

LETTER 2

Magistrate's Court, Bamenda. West Africa

21st December 1961

I have had about a week to digest the Léla, the great dance ceremony that takes place in Bali every December in the dry season. It goes on for several days, and enacts the great battles and migrations that overtook the tribe in the course of its history. The first day is largely ritual, and we were unable to witness the initial ceremonies by the river, in which a white cockerel is slaughtered, and two great white banners, symbolic of victory over all enemies and abundance in the fields, are washed in its waters, so that, in the mingling of the two in the current, it is said, the god appears. The cock is then burnt and divided among innocent children. We arrived at the palace of the Fon in time to see the people of the village thronging back from the river, carrying the emblems before them, the great flags aloft, redolent of strife and valour – (until seven years ago, the Léla was very often the prelude to frightful tribal wars) – sustained by the hoarse shouting and ululating of the crowds, bringing to mind, as they stormed up the bluff into the open space, to the throne of the Chief himself, thoughts of some African Ronceval.

We were lucky, for the Fon had invited us to watch the ceremony at his right hand; so we found ourselves for much of the time in the thick of the action. At the first sight of the banners, all the children who had hidden themselves in two factions around the compound, behind trees and bushes, unloosed a shower of 'arrows', then poured from their refuges and amid shouts and whistles mimicked a bloody skirmish. Before long these gave way before an urgent team of counsellors, chosen to bear the emblems and the hereditary clutch of spears, who rushed headlong to our feet, raucously declaiming their allegiance to the Fon, before hurling themselves away to the other side of the kraal. This was repeated thrice, and acknowledged by the Fon by striking a curiously-shaped bell in his hand, until at length the flags were lodged within a palisade at the far end of the compound. Our senses quickened with the excitement that was going on around us, and I find it hard to recall the sequence of all that followed. The noise was tremendous, for in the ensuing representation of ancient wars each man who possessed a gun – and there must have been a good two hundred or so, armed with weird, double-barrelled, flint-locked weapons of German origin, as tall as a man, often embellished with scrolls of silver and a hand juju wrapped around the lock – he would move out into the open, stalking rhythmically, and discharge his ancient blunderbuss with gusto into the earth or sky, before rejoining his fellows.

The furore held within itself, bound together in tortuous patterns, a kernel of rhythm, constantly changing, which could be traced to the group of musicians placed in the centre of the compound beside two jujus or totems, decked with cowries and designs of lizards worked in red and white beads. Each drum possessed an identity of its own, which would strive against and harry its neighbours in nervous contretemps: slim cylinders of light wood with skin of roebuck tautly stretched, scorched before any fires to bring its utterance to frenzy, vying with more sonorous companions, broad of girth and carved round the middle, seasoned and lubricated under the palms of long-dead musicians. These, in their turn, were knit together in the sour-sweet, whiffing tones of a repetitive 'round' scarcely three bars long, which wound itself incessantly

through the fabric, played in several keys at once on a scattering of recorder pipes made from bamboo. Most electrifying was the sudden bray as two heralds lifted to their lips a pair of gigantic elephant tusks the colour of amber, emitting a hollow, stricken roar, the voice of Africa, inflaming men's reason and setting the nerves on edge, which intermittently returned as a burden to this monumental rejoicing. The climax came when the Fon himself descended from his throne, grasped a gun, and with bravura dashed into the ring, firing in all directions, spurred on by the shouts and cries of his people.

The second day of the Léla was not so interesting as the first, since a number of Europeans had been invited by the Fon to watch and we were all given VIP treatment, remaining for most of the afternoon on a balcony in the palace. Whereas on the previous day, surrounded and buffeted by the protagonists, our shoulders jarred by innumerable rifles, and the breath of pine wine rank in our nostrils, Little Pete and myself had been willy-nilly carried away and into the pulse of all that went on around us.

But in some ways the second day was more impressive. Certainly the costumes of the Fon and his courtiers were fabulous: embroidered robes of wonderful variety and splendour; great head-dresses looking like thistles, made up from myriads of cock feathers; and, for the Fon, a regalia from the coffers of some Renaissance prince – a high-tiered cap, orange and green, and a voluminous mantle which lent stature to his already royal figure.

After some preliminary artillery junketing, such as we had seen already, the music asserted itself and the dancers gradually assembled: the Fon's fifty-eight wives in the centre, each holding in her hand a switch made from the tail of an elephant or lion, with which she trounced out the rhythms of the dance, waving it from side to side and permitting herself very little movement of the body apart from an aloof and flexible quiver, slow and lithe, in counterpoint to the steady shuffling of the feet.

