

Interpreting Luguru Religious Practice through Colonialist Eyes: Child Sacrifice and East African Dance in Brett Young's *The Crescent Moon*

Frederick Hale
fh243@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

Public perceptions of indigenous African religious life have been heavily influenced by its representation in imaginative literature and film, both before and after serious scholarly investigations yielded detailed analyses in little-read professional journals and other academic publications. While serving as a medical officer in German East Africa (present-day Tanzania) during the First World War, the increasingly popular English novelist and poet Francis Brett Young, who would eventually write nine books set in sub-Saharan Africa and die in Cape Town in 1954, described Luguru religious practices in his widely praised non-fictional account *Marching on Tanga* and his first African novel, *The Crescent Moon*. It is argued in the present article that Brett Young severely misrepresented his subject, not least by ascribing child sacrifice to the Luguru. His presentation of this ostensible dimension of tribal worship as a vestige of transplanted ancient Semitic propitiation rituals is found to be unwarranted.

Keywords: Francis Brett Young, Luguru, African religion, child sacrifice, East Africa, Tanzania, missionaries

The British novelist and poet Francis Brett Young has never received his

scholarly due, and both missiologists and literary critics have almost completely ignored his writing about the confrontation between missionary Christianity and African spirituality. One of his nation's most popular writers of fiction between the world wars, he crafted some thirty novels, four volumes of short stories, collections of poetry, and other works. There were reportedly translations into eleven languages, and some of the novels were adapted into motion pictures. To be sure, the Francis Brett Young Society has valiantly sought to raise and maintain public interest in this relatively—and unjustly – neglected author, and such works as Jacques Leclair's published doctoral thesis (Leclair 1969) and Michael Hall's general study (Hall 1997) have complemented the sympathetic biographies by E.G. Twitchett (Twitchett 1935) and his widow, Jessica Brett Young (Brett Young 1962). Yet most of Brett Young's works have not been explored in depth, and some dimensions of his life also remain largely unfathomed.

The six novels and three nonfictional works set in sub-Saharan Africa remain one of the dark continents of Brett Young scholarship. Published between 1917 and 1952, these books revealed another side of a writer who devoted considerable time living in and writing about the English Midlands. In these nine volumes, he probed a range of themes as the British presence in Africa crested and began to decline. To be sure, in most of these books neither missionary Christianity nor indigenous religious beliefs and practices occupy centre stage. A prominent exception is his novel of 1918, *The Crescent Moon*. Set chiefly in German East Africa (present-day Tanzania) and vividly reflecting Brett Young's own experiences there as a British medical officer during the First World War, this work merits scholarly attention as an example of how an imaginative misrepresentation of African spirituality, in tandem with preconceived attitudes towards African people, became embedded in the writing of a rapidly rising star in the firmament of English letters. How did he come to address the religious life of the Luguru people? What was his inspiration? How did he misrepresent his subject? Did typical colonialist attitudes towards Africa and its indigenous peoples impede his perception of them? A key phrase in the world of German literary criticism reminds us that *darstellen ist immer entstellen* – to portray is always to distort. It will be argued that Brett Young's presentation of Luguru religious practice speculates far beyond the pale of his observations and is apparently a severe distortion thereof, particularly with his inclusion of child sacrifice as a nocturnal ritual.

Pertinent Dimensions of Colonialist Literary Theory

Theoretical literature pertinent to colonialist discourse has grown significantly since the 1970s, and most of it lies beyond the scope of this study. With regard to the history of British literary representation or misrepresentation of Africa, the classic study by Hammond and Jablow, *The Africa That Never Was*, remains useful as a point of departure. To be sure, their generalisations must be taken *cum grano salis*, but it is striking how aptly they summarise certain characteristics of Brett Young's early writing about that continent and its indigenous people, including the spiritual life of the Luguru.

