

# PEOPLE WHO DRESS IN GRASS

FRANK G. CARPENTER WRITES  
OF THE BAZIBAS WHO LIVE  
ON THE WESTERN SHORES OF  
VICTORIA NYANZA.

**The Queer Town of Bukoba and Its German Governor—How the Natives Are Treated—A Look at the Villages and a Description of a Baziba House—The Town of the Chiefs—Markets Where Shells Go as Money—Something About the Women and Especially About One Who Sold Her Dress to Our Correspondent for Sixteen Cents.**

Special Correspondence.

**B**UKOBA, German East Africa. April 10.—I have just made a big bargain in clothes. I purchased the wardrobe of a girl of 18, and have it packed away in my trunk. The sale was made in the midst of a crowd and the price for the whole was equal to just 16 cents of our money. The bargain was in cowry shells, about as big as my thumb nail, and I had to pay 500 of these for the costume. The dress had all the swirl of a silk petticoat, and it rustled, as the young lady walked along with me to the town of Bukoba where my silver money was changed into shells.

AMONG THE BAZIBAS.

This maiden was a Baziba, and a very good looking type of the people who inhabit this part of German East Africa. I took her out of the crowd in which she stood, and before she delivered the goods, had a photograph made. She stood just about four feet in height, and was as straight as an arrow. Her dress began at the waist and reached to her ankles. Above it she had on only two strings around her neck. The dress was made of the long fibers of the raphia palm, and it looked for all the world like so much timothy hay tied on by a string. There were so many strands of the fiber that they hid all of her person below the waist and they swayed this way and that as she walked.

I was in company with Archdeacon Walker, the famous Uganda missionary, and it was through him, as an interpreter, that she made the trade. When I pointed to her dress and held up the silver coin her eyes brightened, and when the archdeacon told her that I was willing to pay cash she gladly assented. She borrowed a piece of red calico about the size of a dinner napkin which one of her sisters was wearing as a shawl, and loosening this fiber skirt a little at the waist she slipped in the napkin and wrapped it around her person. It was long enough to fall to the middle of her thighs, and she fastened it over the left hip with a thorn. She then took off her skirt of long fringe and handed it to me; and we went on together to the village to change our money to shells. On the way there, the archdeacon talked with the girl. He told me she was trembling with excitement and delight at her bargain, and ventured she had never made as much as 4 cents a day in her life and probably not over 3. Here she was selling her old skirt for 500 shells equal to six or eight days of hard work. When I gave her the shells she trotted off laughing and then thanked us again and again for my great generosity. In the whole transaction she displayed not the slightest modesty, and at the close, although almost nude, was not ashamed.

CLOTHING OF GRASS.

These Bazibas are all clad in grass clothing. The men have grass or 5 or 6 cloaks which they wear around their shoulders. Some have shirts of grass fastened to a ring at the top of the waist. Outside this the girl may have a bracelet or two and some anklets of wire, but otherwise she is bare. This matter of nudity, however, is entirely governed by custom. On the other side of Lake Victoria, among the Kavirondo, I saw thousands who go naked from the waist down to the knees, and who in their manners are just as decent and quite as modest as our people at home. In Uganda, whence I came here, the women are clad from their chests to their feet in robes of bark cloth and it is impolite for a man to lift up his gown above the middle of the calf. Nevertheless, the Bazibas are said to be much less virtuous than the naked Kavirondo, and I venture they will not rank higher in that respect than these grass-clad Bazibas.

DEATH FOR INFIDELITY.

Indeed of all the inhabitants around Lake Victoria these people are about the most rigid in regard to such matters, and offenses against the marriage tie are punished severely. The Baziba man and woman who attempt to live together without being married take their lives in their hands. They are liable to be tied hand and foot and thrown into the lake; and if they dwell far off in the country they are carried to the nearest swamp and hanged alive under the canopy. Murders take place on about the same conditions as in other parts of Africa. The girls being sold by their parents just pass the usual price for a bride in 1000 cowry shells, or a little over three dollars. This is for a fat, good looking maiden of fifteen or so. The price for those who are old, or who are of a less attractive type, falls according to age, and a full grown woman or widow often brings less than \$1.75.

IN GERMAN EAST AFRICA.

But before I go further let me tell you about this land of the Bazibas, where I now am. It lies in German East Africa just below Uganda, on the western side of Lake Victoria. It is bounded on the east by the lake, and it includes a part of the Kagera river, which many believe to be the source of the Nile. This river rises in the highlands not far from Lake Tanganyika, and flows in a winding way through German East Africa, emptying into Lake Victoria almost on the boundary between the two countries. Commissioner Tompkins of Entebbe tells me that the river is quite a little over 1000 miles long, and that it can be navigated for about 70 miles. I passed this river on my way to Bukoba.