Gradually the numbers increased until the square was packed with the multitude, all swaying and nodding, waiting for the moment when the Fon – who had entered the palace to change his clothes – would return and embark on the exhaustive dance which would carry him right round the borders of the compound. He appeared, and, with a blank smile on his face, threw himself into an exaggerated and delirious account of its motions, abandoning himself to the rhythm, quite in contrast to the dignified figure who had welcomed us at noon. From our stations on the balcony we could see the crowds kindle as he passed, the enormous royal parasol, reeling and gyrating above their heads, touching all with its jubilant infection and delight; so that Didy and I, passing through the crush on the way back to the car, were seized in its grip for a full two minutes, rapt in excitement as the golden palanquin nodded by, the Fon, the people, ourselves, all in the throes of the general dance.

A few days later we wished to make some errands on the Bali road, dropping messages and photographs from someone who had worked here during the plebiscite. Big Pete sent us off with a bottle of gin to present to the Fon; but unfortunately we found him away and were entertained instead by his secretary and his first wife. We sat in the cool reception room, talking for a long time – Didy, Little Pete, Fiona and myself – somewhat cowed before three large bottles of lager – luke-warm. Fiona (aged 6) saved the situation and quaffed enough to impress any Fon; but it required considerable tact and manly stamina to overcome the next hospitable barrage: a murky decanter of corn-wine laid before us with a flourish by the first wife, a formidable woman with a dour reputation and a complacent pride in her obnoxious brew. With the first savour our stomachs quailed; Didy's eyes went beady, and she started to fumble with her glass. I realized dully that our honour depended on my being able to despatch mine to the dregs.

At the approach of the Léla every housewife busies herself to furnish the men with enough corn wine to sustain them over three days celebration. Its quality is relative to its freshness, and from a harmless, though unalluring, cordial it quickly ferments, its alcoholic content soars, and within a week it has reached its characteristic potency, concealed, acrid, and deadly. Our beverage had clearly passed its first youth. However by dint of swallowing every mouthful twice, I managed to attain the very lees.

The secretary told us that this was the last day of the Léla, during which the dancers would call at several traditionally chosen houses in the village before being disbanded by the priests at midnight. We went out into the square before the palace, empty now but for the totems standing mysteriously beside a large heap of stones in the centre. The whole clearing was pervaded by such an air of solemnity as to make us think that perhaps it marked an altar or a burial place; and in fact it was on this slightly raised knoll, at the grave of the old Fon, that men came to swear or take sanctuary.

Faintly, from the village, we heard a random fracas of pipes and drums and singing which told us the route the musicians had taken. Passing mud houses, goats and white hens ambling among banana trees, women laying out coloured laundry to dry on the hot grass, we were guided through small paths to a dell, cradled within a scattering of dwellings. The families of the honoured houses were sitting on the slopes drinking mimbo (palm wine) from cow horns which they passed from one to another. Their exuberance, and the way they chafed the musicians squatting beside their drums, made me think of carol parties visiting; and it was only sad most of the young people seemed to be away, in the fields, or unconcerned. There was a lot of laughing and waving and giggling, and when the dancers appeared through the bushes, reeking of corn wine, many got up and joined in, lavishing about as much finesse on the dance as village boys will upon 'The First Nowell'. This easy festivity, entered into by whoever felt inclined, and held in especial and accustomed affection by the old women and herdsman, was much more to our taste than the teeming rout of the day before. So that, when the dance had moved to the next station in the village, Little Pete and I were willingly drawn into the circle, and shuffled and swayed our way around its ranks, fly-switch in hand, until the dance had run its course and it was time to move again. The musicians packed up, stuffing their pipes into the folds of their

robes, shouldering their drums – one man lit a bunch of dry twigs, and held the brand to the face of his – and sauntered off among the trees, uttering a brisk tattoo, a casual arabesque. In the failing light by the old Fon's grave we could still hear clearly the weird, sweet-sounding cacophony enticing us from the distance.