Concerning the depiction of African peoples as such, Jablow and Hammond discovered numerous interlocking features in British characterisations of them in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There was a marked tendency to portray them as 'vestiges of primordial times' and to describe visits to Africa as journeys into prehistory (Hammond & Jablow 1970: 90). Yet the British regarded the Africans not merely as primitive hosts but as lower order people who sorely needed imperial governance, as they were incapable of ruling themselves satisfactorily (Hammond & Jablow 1970: 92). After all, in an age when social Darwinism prevailed in much British thought, the African indigenes seemed to have little intellectual capacity and correspondingly few ethical qualities: 'Morally, too, they were very short of the mark since they were lazy, liars, thieves, cowards, and bullies' (Hammond & Jablow 1970: 96). British writers allegedly gave individuality a wide berth. Instead, 'the Africans . . . shared a tribal psyche, and the conventional stereotypes of tribe and race suffice to portray and to explain the individual. Membership in a tribe confers upon the individual his talents, virtues, and vices; his traits and those of the group are one and the same' (Hammond & Jablow 1970: 128-129). Readers of Brett Young's works about East Africa will find much in them that fits all of this hand-in-glove.

Jablow and Hammond's findings regarding human sacrifice as a primitive ritualistic practice are particularly relevant to the present topic but, as we shall see, do not entirely mesh with *The Crescent Moon*. They stated that early in the nineteenth century British authors witnessed this phenomenon only 'occasionally' but magnified its frequency in their writing. More recently, Hammond and Jablow insisted, 'modern writers have never seen it' but described it 'only as an isolated element' and not a crucial 'ritual

within a total religious system'. Consequently, whatever meaning such sacrifice had was 'sensationalized into a literary fantasy of savage blood lust'. This was one dimension of an attitude which perceived Africans as 'dominated by instincts which make him sensual, cruel, bloodthirsty, unthinking and fear-ridden' (Hammond & Jablow 1970: 139).

Extending their generalisations to a more inclusive scene, Jablow and Hammond professed that 'whenever African religion is discussed, it is presented primarily as phallicism shot through with fear' and as a product of the dark and labyrinthine 'tribal mind' that had created 'religions, rituals, and gods in its own fear-ridden image'. These matters tended to become decontextualised under British pens and dismissed as manifestations of 'savage instinct': 'The writers seize upon aspects of religion and art and detach them from their cultural matrix and their actual significance ritual elements such as sacrifice, cannibalism, drumming, and dancing are moved from their context and so overblown that they are made to represent the totality of African life' (Hammond & Jablow 1970: 139).

Particularly germane to a discussion of *The Crescent Moon*, Hammond and Jablow judged African dancing to be especially prone to European literary responses. Especially British writers struck them as 'amused or appalled spectators' of this activity, and they described it as 'instinctive, an orgiastic shake and shuffle', their own reactions to which they often narrated in detail. Intimately related to this in their narratives was drumming, the one African art which above all others 'captured the imagination of the British writers', who 'transmuted the sound of the drums into the voice of Africa itself' (Hammond & Jablow 1970: 141-142).

A particularly useful concept in subsequent colonialist theory is 'Manicheanism', the notion that writing from imperialistic perspectives tended to bifurcate their own and subordinated cultures into simplistic, dualistic categories, e.g. good and evil, modern and primitive, enlightened and unenlightened, Godly and demonic. In the words of one frequently quoted advocate of this theory, Abdul R. JanMohamed, a native of Kenya, European writing about colonised societies was generally not 'an exploration of the racial Other' but an uncritical affirmation of authors' 'own ethnocentric assumptions'. His statement about their literary creations is particularly applicable to *The Crescent Moon*: 'While the surface of each colonialist text purports to represent specific encounters with specific varieties of the racial Other, the subtext valorizes the superiority of European

cultures, [and] of the collective process that has mediated that representation' (Ashcroft 1998: 134). *Mutatis mutandis*, this fits Brett Young's attitude at the time of the Great War fairly well and, by extension, that of his protagonist's perceptions of Luguru culture, apart from the fact that what that zealous missionary sought to bring to Africa was not simply European but originally of Near Eastern origin, namely the Old and New Testaments as embodied in the variety of Christianity he sought to transmit from British Nonconformity to East Africa. It is suggested here that Brett Young, as a neophyte observer of East African culture, did in fact make a rudimentary attempt to comprehend certain aspects of it which he observed (and described privately as a 'devil dance') but that his efforts in this regard were grossly inadequate for his purposes.