We left Entebbe, the British capital

of Uganda, at 4 a. m. and were all day long attempting off the western shores of Lake Victoria. Our first course was through the Sesse islands, about the largest archipelago in the lake. They are beautifully wooded on the shores, with grass lands higher up. They were formerly well populated, but they are now almost deserted, on account of the sleeping sickness, caused by the bite of the tsetse fly, which infects their shores.

After traveling through these islands we went westward along a country which looks very much like southern Ireland, and which would compare with Staten Island if the latter had no houses upon it. We passed a little rocky islet, known as the "Island of the Dead," and then came into this beautiful harbor of Bukoba and anchored well out in the bay.

BUKOBA.

Bukoba is the northernmost station in German East Africa. It is beautifully situated, lying on a moon-shaped bay backed by low hills. At the south end of the bay is the opposite end of the harbor, which rises straight up from the water to a height of 200 feet. Right under these bluffs is the landing place, and it was a little outside them that the steamship Winifred came to anchor. We were carried to shore in native canoes of wonderful workmanship. Each boat was about 20 feet long, three feet wide and two feet deep. It had a keel made of the trunk of a tree and the sides were of woven reeds about a fourth of an inch thick and one foot in width, running almost the full length of the boat. The boards were sewed together with strips of the keel by threads of fiber or bark and the whole was made watertight. There are also larger boats, some even 50 feet long, which are used for navigating the lake. They are made the same way.

We stepped out on the shore under the bluffs and walked perhaps three-quarters of a mile through the banana groves about the bay to the opposite end of the harbor. Here is the headquarters of the German government, consisting of a fort, a barracks, and the home of the commander. The fort is made of brick, plastered on the outside and roofed. Native soldiers guarded the gates, but we were able to pass through into the large inclosure which contains the barracks and other buildings.

The grounds comprise several acres. They are covered with green grass and have also beds of red flowers surrounded by hedges. As we went in we saw chains of black huts, and we were told to make the flower beds. Each gang consisted of about 20 men chained and padlocked. Every man had a steel collar about his neck and there was a chain which ran from man to man by being attached to these collars, so that the gang made a great jangling as it walked along. Each had a sheet of corrugated iron on his head, and upon this about a bush or so of black earth from the swamps outside the fort. The men were guarded at the front and rear by soldiers, with guns.

A CALL UPON THE COMMANDANT.

The soldiers at the gates were not especially friendly, and it seemed to me that the officers within did not want to meet strangers. Archdeacon Walker was with me, and through his knowledge of the native language we were able to talk with the guards and make our way. The first soldiers we met told us that the commandant was asleep and that we could not see him until he had finished his after-dinner nap. We then started away, but were called back by another soldier, who told us that his highness had just awakened and would probably be out presently. This man did not ask us into the house, so we stood there and waited until the governor might appear. In the course of 15 minutes he did so, and after that we were very well treated. The name of the governor is Baron Capt. von Suman. He is a short, fat, little man with a blond beard. He was dressed in white duck, but nevertheless looked exceedingly warm. He took us into the house and we chatted together for some



BAZIBA MEN.

The Man With the Pipe is Dressed in Grass Cloth, the Other in Fibers of the Raphia Palm.

Photographed for the "News" by Frank G. Carpenter.

time about his country and people. He told me that the trade about Lake Victoria is rapidly growing, and that a large part of the goatskins and hides, which form one of the principal exports, goes to the United States. He says there is an increasing demand for American cotton goods and advises our country to push them. He also gave the opinion that German East Africa was beginning to prosper and that it would eventually be a well paying colony.

BUSINESS AMONG THE BAZIBAS.

Shortly after this, we left the governor and strolled out into the town of Bukoba to look at the stores and the market. These are right near the fort, the village proper being some distance away. The chief business street consists of a dozen or more little booths, each occupied by a Hindoo merchant, who sits or stands in it, surrounded by his goods. The black, grass-clad customers of the natives come to the booths and make their purchases by means of cowry shells. The chief things sold are colored and uncolored cottons, the favorites as I have said, being American sheetings. Another popular article of merchandise is wire, of copper, iron and brass. This is used by the natives as jewelry, and it is almost as valuable as gold and silver in our country. The wire is brought here in great kegs, and coils of it are hung up in front of the stores. It is of all thicknesses, from the size of a human hair to the diameter of one's little finger. The thicker wire is hammered out into armlets, anklets and collars, and the finer is woven and plaited into smaller ornaments. Some of the wire jewelry is heavy, and a very common anklet worn by the women looks as though it might have been torn from our woven wire fences and twisted to, together.

