

\*

\*

\*

B. BERNARDI: *The Mugwe, a failing prophet*. A Study of a religious and public dignitary of the Meru of Kenya. London, New York, Toronto 1959, xiv, 211 pp., ill., map. Published for the International African Institute by the Oxford University Press. Price \$3.75.

Father Bernardi's study is based on a tour of nine months of fieldwork among the Meru, but the author has had previous contacts with this people while being attached to the staff of a Roman Catholic Mission. His enquiry has involved visits to all nine Meru sub-tribes, each of which, with the exception of a few small ones, has its own Mugwe.

The Mugwe, or prophet as he is called by Bernardi, is regarded as the national leader and symbol of the unity of his people. His main functions are religious. He is believed to promote the well-being and prosperity of his people by his blessings and his prayers directed to God. Being the representative of God by whom he is inspired, he is equally the representative of his people. The function of the Mugwe is hereditary and the actual Mugwe is claimed to be the descendant of the first Mugwe who led his people into their present country.

Of particular interest is the connection of the Mugwe with the institution of the age-classes. It is the Mugwe who controls the initiation and formation of new age-classes and who gave his consent to military expeditions undertaken by the young initiates. No raid was organized without the blessing of the Mugwe on which success depended. In some sub-tribes, the Mugwe is replaced when a new age-class assumes power and the previous one retired. In other sub-tribes, he remains in office during his whole life.

The Mugwe is considered to be the father of his people. In this respect his position resembles that of the elders who are also called "fathers". The Mugwe, however, is very much superior to them, and has to sanction the final decision in important matters taken by their councils.

The best chapters of the book are those dedicated to a discussion of the religious conceptions of the Meru in connection with the Mugwe and the mythological justification of the office. The author succeeds in demonstrating convincingly that the unique position of the Mugwe as the spiritual leader of his people is fundamental to the unity and cohesion of the Meru sub-tribes. The only objection that one could make is the use of the term prophet, this might create confusion with the spiritual leaders of messianic movements elsewhere in Africa who are commonly called prophets too. Moreover, while it is true that the Mugwe is inspired by God, his powers of prediction seem to be limited to such as the issue of a military raid or other minor events.

The author's statements on the political role of the Mugwe are less

clear. The Meru are governed by councils of elders in which the Mugwe can exercise considerable influence. The voice of the latter is decisive in matters regarding the age-classes, warfare and the passing of the sentence of death. The Mugwe does not seem to have much to do with the regulation of small daily affairs. His assistance is invoked only in matters of great public interest when his supernatural sanction are felt to be needed. Bernardi does not specify however what the character of these matters can be and to what extent the Mugwe can enforce his own decision. Neither does he say if there ever was any opposition to the authority of the Mugwe and what precisely is meant by the statement that the political character of this dignitary "could be exploited by strong personalities" (p. 48).

The shortcomings of Bernardi's work in this respect can partly be explained by the fact that the author had to make his enquiries at a time when the position of the Mugwe had considerably declined. One wonders, however, if he could not have obtained more information on the political aspect of the problem if he had limited his investigation to a smaller number of sub-tribes instead of visiting them all.

On the other hand, the political role of the Mugwe is not the most important one. Bernardi states that the legislation and juridical authority of the Mugwe is not stressed by the Meru. The Mugwe is first of all the spiritual leader of his people, and Barnardi has made it sufficiently clear that he was justified in concentrating most of his attention on the religious functions of this dignitary.

A.A. TROUWBORST  
*University of Montreal*

---