Brett Young's Initial Encounter with East African Spiritual Life

Pertinent biographical facts about Brett Young can be stated briefly. Born at Halesowen west of Birmingham in 1884, he received his medical degree at the University of Birmingham in 1906 and practised for approximately a decade in Devon and elsewhere. Brett Young was also a competent pianist and amateur composer who continued to nurture his interests in music, as did his wife, Jessica. Before the First World War broke out, he launched his literary career on a small scale while remaining primarily a physician. His biographers have described him as at most a nominal Anglican who did not have strong religious beliefs but nevertheless appreciated Worcester Cathedral (in which his ashes are preserved) for aesthetic reasons. At any rate, Brett Young was a keen-eyed observer of human nature, and among the literary strengths of his fiction is the careful and detailed development of his characters, a generalisation which, admittedly, hardly applies to his indigenous African *personae*. By 1916 he had published three novels of modest artistic merit, *Deep Sea* (1914), *The Dark Tower* (1915), and *The Iron Age* (1916).

The Great War gave Brett Young his first exposure to sub-Saharan Africa. On the *RMS Balmoral Castle* and the *HMS Armadale*, the latter then stripped of all luxuries and serving as a troop ship, he sailed first to Cape Town in April 1916 and, after rounding the Cape of Good Hope, called at

Port Elizabeth and Durban before continuing north to steamy Mombasa, which he described as ‘no place for anyone’. His adventures in the East African theatre of war began after landing there on 7 May and continuing by rail through south-eastern British East Africa to an area within sight of Mount Kilimanjaro. A narrative section in one of many of his letters to his wife in England reveals his first encounter with the dimension of indigenous spirituality which he would describe in his memoiristic *Marching on Tanga* and subsequently transform into a different, deadly kind of ritual in *The Crescent Moon*. Strolling along a river, he and a colleague heard drumming in the distance and followed the sound to what he called ‘a small isolated community dancing their devil-dance in a small clearing of the forest’. The participants ‘took no notice’ of the British observers, giving the musically attuned Brett Young an opportunity to record mentally certain details of the ritual as it unfolded before him. Three or four men were beating on a ‘skin drum stretched across the hollow trunk of a tree, each beating in their own cross rhythm [*sic*], yet forming together this insistent pattern.’ It was essentially a recurring three-beat measure, the first of which was stressed. He later depicted it as ‘!.. !.. !.. !.. !..’ To this beat danced an unspecified number of women who struck Brett Young as initially disinterested but who ‘gradually began to jerk their heads from side to side in time with each group of three’. The British physician noticed details of how they then began to sway their torsos while swinging their arms at their sides. These, he believed, were ‘primary movements’ and supplemented by ‘other strange muscular jerks and twitches emphas[i]s[ing] each *separate* beat; so that in the end the whole woman was nothing but a mass of horrible rhythmic [*sic*] convulsions, shaken in every muscular fibre of that incessant devastating impulse’. To Brett Young, as a first-time observer of African dance, it was psychologically overwhelming. ‘I have always thought that rhythm [*sic*], cruelly repeated[,] was maddening. ‘With staring eyes, and bodies possessed [*sic*], these creatures were utterly slaves to those little groups of threes,’ he continued, adding his comments about the captivating relationship between the utterly exotic music and its neurological impact on the dancers. ‘Sometimes they leaned back their heads, still quivering, and clamped their shoulder blades from behind. Sometimes they clutched at their breasts, as if something were burning there, and they cried out horribly aloud. But what ever [*sic*] they did, the poor muscles never stopped twitching, for the music would not allow them, till they fell down exhausted at the foot of the drum, and tried to crawl under it,

as though they must be nearer, nearer to the sound.’ In rudimentary Swahili, Brett Young and his colleague then inquired about the meaning of it all, and the father of the malaria victim who was being exorcised told them that ‘it was meant to drive away the devil’. This Birmingham-educated man of science thought it was in fact ‘the devil of fever, that in that endless swamp was slowing killing them all’¹. Which tribe these people represented he did not say; both the Luguru and related tribes are found in the area where he was at that time.

