

A Shocking Toll : In Kenya, Lightning Hits Hard

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KISII, Kenya — A mighty noontime thunderstorm drenched the green slopes here a few days ago and sent a dagger of lightning toward Mary Raita's one-room dry goods store.

Raita, napping inside, and three young women who had taken shelter under the metal eaves outside were killed instantly.

By the next afternoon, the towering clouds had retreated to faraway hills, and a crowd of stoic men and sobbing women were gathered around the blanket-covered bodies. The mourners' faces, although wrinkled in grief, registered little surprise at the manner of death.

Instead, they waited patiently for the village elder and the *amanyansi*, the lightning ritual. No lightning victim may be touched before the *amanyansi*.

These densely populated rural highlands, with huts of grass and metal sprouting like mushrooms on spongy hills more than a mile high, have one of the world's highest lightning death tolls.

30 Killed Annually

Lightning kills about 30 people each year in Kenya, and nearly all of those deaths occur near Kisii in a farming region about half the size of Missouri. (The entire United States records only about 70 lightning deaths a year.)

The tragedy at the store brought the 1987 toll to 23 dead and more than 50 injured. In addition, scores of cattle were killed.

Over the years, folks here have developed a healthy fear of thunderclouds, plus the certain knowledge that lightning sometimes strikes not just twice but perhaps dozens of times.

"We always hide when there is a thunderstorm," said John Nyakundi, a high school teacher. "Like when you see a snake, you don't try to fight it. Lightning can strike anyone. Nobody can tell us why."

Lightning bolts, as much a part of the weather here as sun and rain, are steeped in mysticism and tradition. Don't touch a lightning victim or you will become one, too, it is said. Lizards attract lightning, so stay away from trees with lizards, says traditional wisdom. Similarly, people wearing red shirts are asking for trouble.

Lake Air, Cool Winds

Western Kenya is one of the stormiest places on earth, meteorologists say, because it is wedged on an escarpment between the moist, warm winds of Lake Victoria on the west and the cool, high-altitude winds prevailing year-round from the east.

The cumulonimbus clouds that form in the skies here--10 or more miles tall and highly charged--make fertile farms for hail and lightning.

"As scientists, it is easy to explain what happens in western Kenya," said Alexander L. Alusa, an American-trained cloud physicist and former director of the meteorological department of the Kenyan government. "What is not easy to know is what you can do about it."

Scientists say more people are struck by lightning here than in other areas because their exposure is so great. Large numbers live on mountains, the population is growing at a world-high rate, and metal roofs are becoming increasingly popular for homes and stores.