In the market square, near these stores, I saw many black peddlers. They squatted on the ground, with their wares piled about them. Here a woman sold sweet potatoes, there one offered little piles of the entrails of sheep or goats, and farther over were others selling peanuts and white ants. The white ants had been roasted. They were displayed upon bits of banana leaves and were sold at 80 many shells per pile.

SHELLS USED AS MONEY.

The cowry shell is the chief currency of this part of Africa, and I understand it is in common use throughout the regions about Lake Tanganyika and the Congo valley. The shells are brought here from the coast of India and are exchanged for rupees at the rate of 1500 to the rupee. A rupee is worth about 33 cents, and as the shells are put up in strings of 50 each, a string of shells is worth just about 3 cents of our money. Among my recent purchases are two spears at 1,500 shells, each, a carved milk bowl at 2,000 shells, and a native chopping knife

When I go through the country I should have to have at least 15 porters to carry every 500 lbs. with me. Several dollars' worth is a good load for a man, and 10 cents' worth would weigh about as much as 10 of our silver dollars. This makes commerce difficult, and the Germans are trying to introduce a new coinage based on the Indian rupee. The chief trouble is to make the coin small enough. The present issue includes coins known as beliers, of which 100 go to a rupee, so that one belier is worth one-third of a cent of our money.

IN A BAZIBA VILLAGE.

Leaving the market, I visited the village near the fort and then went across the country to see other towns in the interior. The houses are very small, and the people live in huts of straw or mud. They are made of poles fastened together at the top, making a framework the shape of a cone. This is lined with reeds or similar stuff, and the bottom to the top and are fastened together by bands of reeds which go round and round inside the hut from floor to roof. The outside is thatched, and the thatch is made of grass or hay on the ground. The roof is upheld by many poles, which are so arranged that they divide the interior into rooms. One of the huts which I entered had two apartments about three feet wide and six feet long, which were used for sleeping. In the center of the hut was a fire, upon which, in an earthen pot, some food was steaming away. There was neither stove nor chimney, and the smoke filled the hut. It had already turned so that the whole looked gloomy. I understand that the fire is kept up day and night, as the weather is often damp, and also as new fires are hard to kindle. In many parts of this country matches are comparatively unknown, and fire is gotten by twisting one stick in a hole made in a block of wood until the friction brings a light.

The floor of this hut was well pounded down and the wall inside was plastered with clay to the height of my waist. There was no grass or hay on the floor, as is common in Uganda, and the entrance, which was very low, was by no means so beautifully made.

IN THE HOMES OF THE CHIEFS.

In my trip over the country nearby I stopped at a large native town made up of the homes of the chiefs and their retainers. These are occupied by native rulers who live some distance away, but who are required by the Germans to spend a part of each year at Bukoba. They might be called the court residences of these men, for they come here to have conferences with the Germans as to how to govern their subjects, to pay their taxes

and to see that the right amount of government work is supplied by their people.

This town is made up of inclosures surrounded by high fences of upright poles tightly sewed together by vines. Inside each fence is the establishment of an African nabob and his numerous wives. In going through the village I wound my way about inclosures after inclosures, through one walled enclosure into another and in and out among buildings of poles and mud until my sense of direction was lost and I seemed to be in a Rosamond's bower. One of the chiefs was putting up a new establishment, and I had a chance to see how the buildings were constructed. They are made of poles, mud and elephant grass, and one man may have a large number, including separate apartments for each of his wives. There were not many women about, but such as I saw were clad in grass strips of similar stuff. The men were mostly young. They were straight, well developed and fine looking, but nearly every one of them was more or less drunk. A feast was evidently going on, and each man had a long calabash filled with banana beer which he was sucking at through two straws made for the purpose. In front of one of the huts a dozen

musicians were dancing to music made upon several great drums by men drummers. I was anxious to buy one of these drums, and I tried to buy one from a chief. The instrument I picked out reached above my waist as it stood upon the ground. It was as big around at the top as a flour barrel, narrowing to the size of a nail keg at the bottom. It had a hollowed out of a log, and the top and bottom were covered with cowrie shells, which were laced on with cords of mud. It had evidently been used many years, but he politely refused, saying that he himself and his ancestors had had the drum a long time, and that he did not know whether he could get another as good. He told me that if he owned another he would give me this. By that, alas, he had only one.

FRANK G. CARPENTER.

HIS CONSTANT NEED.

"Now," said Mr. Meekton's wife, she cut a box of caller buttons from the tree. "I am going to give you for Christmas something that you are always needing." "I know what that is," rejoined her husband, trying to look cheerful. "What is it?" "Advice,"—[Washington Star.]

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