Apparently within a very few months of this disturbing incident, Brett Young conceived the idea of writing a novel incorporating an East African tribe’s ‘atavistic return to Astarte-worship’, *i.e.* devotion to the Baal goddess Ashtoreth (or Ashtaroth) of the Old Testament together with an element of *ngoma* (East African dance) and reflecting the European fascination of recent decades with the notion that there had been cultural linkages between ancient Hebrews and African gold mines. This possibility occurred to him ‘in the middle of the invasion of German East Africa’, or in mid-1916. Walking with a group of stretcher-bearers, he noticed a pair of beautiful African doves which he believed could be ‘appropriate’ symbols of the birds of Astarte, ‘that dark and cruel deity whose cult, it was said, had invaded Eastern Africa in the days when Solomon and Sheba sent their fleets to search for the gold of Ophir’. Brett Young had not yet visited the ruins of Zimbabwe, but in accordance with widespread belief he assumed that its ‘phallic towers and hawk-headed figurines’ could be a vestige of the religious practice of the Ashtoreth cult. It is entirely conceivable that before he sailed to Africa he had some rudimentary awareness of recent speculation about location of Ophir. The English editions of the dismissed German East African administrator Carl Peters’s books about the subject, *King Solomon’s Golden Ophir* and *The Eldorado of the Ancients* had been published in 1899 and 1902, respectively, as part of a wave of interest in the topic. During Brett Young’s student days in Birmingham, one might note, the United Kingdom had been engaged in a protracted war against ‘Boer’ forces for control of *inter alia* the vast gold resources of the Witwatersrand.

In his preface to the 1935 edition of *The Crescent Moon*, Brett Young acknowledged that with his mind ‘made fanciful by thirst and fatigue’, he had

¹ University of Birmingham Library, Special Collections, Francis Brett Young papers, Francis Brett Young to Jessica Brett Young, 17 May 1916.

begun 'to speculate on the possibility of the dark goddess's cult having survived' in East Africa. From this hypothetical and tenuous skein of eventuality, it was a relatively short leap of fantasy to a fictional work in which 'a German planter of Jewish extraction' would encounter an Africanised remnant of 'the cult that had seduced his Israelite forefathers' and, with 'his mind overstrained by fever and solitude', unconsciously gravitating towards this 'ancestral heresy and finally succumb to its influence'. The notion remained in his mind, and in September 1916 he revealed in a letter to Jessica that he was 'thinking of an awful sombre thing about a missionary in GEA [*i.e.* German East Africa]'. By the end of the year, when convalescent in Nairobi after contracting malaria and breaking his arm in a riding accident while chasing zebras, he began to write *The Crescent Moon*, and he completed the text at Tidworth Camp in Wiltshire a year later (Brett Young 1935: vii-viii).

The merger of this notion with what he had observed in the exorcism yielded the nucleus of *The Crescent Moon*. Brett Young's familiarity with the religious beliefs and practices of the Luguru was extremely limited. He could not speak their language and knew only a smattering of the East African *lingua franca*, Swahili. Moreover, research in written sources was out of the question as the young physician raced to perform his military duties while under physical duress and pressure of time to complete his non-fictional account of his unit's actions against the German forces, *Marching on Tanga*, which was completed in Kenya and published in London in 1917. Even if time had allowed, virtually nothing had been written in English about traditional Luguru religion and little in German. Thomas McVicar's early studies had not yet been drafted (his seminal article 'Wanguru Religion' was published only in 1941 [McVicar 1941: 13-20]), and as late as 1967, half a century after Brett Young had begun to write *The Crescent Moon*, T.O. Beidelton could lament that 'the matrilineal peoples of eastern Tanzania are among the most poorly described of the societies of East Africa, even though they are among those with the earliest and longest contact with alien, literary societies' (Beidelman 1967: ix).

None of these obstacles deterred Brett Young from exercising his creative imagination and extrapolating his observations into a fictional account which went far beyond what he had experienced in his first encounter with the indigenous people of German East Africa.

Scholarly Knowledge of Luguru Religion

There is no doubt that Brett Young arrived in East Africa quite clueless about the religious life of its native peoples, and nothing in what he wrote in or about that region suggests that he ever acquired any noteworthy familiarity with that topic. For that matter, the outside world was almost entirely ignorant of Luguru spirituality until missionary activity in the Luguru area expanded significantly in the 1920s and 1930s. What little had been written before that time was mainly in German, a language of which Brett Young had very little knowledge and for which, one must assume, no sympathy during the Great War while he was writing about his experiences in and reactions to East Africa.

