

THE DISTRICT COMMISSIONER HEARS A CASE



The Court House was a circular, thatched building with low walls about four feet high going round it. The roof was supported on brick pillars. The inside was perfectly plain apart from one or two pillars built to support the beams of the thatched roof, and a dais on which the District Commissioner

sat when administering justice. That day we had no idea what sort of case he was about to try and so were watching the opening of the court with great interest. On the dais was a large table covered with the Union Jack. On this reposed a number of legal books. Below and to the right was a table and a chair for the interpreter to sit. Facing the DC's dais was another table and chair for the Police official who would prosecute and to the left of the DC. was a bench on which the accused person would sit when the trial was not actually in progress.

The DC arrived briskly and took his seat on the dais. An African police sergeant was acting as prosecutor that day. The accused turned out to be a woman, wrapped in her printed cotton robes with a Policeman standing behind her. The D.C read out the charge. The woman was accused of illegally distilling five bottles of Kachasu, a potent spirit made from native beer. The sergeant was called to give evidence and said there was a great deal of this distilling going on in the district and the police were anxious to have it stopped as the spirit was so powerful that a very little made men quarrelsome. Any more of this spirit would make them fighting drunk. And if they drank it often it would send them blind or send them insane and even cause their death. All this was translated to the accused woman by the interpreter. Then the DC asked her if she wished to plead guilty or not guilty. The DC then sought to produce evidence for and against the accused asking the Police sergeant questions of the woman accused. His words being interpreted to the woman. It did seem quite apparent to us that the woman in fact understood English. But if justice had to be done this had to be done. There must be no question of her not understanding:

DC: *"Why did you make this stuff if you knew it was illegal?"*

Accused: *"I wanted to taste it."*

DC: *"Taste five bottles! That seems rather unlikely. Are you sure you did not intend to sell it?"*

Accused: *"No I was not going to sell it. I was going to have a party at the weekend."*

DC: *"Five bottles! Some party! How many people were coming to the party?"*

Accused: *"Only four or five."*

DC: *"What! Only four or five of you were going to drink five bottles?"*

At that stage of the proceedings the DC asked the accused, *"Are you married?"*

Accused: *"Yes"*

DC: *"Has your husband other wives?"*

Accused: *"Yes one"*

DC: *"And how many children have you?"*

Accused: *"Two, one is a baby only four months old."*

DC: *"And the other wife?"*

Accused: *"She has two children too."*

DC: *"Then if I send you to prison she can look after your children for you?"*

Accused (now thoroughly startled): *"But who will look after my husband's garden? Who will gather in the crops and look after my baby?"*

DC: *"All right you can take the baby to prison with you. The other woman and the children must harvest the crops."*

The DC then reached for one of the legal books and turned over the pages. Whilst he did this the still was produced. It was a hollowed-out log of wood rather like a dug-out canoe. Three or four feet long with a gas-pipe going from end to end and a blade of tough grass

hanging out of the pipe to act as a worm. The method by which the hooch was distilled was explained. The beer from which from which it was made was placed in a bucket over a fire and as it boiled, the steam was lead into the pipe in which it condensed and dripped, drop by drop, from the blade of grass at the other end into a waiting bottle. It was as simple as that, although of course it was a somewhat lengthy business.



The five bottles of kachasu were then stood on the table in front of the DC and the police sergeant asked for a heavy sentence to be imposed as it was necessary to stop the distilling of this liquid which was very prevalent in the neighborhood. It was sold almost by the sip at very high prices and work suffered as a consequence, quite apart from the health of individuals who drank too much of it.

The DC before announcing his sentence, sent for the woman's husband. The man appeared looking thoroughly frightened. The DC's mouth almost dropped open in surprise and his eyes almost popped out of his head. The husband was one of his own employees at the Boma!

There then followed a discussion about family affairs and how the man would get on without his wife. The woman reiterated her statement that she had no intention of selling the stuff, she just wanted to taste it. (The DC interjected: *"Five bottles? Some taste!"*) Her statement was not accepted and the husband, who had not been accused of anything, was duly lectured and dressed down by the DC who expressed surprise and horror that an employee of the Boma should allow his wife to descend to such depths. Finally he pronounced sentence.

DC: *"I shall fine you five pounds for distilling this Kachasu and ten pounds for having five bottles of the spirit in your possession. Have you got fifteen pounds?"*

The accused looked imploringly at her husband who kept his eyes fixed on the ground.

DC: *"Very well. If you cannot pay the fine you must go to prison for six months, you can take your baby with you."*

The DC rose and everyone stood as he marched out to return to his office.

Whilst we were talking outside the court the police sergeant came up to the DC and saluted to him smartly, said to him that the the husband could raise the £15 after all so that his wife would not have to go to prison. The husband was given until 11am (It was then 8.30 am to raise the the cash and save his wife from prison. The woman was driven off in the police Land Rover in custody.

I asked if I could be allowed a taste of the Kachasu and I was told that I could if I liked but probably a smell of it would be enough. I went back to the Court House - where five bottles of Kachasu had stood on the DC's table there now stood only four bottles.

Various people smiled at me, no one said anything. I removed the cork from one of the bottles and took a sniff. It certainly was enough! What it tasted like heaven only knows! It really must have been awful. The sergeant then produced the still for my inspection. The DC joined us and told him to destroy it and the Kachasu.

Sergeant: *"Yes sir I will throw it into the Latrine"*

DC: *"Oh no you don't. Somebody will fish it out and use it again. You must burn it"*

The sergeant was grinning as he walked away. What happened to the liquid I don't know, I expect it was poured away. But as a footnote, I would just say that when I returned to the Court House a few minutes later to take some pictures only three bottles stood on the DC's table!!!

Note: This was found amongst my husband paper's a few years after his death, who wrote it I do not know but a good story and very well written. *Mary Brill*