

EDITORIAL



AFRICA in Today's World

By C. I. West, M.D.

African topics which deal with primitive native customs apparently have strong reader appeal. This column has not touched upon this subject until now.

We have had many readers write in to ask about some of the tales they had heard of tribal superstitions and practices and we have been requested to write on the practice of female circumcision.

Many African tribes still adhere to the abominable custom of removing the clitoris from young girls. The practice is supported, by those tribes which still perform clitoridectomy, with the explanation that by removing the most sensitive part of the female sex organ, a woman is more apt to be faithful to her master-husband, because she gets little satisfaction from the sex act.

Most of the African nations have made this practice illegal but tens of thousands of young African girls are still subjected to this torture every year. The surgery is performed by the Zo, the dean of tribal Home Economics. Female circumcision is part of the training and development of young girls preparing for womanhood.

Mothers deliver their 7 to 10 year old daughters to the Zo who takes these young girls into her training school, the Gri Gri bush. The Zo is the top woman of the tribe, the only woman of the tribe with any power. Next to the paramount chief, the Zo ranks in protocol right along with the witch doctor, both of whom hold their high position because of the great secrecy of their arts.

The Gri Gri bush is a specified area situated several miles from the main village. The Zo rules supreme over the Gri Gri bush and her territory is taboo for any male. Whenever a man is found within the geographic limits of the Gri Gri bush he is incarcerated incommunicado until the Zo decides to release him, which is usually at the time of graduation of the girls from their training.

Not even the chief violates the sanctity of the Gri Gri bush. When he wishes to communicate with the Zo, he dispatches one of his wives to bring the Zo to him, or he sends a message with the drums.

The African girl is given complete practical training in all arts and crafts that she will be expected to use in her adult life. She is taught how to farm, how to cook, how to weave cloth and rugs, how to spin wool and cotton into thread, how to thatch, how to protect herself and her family from the elements, how to be a good wife and how to be a good mother. She is taught primitive midwifery, first aid,

PLANS FOR AN investigation of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara's racial integration program appears to have been quietly shelved by the House Armed Services Committee.

Rep. Carl Vinson, D-Ga., chairman of the Southern-dominated congressional committee, announced plans for the investigation with considerable fanfare six months ago. Vinson now says the probe will have to wait "until we finish important regular business."

A furor over race policies arose last June following release of a lengthy report by the President's Committee on Equal Opportunity in the Armed Forces. The report detailed discriminatory practices against Negro servicemen on and off base and recommended numerous ways to stop them.

One suggestion was that base commanders declare bars or other public places "off limits" to all base personnel if there was discrimination against Negro servicemen.

About a month after the report was issued by chairman Gerhard A. Gesell, McNamara distributed a directive imple-

menting some of the recommendations. The directive advised base commanders that they could declare discriminatory public facilities "off limits" after all other methods to eliminate such practices had failed and after approval from the secretary of their particular service.

Shortly after McNamara issued his directive, Vinson said his committee was going to "look into this whole matter." Questioned last week as to what had been done, Vinson replied, "I have no plans for hearings on this matter at the present time. We must first get our important regular business behind us and then we will see what happens."

It is not expected that Vinson will make a move until after the current debates on the civil rights bill are concluded.

GOVERNMENT EFFORTS to provide more jobs for Negroes and other minority groups is producing results according to the executive vice chairman of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity.

Hobart Taylor, Jr., reports that hiring Negroes without discrimination is now viewed as good business by many firms that would have resisted any federal directive in this field a year ago.

The committee was charged by its founder, former President John F. Kennedy, with eliminating employment discrimination in work under federal contracts as well as within the government itself. It has the power to cancel contracts where discrimination exists but has not found it necessary to exercise such authority as yet.

"We've come close to canceling several times," Taylor said. "I've called people in and told them their contracts were in jeopardy unless they complied with federal regulations. Corrective action always followed."

TAYLOR PREFERS to emphasize the voluntary actions by business to promote opportunity for Negroes. He said an advisory council of business leaders has played an important part in implementing the program headed by President Lyndon B. Johnson himself, who has never relinquished the post assigned to him by Pres. Kennedy.

Taylor said 141 companies with seven million employees have signed the "Plans for Progress" to end every aspect of racial bias in their firms and another 30 or so are expected to sign soon.

American Airlines officials said their

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hygiene, grain milling, tribal architecture, laundering and something about everything that is a woman's job in the tribal tradition.

Graduation from the bush is a big event in the lives of the people of the tribe. The Zo has sole decision as to the date of the ceremony. Whenever she decides that her girls have learned their lessons well she sends word to the chief in the town square. The message is sent either by a runner or by the drums.

Upon receipt of the announcement, the paramount chief dispatches the message to every town within his tribal jurisdiction. Eligible males from each village assemble in the town of the chief to await the parade of the girls in anticipation of purchasing one or more wives. The price is standardized, usually about forty dollars in American money. The money is divided between the chief and the father of the girl. The entire purchase price is returned to the purchaser if the girl does not turn out to be a good wife, or if she proves to be infertile.

When a Gri Gri girl is returned for refund, she is usually placed in servitude by the chief. In other cases the girl may be returned to the bush provided she is acceptable to the Zo. In this case the girl may be confined to the Gri Gri bush for retraining, or she may be assigned by the Zo as a servant. The decision lies solely in the hands of the head woman. It is possible that a rejected girl might be confined in servitude for life.

The Zo is always a settled widow, and is usually the widow of a former chief. She is the only woman in the tribe who has any tribal authority. The wives of the chiefs are regarded as women of special significance solely out of respect to the chiefs. All other women of the tribe are looked upon as chattel of their husbands.

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