Not until the 1930s did English-language anthropological journals begin to publish descriptions of Luguru society, and for decades thereafter what one could glean from them was sparse and, to some extent, tentative. The brief works of a Catholic missionary, Thomas McVicar, laid the groundwork for more detailed surveys by other scholars. One will search in vain for any mention of child sacrifice which is horrifically described in *The Crescent Moon*.

Among them, a Catholic priest, Joseph Mawinza, published his *The Human Soul: Life and Soul-concept in an East African Mentality. Based on Luguru*, in 1963. He shed much light on Luguru conceptualisations of a high deity, veneration and propitiation of ancestral spirits, and related matters, and he discussed the importance of healings in their religious life, but nothing in his work suggests that human sacrifice was practiced. That said, Mawinza conceded that there were grey areas in what could be known about the Luguru, not only because their religious beliefs and attitudes were not particularly systematic (Mawinza 1963). Nearly thirty years later Peter Pels completed his *A Politics of Presence: Contacts between Missionaries and Waluguru in Late Colonial Tanganyika*. This quasi-historical study illuminated many hitherto tenebrous areas of Luguru spirituality. With at least oblique relevance to Brett Young's observations, Pels commented on the important place of dance in this regard². Again, however, one finds

² Other important studies of dance in that region of Africa include Terence Ranger's detailed *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa, 1890-1970: The Beni Ngoma*. London: Heinemann Educational (1975); John Janzen 1991. 'Doing Ngoma': A Dominant Trope in African Religion and Healing'. *Journal of*

nothing about child sacrifice (Pels 1998).

Brief Plot Synopsis

The yarn Brett Young spun is relatively uncomplicated but rich in suspense. There are elements of ‘melodrama’, as he stated unabashedly in a candid characterisation in his Preface, and some of the *personae* do not rise significantly above the level of stereotypes. One is an unseasoned English missionary of unidentified Free Church background, James Burwarton, who arrives at a remote station in northern German East Africa accompanied by his younger sister, Eva. This naïve young minister is overflowing with a sense of duty to proclaim the Gospel to the Luguru. Cut off from most familiar trappings of Western civilisation, he has one neighbour, a German-Jewish rubber planter, Godovius, whose contrived surname suggests the reverence the Africans in his employ have for him and their willingness to subordinate themselves to his will (‘God over us’). Burwarton has at hand African servants who initially seem loyal to him, and he has inherited from his predecessor at the station a minuscule flock of converts.

In a scene bearing an uncanny resemblance to Brett Young’s previously mentioned encounter with an exorcism with drumming and dancing, and which foreshadows an immeasurably more horrific phenomenon, Burwarton follows the sounds of drumming and a ‘shriek that sounded scarcely human’ in the forest and inadvertently stumbles into a village where a similar ritual apparently has been taking place. He discovers a small cluster of bemused women and one old man ‘with an evil face’ staring at him. On the ground lies a nearly naked girl approximately sixteen years of age who appears to be either asleep or ‘very ill’. This female arises as the drumming resumes. Brett Young’s description of the scene illuminates both the African ritual and the missionary’s inability to cope with it emotionally and need to flee from the scene:

Her hands, which had been sheltering her head, clutched at her breasts. Then, as the faint drumming continued, her head began to

Religion in Africa 21,4: 290-308; and John Janzen 1992. *Ngoma. Discourses of Healing in Central and Southern Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

move in time, her limbs and her body were gradually drawn into the measure of the distant rhythm till, with a steadily increasing violence, each muscle of her slender frame seemed to be obeying this tyrannical influence, so that she was no longer mistress of herself, no longer anything but a mass of quivering, palpitating muscle. A horrible sight . . . very horrible. And then, when her miserable body was so torn that the tortured muscles could bear it no longer, there was wrung from her that ghastly, sub-human cry which James had heard in the forest as he approached (pp. 79-80).

Subsequently, Burwarton meets Godovius at the latter's home and also becomes acquainted with a Scottish hunter, M'Crae, who has extensive experience in Africa and who seeks his assistance in understanding the religious ways of a tribe he has encountered. Burwarton gradually suspects that Godovius is some kind of incarnation of evil but cannot fathom the shady planter's odd psyche, although it becomes increasingly clear that he exercises some kind of spiritual authority over the Africans around him. Eventually Burwarton witnesses a sacrificial ritual after his flock of supposed converts to Christianity has deserted him. Near the end of the novel he is murdered, apparently by rebellious members of his now defunct church.

