'attack and dance can be translated into one another' (Harris 1957: 1061). Despite Harris' contention that women could be viewed as intellectually isolated and left to only extreme and symbolic ways of making themselves seen and heard, they are nonetheless shown to be central to Taita expressions of well-being and entitlements. The stereotyping of women as 'flighty, foolish and irresponsible, in need of masculine guidance and control' was in fact manipulated through religious doctrine to subvert 'the mutterings of the everyday battle of the sexes' (Harris 1979: 176). A broader gendered 'battle' could be seen in generational terms as well, with Harris reporting that some young men considered saka to be 'all pretense' and laughed at anyone taking part. Others in the community, including converted Christians, considered saka attacks to be either the 'work of the devil' or a 'product of foreign sorcery' sent to ruin the Taita (Harris 1957: 1050). The memory of imported witchcraft and foreign charms was cited as a source of stress by district officials who reported that the 'great war' of 1939 was thought by locals to be the point that witchcraft (previously thought to be hereditary) entered the Hills. It was said that this helped to explain why there were now so many 'funny lunatics'

in the region.¹⁷ Madness was understood within the region and there were distinct categories of these types of illnesses. However, true insanity was associated with violence and such cases could be dealt with harshly, if not fatally. As such, the Taita were careful in their use of such terms (Harris 1978: 49).

Harris remarks as well on the interpretation of women as 'deprived persons' whose behaviours can be seen as arising from the psychological tensions associated with envying men (Harris 1957: 1054). She gives little space to this, however, although such an interpretation would fit squarely within the eventual dominance of I.M. Lewis' theorisation of women's cult activities as a response to their peripheral status (Lewis 1971), a view that has since been challenged by a broad scholarship. Harris notes briefly the Freudian symbolism of certain objects, but her contention overall is that the saka complex must be viewed along a continuous scale of ritual life, whose specific form can be said to 'symbolize and expound the social order' (Harris 1957: 1055).

As the saka complex is, in part, about individual expression (the attack), Harris addresses the suggestion (and the obvious imagery) of a psychiatric disturbance or condition. She recounts the diversity of women she knew personally who suffered saka attacks, stressing a range of personality types (from 'mousy shyness' to 'sardonic cantankerousness'). In this instance, Harris has the distinct advantage over other outsider observers in knowing the individuals involved and gauging their levels of control over their actions or, in some cases, the possibility that they *might be* fairly neurotic personalities. She also posits that understanding the susceptibility to saka attacks would be a useful psychiatric study particularly as it might shed light on the 'self-induced hypnotic states' of some attacks as well as the value of saka dances as a form of psychotherapy (Harris 1957: 1062). Harris concluded by remaining open to the suggestion that a psychological interpretation of saka would have value although she stresses the vital contribution of social anthropology in understanding the Taita idiom; 'if they are neurotic; it is in the Taita fashion' (Harris 1957: 1065).

Conclusion

In this brief snapshot of the Taita Hills in the 1950s, I have brought together the competing (sometimes complimentary) claims, observations and interests of the local district government, alongside their engagement with anthropology and psychiatry in so far as these individuals represent their fields. What can such encounters tell us about this region in the 1950s? The reportage of a range of non-Taita witnesses depict a zeal for documenting behaviours they clearly viewed as exceptional amidst conditions they saw as worsening. There is evidence that neighbouring communities also witnessed a growing turmoil expressed as rising cases of insanity that threatened to destabilize the region. Furthermore, reflections on Taita from the distance of two decades produced one of the first ethnographies of the area with both the benefit of hindsight and the limitation of fieldnotes that transformed the fieldwork of the anthropologist to memory.

Within her early article on possession 'hysteria', Harris situates the 'saka complex' within similar possession activities in neighbouring groups along Kenya's coast (chiefly the Giriama) as well as further afield, amongst the Zulu (Junod 1927), the Somali (Ross 1956), and the

¹⁷ KNA: DC/TTA/3/9/44. 23 October 1956, 'Witchcraft in Teita District'.

Songhay (Rouch 1954). The reliance on symbols of 'foreign-ness' as a means of expressing anxiety, desire and a demand for consumable things and experiences was related, according to Harris, to the world of wage-labour that surrounded, but also excluded women. 'Hysteria' is employed non-clinically, but speaks to the emotive power of saka possession as a system of communal expression as well as an individual malady that, in turn, loops back into all women's concerns. At the same time, the psychiatrist Margetts similarly rejected a notion of explicit mental illness or 'hysteria'. He too allowed for occurrences of feminine 'deception' in the zeal for acquisition. He saw the ubiquity of pepo in Taita as evidence of mystical thinking common to Africa, but he also meticulously documented and compared key differences in concepts, language and practice, among neighbouring groups, all of whom were 'foreign'. Lastly, the Colonial government was the most insistent that the Taita were being driven increasingly mad, seeing the turmoil of the region as largely unrelated to politics, but disturbing in the realisation that a once placid region could turn.

This case study of writing from the time, admittedly a *glimpse* of how things were in the 1950s, is a fairly remarkable record, particularly as we may reread these moments of witness alongside more recent ethnographic work on the region. James Smith's work portrays a similar period of crisis, expressed in part, by an 'alarming increase in uncontrollable and deadly forms of witchcraft' handled internally by a few sub-locations in the Hills alongside the help of a prominent witch finder from Tanzania. According to Smith, the witch finder's public activities over the course of six months, brought controversy and conflict, but also 'drew attention to local concerns about the erosion of local social and moral boundaries under conditions defined, at least in part, by recent economic and political liberalization' (Smith 2005: 141-58). This movement, he writes, was articulated as 'global in that it was seen as emanating from beyond Taita, and also highly local, in that it seized on and transformed localized conflicts and histories as well as people's emotions, which were perceived as increasingly vulnerable because of a diversity of contemporary hardships' (Smith 2005: 143). Smith's interviews cite the unease felt in Taita of the 1990s with 'the rapid increase in violent crime and death, social facts that seemed to directly contravene the image of their region as a place of serenity and cool heartedness in a troubled nation' (Smith 2005: 145-46). The ineffective local police response resulted in some cases in violent vigilantism – adding to the sense of chaos and disorder. The Taita, under the confines of structural adjustment, have echoed the pressures from decades earlier where local values eroded under the quest for wages, the payment of taxes, and an occupying colonial government that was supposed to leave by 1960. In looking back on the reports, ethnographic writing, and photographic essays produced over the course of a few years in the 1950s, we can see a frenetic production of a paper trail, but also snap shots of problems that were deemed important within and beyond daily life in the Hills.

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