

by Richard Petraitis

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Bullets into Water: The Sorcerers of Africa

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George Ivan Smith, author of the book, *Ghosts of Kampala* (a biography of Idi Amin Dada, the former dictator of Uganda), has provided an account of a battlefield tour in what is now the country of Zaire. Under the escort of local guides, Mr. Smith observed the corpses of tribesmen sprawled around him, but was told by his companions that the now prostrate men had their ears to the ground listening to the talk of the enemy. Furthermore, these dead tribesmen would return to their compatriots with secrets from their foe, according to the guides, because they had been protected from danger by "Allah Water." This was a magic water given by local sorcerers to protect warriors from bullets and even from nature's fury -- thunderbolts rained down by the gods.¹ One hundred years earlier, this belief in magic water had led to the routing of tribal armies across Southern Africa, the Congo, and Uganda. This water, sometimes called "Yakan Water," was laced with a hallucinogen from the daffodil species which gave many African warriors feelings of elation, excitement, invincibility, and false courage; all undone by the physics of bullets traveling through the air.²

In April 1819, the British Colony on the Cape, Grahamstown, was menaced by a large Xhosa army. The Xhosa prophet, Nxele, had promised the Xhosa king, the Ndlambe, the ability to turn white men's bullets to water. Due to the mystic's promise, the Xhosa army was ordered into harm's way and engaged the British colonial army in a rare pitched battle. Believing in the powerful magic of Nxele, they advanced in massed columns against their enemy. The British, lined-up in formation, opened a withering fire with their muskets and artillery and decimated the Xhosa ranks, led personally by Nxele.³ One hundred warriors died, and nearly a thousand were wounded. The British army then invaded Xhosa territory and accepted, at a later date, the surrender of Nxele.⁴ A belief in magic had brought about a military disaster for the Xhosa people.

The Xhosa continued to grapple with the British army. In 1850, a sickly youth named Mlanjeni, "the Riverman," claimed it was necessary to cleanse the Xhosa nation and to make war on the whites. Mlanjeni promised the Xhosa warriors immunity from the white men's bullets, and sent them into battle with a twig from a plumbag bush to ward off evil (including bullets).⁵ Battlefield tragedy followed; hundreds were killed when the Riverman's protection was found to be nonexistent. By 1853, the Xhosa were exhausted by the British army and resistance came to an end. However, the belief in those professing magic power persisted.

After the signing of the Berlin Act of 1885, the European land grab accelerated throughout Africa, causing desperate resistance by African peoples. During the summer of 1905, Germany's newly acquired colony of East Africa became the scene of revolt, using magic to defeat the white man. A spirit medium claimed to be possessed by a snake spirit named Hongo. The medium's name was Kinjikitile Ngwale, and he began to call himself Bokero.⁶ Bokero insisted the people of that region were called to drive the Germans out. The medium gave his followers war medicine to turn German bullets into water. This powerful war medicine turned out to be water (maji in Swahili) mixed with castor oil and millet seeds.⁷ Thus the Maji-Maji rebellion was born!

Followers of the movement, armed with a poor arsenal of cap guns, spears, and arrows, moved to attack German strongholds across the colony. Maji warriors, wearing millet stalks around their foreheads, marched toward the German garrisons for battle. Several thousand Maji warriors, led by a spirit medium (not Bokero), marched toward the Reich's compound at Mahenge. As soon as the rebels were within firing range, soldiers, backed by two machine guns, laid down a lethal fire. Row upon row of Maji warriors marched toward the guns, but were cut down.⁸ Hundreds were killed or wounded before breaking off the engagement. The battle at Mahenge was the zenith of the Maji-Maji rebellion. However, the Ngoni people decided to join the revolt with an army of five thousand.⁹

A German force armed with machine guns marched from Mahenge and approached the Ngoni camp. On Oct. 21, 1905, the German soldiers attacked, and the whole Ngoni army retreated in disarray as their warriors threw away their magic bottles and ran away crying, "The maji is a lie!"¹⁰ The German army was victorious against the rebels. Surprisingly, Kinjikitile Ngwale (Bokero) is a hero today for the many people of Tanganyika -- including the great warrior tribe of the Ngoni!

While World War I erupted across Europe, in Uganda another prophet arose named Rembe. He came to give the Lugbara people divine power by the drinking of a special water from a pool in Lugbara territory where a snake with a human head gave oracles. Rembe promised special protection for his followers who drank the "Yakan water." The water was to provide protection against European rifles, and cult followers believed Rembe's magic could cause the guns to only fire water.¹¹ In 1917, the authorities quickly arrested and executed Rembe. But the Yakan water cult persisted among the Lugbara. After World War I ended, unrest broke out in Uganda, spurred by belief in the magic water. The Yakan revolt of 1919 resulted in the deaths of a dozen policemen, but the authorities acted decisively and imprisoned the leaders, which resulted in the minor loss of life. The deaths of a number of leaders in prison caused the cult to die out.¹² However, magical thinking was to resurface again.

October, 1987, witnessed the invasion of Uganda by a Voudon priestess, Alice Lakwena, with an army of six thousand, called the Holy Spirit Movement. Many in the army were soldiers driven out of Uganda after their military government was overthrown by the National Resistance Army. Lakwena smeared her followers with an ointment to grant them protection from bullets. Her poorly armed warriors threw themselves into battle launching suicide attacks. Lakwena combined Christianity with African sorcery and told Holy Spirit troops that their rocks and sticks, when thrown at the enemy, would explode like grenades.¹³ According to Associated Press and Reuters dispatches, several thousand of her loyal followers were mowed down by modern arms, with local Ugandans running into the streets to help the military kill the hapless, crudely armed Holy Spirit warriors. Fortunately, in December, 1987, Lakwena was arrested by Kenyan authorities at their border, as she fled Uganda. This put an end to her nearly year-long campaign that convinced thousands that spirits spoke to her. Of special interest are reports that Lakwena kept a heavily armed bodyguard with her at all times, but armed her suicide warriors only with rocks, sticks, and a dab of magic ointment on their chests!¹⁴ The prophetess seemed to favor the AK-47, not her own magical abilities.

A belief in magical arts and the powers of sorcerers has led to the demise of many African armies. The tragic lessons of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries are ignored by many in modern Africa. On a continent where superstition and magical thinking die hard, countless local sorcerers are fully employed and fear has reigned supreme. Liberty can't flourish in lands where the irrational is deeply rooted. I understand now President Kenyatta's speech, in 1968. when he asked a crowd of forty thousand Kenyans to stop the practice of witchcraft. The speech was made after the mass execution of fifteen people at Fort Victoria, because they had feasted on human body parts, believed to give them a sorcerer's power.¹⁵ It appears that the use of magic water and oils aren't the only excesses of magical thinking.

End Notes

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Richard Petraitis teaches at Riverside Brookfield, Illinois, High School. He has taught a class on pseudoscience and the debunking of the paranormal. His cover article, "The Shamans of Suburbia," was published in the May 1997 issue of *The REALL News*.