A Critique of Uncontextualised Missionary Christianity

As a secondary but nevertheless prominent and related theme, Brett Young criticised mercilessly the lack of preparation he perceived among some missionaries and their ostensible failure to adapt to African folkways and mentality the forms in which they sought to convey the Gospel. This is made explicit in the first chapter of *The Crescent Moon* when readers are introduced to James Burwarton. The narrator informs us that the young man felt called to ministry during his school days and had then proceeded to 'North Bromwich Theological College' (Brett Young 1918: 21). At that fictitious institution ('North Bromwich' repeatedly serving as a pseudonym for Birmingham in Brett Young's fiction), he had imbibed Hebrew and New Testament Greek as well as some knowledge of 'the modern pillars of Nonconformity'. His apparently antiquated teachers had made 'a timid glance' at higher criticism of the Bible (Brett Young 1918: 21). The narrator

spares no sarcas in stating that armed only with such theological notions as he had acquired, Burwarton had sallied forth ‘ready to deal with any problem which human passion or savage tradition might put to him’ and that he approached the mission field ‘very much as he might have gone to a Revival meeting in the Black Country’ (Brett Young 1918: 22). Looking ahead, the narrator evaluates the young man’s future woes as partly a consequence of his failure to adapt himself and the way in which he communicated his faith: ‘He had gone there with the wrong sort of religion: with the wrong brand, if you like, of Christianity. You can’t replace a fine exciting business of midnight n’gomas and dancing ceremonies by a sober teaching of Christian ethics, without any exciting ritual attached, without any reasonable dilution with magic or mystery,’ he reasons. Had the inflexible Burwarton taken a cue from the success of other Christian missionaries, his fate might have been different: ‘The Roman [Catholic] missionaries in Africa knew all about that. But James was prepared to sit down in his black coat while a sort of reverent indaba of savages drank in the Sermon on the Mount, and forthwith proceeded to put it into practice. Ritual of any kind was abhorrent to him’ (Brett Young 1918: 22).

Resolution by Way of Eisegesis and Misperception

Brett Young’s fictional resolution of the predicament in which Burwarton finds himself as his minuscule staff and slightly larger congregation disappear and, apparently, have come under the sway of the evil Godovius stretches plausibility. On the Sunday morning when no members of the flock assemble for worship, Burwarton and his sister nevertheless conduct the service in their otherwise deserted sanctuary. *Mirabile dictu*, one of the Scriptural texts he has unwittingly chosen for that day is Psalm 106. The missionary reads verses 36 and 37: ‘*Insomuch that they worshipped their idols, which turned to their own decay; yea, they offered their sons and their daughters unto devils,*’ and Eva responds with verse 38: ‘*And shed innocent blood, even the blood of their sons and their daughters: whom they offered unto the idols of Canaan; and the land was defiled with blood*’ (pp. 216-217).

To Burwarton, this is the genesis of an epiphany. He is immediately certain that what he has observed at the Luguru ritual is a latter-day vestige of this ancient practice, perhaps millennia ago transplanted to East Africa. To

his own amazement, Burwarton has 'picked up the scent'; by a 'lucky mischance' he has chosen Psalm 106, part of which appeared to fit the apostasy of his congregation after its members had become involved in worship of the devilish Godovius. The seeming parallel between the Scriptural text and their conduct triggers his imagination: 'He sat at the table, turning over the worn pages of his Bible, finding everywhere in the songs of the prophets words which strengthened his incredible surmise' (p. 220).

Other recollections of his recent experiences among the Luguru reinforce Burwarton's waxing conviction that he has solved the riddle. Further certitude evolves from his pondering the apparent rôle of the new moon in the hitherto unfathomable ritualistic ways of the Luguru: 'He remembered the young girl in the Waluguru village who had disappeared about the time of the new moon' and also how a boy, Onyango, had cautioned him on the night of a new moon that the people 'would kill him if he were found in the forest'. More pieces of the puzzle fall into place: 'And the heathen inhabitants of Canaan worshipped the moon in abominable rites,' Burwarton remembers from his reading of the Old Testament. Moreover, he recalls from his studies that 'Ashtoreth, the Goddess of Groves, was a moon deity.' Burwarton's memory of a non-Hebrew supernatural being called 'Moloch' is vague, requiring him to turn to the prophet Isaiah. In the thirteenth verse of the first chapter, he reads: *'Bring no more vain oblations: incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting.*

'Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth; they are a trouble to me; I am weary to bear them. . . .' (pp. 220-221).