I must describe to you the visit of Little Pete and myself to the Foulani chief at Nkambe. We had been invited to tea by Malem Sheiba, the vet whom we had asked to cure Mumbo our chimpanzee of bronchitis. He had managed to find some penicillin and we were very grateful to him. We went to his house and played chess until it was after dark. Near the end of the game a very tall man, in a burnous and a loosely bound turban, stepped into the room and was introduced to us as Chief Bubu of the Foulani. I should guess he was about thirty-five years of age, though his dignity and regality made it difficult to tell. He had a very beautiful face, rather gaunt and expressive, with a sparse beard on his chin; and though not able to speak any English – it seems that the Moslem community rightly disdains pidgin – he managed to convey great friendliness. Malem asked us if we would like to go and see the Chief's house, which was on the way back to the rest-house. We eagerly accepted the invitation, and were bundled into the back of the Volkswagen, with the Chief looking very bizarre indeed facing the dashboard. It was quite dark now and we were soon plunging down from the six thousand metres or so of Nkambe towards the plain where the Foulanis' live; the kind of mountain road to which we are becoming accustomed, clinging to the edge of the precipice, suddenly writing in snake-like contortions so that, in the euphoria induced by the clouds of red dust, one feels almost as though the car were on the end of a string being hurled about like a yo-yo.

Driving to the camp of the chief of this ancient tribe, night-riding through the plains, with the grass-fires luridly flaring about us; wild grey owls leaping out of the dark; white horns of cattle, nobly poised as though for a ceremony, touched for a moment by our headlights as we passed; the path gradually narrowing, thick grass bowing over us, seemingly impenetrable, choking its way over lolloping dunes the car rounds the corner, and stops. A pause, and then lights appear revealing a palisade, and figures who, while conducting us into the precincts, never show themselves to be more than dark shapes. We take in the low building to which we are being led, built of bamboo with a grass roof, with cross patterns on the wall. Someone comes out of the doorway, whom Malem introduces as the first of the Chief's three wives. We are shown inside and arte presented to his daughters, very beautiful girls, rather gypsy in appearance, with nice, graceful manners. The Chief has disappeared. We don't stay long here and are soon taken next door to the second wife, Didi. We are offered seats, and our eyes are able to become gradually accustomed to the darkness. The only light comes from the little fire which lies in the middle of the room stacked simply on the mud floor. The smoke is pungent and smarts in our eyes until we get used to it. It is very warm and we are quite content merely to look about us, to stare and exchange smiles.

We sat on a bench of bamboo, and Malem, who spoke for us, stood by. I couldn't take my eyes off Didi, and I thought that we had seen her before, at the market, very proud and beautiful, when Didi took a photograph of her. She had in her arms a little boy, Alya, naked but for a splendid piece of jewellery about his neck, heavy pouches

of blackened leather, carved and embossed, holding charms to safeguard his childhood.

We were offered hospitality and a bed for the night if we liked, but we had to refuse as nobody knew where we were. Instead, the Chief brought in a bowl of eggs for us and two cups of sweet hot milk which we enjoyed, not having tasted real milk since we had left England. Didi was fascinated by Pete, his fair skin, pointed nose and slender face conforming to the Foulani conception of the *beau idéal*. She would stare at him for some time and then, quickly and breathlessly, chatter with mischievous eyes and flickering hands to Malem, give way to an uncontrollable gust of laughter, and finally turn, leaning her elbows on her knee, her chin cupped in hand, once more to gaze at us.

Soon presents were brought: a finely made cover for a pot made of coloured beaded raffia for Pete; and, because I had been admiring the handsome spherical shapes of the calabashes glowing in the firelight where they hung from the ceiling swathed in nets, a little bowl, the half of a gourd, for myself. We had seemed to have stayed there for a long time, sipping the milk, huddled round the fire wrapped in its warmth, with the strong smoke losing itself among the blackened rafters, when Malem said that we ought to leave for home. Long farewells, with repeated invitations to return in February and spend some days at the camp hunting on the plain. Much shaking of hands, and ceremonial clapping, accompanied by the curious neighing through the nose, abrupt and slightly questioning, with which the women convey their ancient courtesy. Big Pete said, when we had returned to the rest-house, that we had been favoured in a way that very few Europeans had known.

A strange thing happened the other day as I was reading in the garden. I put down my book and for no reason at all found myself walking round the east corner of the house – a path that is very rarely used, and where tomato plants grow beneath the shade. Like Miss Moberley's spectral reflections at Versailles something seemed wrong with the scene: static and attendant upon events. I looked up at the withered old fruit tree that clings to the wall and was surprised to see what looked like a vivid green hose wrapped about its upper boughs. It seemed so still. And rather too erect at one end. And it was not until it lapsed rather suddenly, shrugged off the branches like a broken necklace, that I stirred myself out of my trance to fetch others. Who duly came, Gregory and the boys, armed with sticks and machetes to rout the snake in its leafy sanctuary. We have since been visited by other snakes, though none so beautiful as our first Green Mamba whose vital statistics (five feet, four inches c.) are now lost to us at the foot of the precipice.