Not merely the spiritual but also an ostensible ethnic linkage between the ancient Hebrews and the Luguru also comes into focus. Regarding the latter, 'He remembered once that Godovius had told him that they were of Semitic blood, a remnant of those Sabæns whose queen had corrupted the court of Solomon, a fair-skinned people who had sailed to Africa for gold. And Godovius was a Jew. . . . It was plausible, plausible' (p. 222). A further text from the Hebrew Bible augments the credibility. Burwarton recalls that in II Chronicles 28 a certain Anaz had *'burnt incense in the valley of Hinnom and burnt his children in the fire after the abominations of the heathen. . . . He sacrificed also and burnt incense in the high places and on the hills and under every green tree'* (p. 222).

The missionary's theological studies provide further fuel for his

theorising. With ‘a chilly heart’, he thinks about the sacrificing of children to Moloch: ‘These passages, in their mystery, had always seemed to him among the most terrible in the Old Testament.’ Burwarton remembers a lecture in which he had been taught that Moloch was a ‘male counterpart of Ashtoreth or Astarte, the great goddess of fertility’, and that the worship of both of them had actually been ‘ceremonies of homœopathic magic by the practice of which the fertility of fields and cattle might be increased’ (p. 223). Again, the parallels with what he believes the Luguru were up to strike him as compelling.

With this mindset, certain of finally having cut the Gordian knot, and fortified by his unflinching faith in the historic relevance of Scripture to what he has already observed, Burwarton returns one night to the village where he had initially heard drumming and seen the accompanying ‘devil dance’. Brett Young’s description of what the young missionary now witnesses is on a par with some of the most horrifically sanguinary scenes in European writing about African rituals. It is the time of the new moon, and a crescendo of drumming fills the air, although the village seems deserted. Fear fills his psyche. He proceeds to the place near Godovius’s home where he has furtively witnessed shocking rituals. Approaching unseen an open expanse of ground, he finds it filling with people. Concealed in tall spear grass, Burwarton notices a circular kiln around which Luguru men and women are feverishly assembling, carrying bundles of dry fuel. One of many zoological metaphors adds to the alterity of the scene: ‘They ran to and fro like the black ants, which the Swahili call *maji ya moto* (boiling water), from the seething noise which they make when they are disturbed.’ The missionary’s fears about the vestigial character of his departed staff are then fulfilled:

But what most deeply filled the heart of James with dread was the expression of the faces of the naked men and women who danced about the flame. They were not the faces, the pitiable human masks of the Waluguru, but the faces of devils. He saw the transformed features of men whom he knew well: the mouth of the mission boy Hamisi, opened wide in horrible laughter, the red eyes of the headman, M’zinga. M’zinga was carrying the stolen chisel, waving it as his muscles twitched to the rhythm of the drums. He danced right up to the mouth of the kiln, then suddenly collapsed before it, hacking at himself with the sharpened edge till his legs streamed

with blood. James could not see the end of this horror, for a company of sweating fuel-bearers from the depths of the forest swarmed before him, pushing the crowd to right and left. They threw the branches which they had carried on the fire (pp. 230-231).

At this point Burwarton cannot doubt what is in the offing. He notices a young woman carrying an infant nearby and recognises her as the wife of his former employee M'zinga, who 'pulled the baby from the arms of its mother. She clung to it, but the other women tore at her arms, and the rest of the Waluguru snarled. He held the child high above his head in the face of the furnace. The Waluguru shouted. For the moment the sacrifice of Ashtoreth was forgotten. And the white figure of Godovius was Moloch the king' (p. 232).

Conclusion

One can justifiably interpret Brett Young's first novel about Africa as essentially a shocking if uninformed exposé of one dimension of indigenous religious life of indigenes which was generally unfathomable to a newcomer from the United Kingdom. By extension, it can be read as a fictional account of either the virtual incompatibility of missionary Christianity with deeply entrenched Luguru beliefs and practices or at least the gaping chasm between the spiritual life of the Christian and African cultures in question. As such, it fits previously quoted generalisations by Hammond and Jablow hand-in-glove, and to a great extent it also supports JanMohamed's interpretive framework of Manicheanism, despite Brett Young's criticism of naïve missionary attitudes. Yet it is more. The unintentional nexus of *The Crescent Moon* is, *inter alia*, a critique of the willingness of people who are out of their depth to cobble together fragments of evidence and draw unwarranted conclusions about religious phenomena which are simply beyond their ken. In this case, the isolated James Burwarton links his preconceived notions of Africans with superficial observations of their spiritual life and his literalist hermeneutics to interpret what was otherwise too horrific for him to understand.

When one moves outside the text, however, and places it into a broader framework which examines the perspective of the author, we

encounter another grave difficulty. Although Brett Young, by his own testimony (whose fundamental veracity we have no compelling reason to question) witnessed an exorcism shortly after arriving in Africa and described the dancing and accompanying drumming as a ‘devil dance’, there is no reason to believe that he observed child sacrifice. The scene which he described to his publisher as a ‘shocker’ was a figment of his fertile literary imagination, not in any way a narrative of observed religious phenomena. In this regard, Brett Young was no less out of his depth than was James Burwarton.

It was thus a colossal error which perpetuated a false image of East African religion, and as such it contributed to the continuation of a deeply entrenched tradition of British colonialist writing about Africa and its peoples. Quite in accordance with what Hammond and Jablow (and, for that matter, numerous subsequent theoreticians of colonialist discourse) argued, Brett Young fell into the trap of writing about a topic that was far beyond his ken and speculating about it on the basis of limited observations. A sober judgment is that perhaps quite unintentionally he crafted a captivating if in places implausible story focusing on how a neophyte missionary with grossly inadequate knowledge of the people whom he sought to evangelise perceived African tribal people through the lens of his own religious convictions. Brett Young would return repeatedly to that continent, both physically and thematically. His subsequent novels set in two general areas of the continent, especially those which portray South African history, were of a different stripe, resting on quite extensive research and offering a significantly greater degree of verisimilitude than one finds in *The Crescent Moon*. Mercifully, Brett Young did not again take up his pen to write about indigenous African religious life.

References

- Ashcroft, B. *et al.* 1998. *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Beidelman, T.O. 1967. *The Matrilineal Peoples of Eastern Tanzania*. London: International African Institute.
- Brett Young, F. 1917. *Marching on Tanga*. London: W. Collins Sons & Co. Ltd.

Frederick Hale

- Brett Young, F. 1918. *The Crescent Moon*. London: Martin Secker.
- Brett Young, F. 1935. *The Crescent Moon*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.
- Brett Young, J. 1962. *Francis Brett Young. A Biography*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.
- Hall, M. 1997. *Francis Brett Young*. Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press Ltd.
- Hammond, D. & A. Jablow 1970. *The Africa That Never Was: Four Centuries of British Writing about Africa*. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc.
- Leclaire, J. 1969. *Un Témoin de l'Avènement de l'Angleterre Contemporaine: Francis Brett Young*. Rouen: Publications de l'Université de Rouen.
- Mawinza, J. 1963. *The Human Soul: Life and Soul-concept in an East African Mentality. Based on Luguru*. Rome: Pontificia Universitas Urbaniana.
- McVicar, T. 1941. Wanguru Religion. *Primitive Man* 15, 1-2: 13-20.
- Pels, P. 1999. *A Politics of Presence: Contacts between Missionaries and Waluguru in Late Colonial Tanganyika*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers.
- Peters, C. 1902. *The Eldorado of the Ancients*. London: C. Arthur Pearson Ltd.
- Peters, C. 1899. *King Solomon's Golden Ophir*. London: The Leadenhall Press, Ltd.
- Twitchett, E.G. 1935 *Francis Brett Young*. London: Wishart Books Ltd.

Frederick Hale
Extraordinary Professor
North-West University
fh243@cam.ac.uk
profhale@yahoo.com