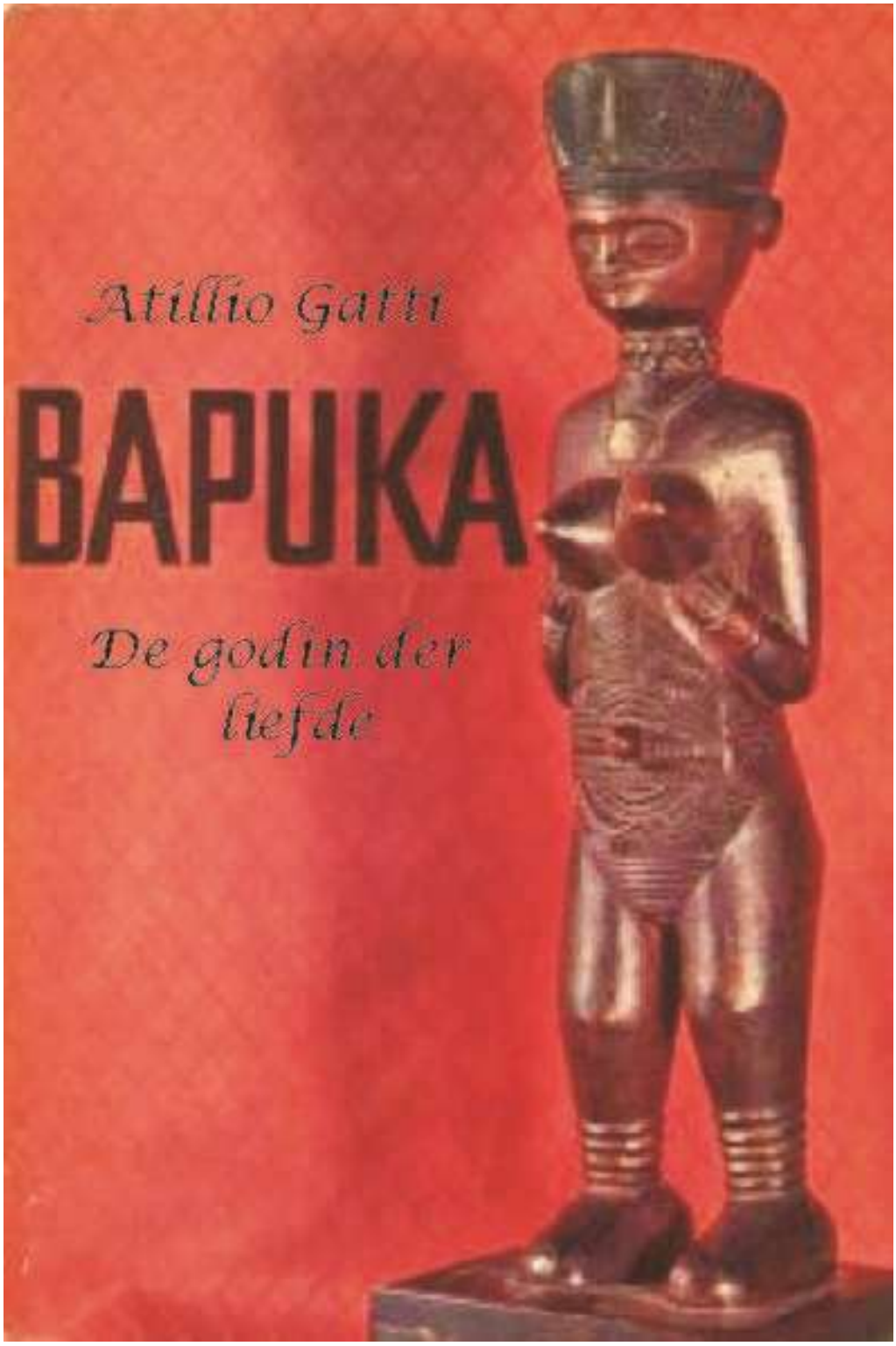
Attilio Gatti: Bapaku, the Goddess of Love

Cover



Foreword by the webmaster

Attilio Gatti (1896–1969) was an Italian-born explorer, author, and documentary filmmaker who traveled extensively throughout Africa during the first half of the 20th century. A member of the Royal Italian Geographical and Anthropological Society, he was one of the last great explorers of the continent. Between 1922 and 1948, he led thirteen expeditions to Africa.



On YouTube, one can view some of the films he made during his travels. In the 1950s-a time when the television set was still a rarity in the average living room-his films, which showcased the continent's indigenous tribes and its rich flora and fauna, attracted a great deal of interest.

Gatti's wife, Ellen, accompanied him starting with his eighth expedition. His tenth expedition (1938–1940) took him through the Belgian Congo, while his eleventh (1947–1948) led him to the Rwenzori Mountains, on the border of Uganda. For many of the local inhabitants-who had never before seen an automobile-it must have been an astonishing sight when a caravan suddenly arrived in their village, consisting of passenger cars, large trailers, and trucks, which then set up camp in an open space nearby.

Commander Gatti was among the first Europeans to encounter the then-legendary okapi, as well as the virtually unknown bongo-a brown, lyre-horned

antelope with white stripes-and he even managed to capture a few specimens to donate to a zoo. Known among the African people as “Bwana Makubwa” (“Great Chief”), he was deeply familiar with the Pygmy peoples, as well as the Tutsi and Maasai tribes of the Congo.

During his travels, he encountered, among others, Twadekili-a clairvoyant and magically gifted shaman-who shared her hut and her life with her companion: a giant python. Just as the energies of plants can heal certain ailments, the same-perhaps even more potently-applies to the energies of animals, provided one knows how to harness them.

Gatti, who was rather skeptical by nature, repeatedly witnessed magical rituals-the likes of which we would today find almost impossible to believe-and recorded them faithfully, employing the keen, practiced eye of a skeptic. These accounts remain rare and valuable testimonies of cultures that, while now lost, were once remarkably rich and had withstood the passage of centuries.

Gatti authored numerous articles and books on the indigenous peoples living south of the equator; he often spoke their languages and maintained strong relationships with local figures, including tribal chiefs and medicine men. He documented African life through a series of films and more than 53,000 photographs. His records offer a wealth of scientific and anthropological material concerning various cultures as they existed in their original, pristine environments.

Following contact with Western European and North American civilization, these cultures have all but vanished. Their centuries-old magical practices, healing traditions, and profound insights into life may well be lost forever. The world is undoubtedly much the poorer for it-a truly great tragedy.

Gatti, Attilio; Bapuka

Translated from the American edition by Susanne Ullrich. Includes 32 illustrations based on photographs by the author. Zurich: Orell Füssli, 1963.

With thanks to the publisher Orell Füssli for granting permission to publish the text and the image from the book.

Book cover text

The reaction of a clear-headed European to the strange, mysterious and often utterly inexplicable phenomena of African life is one of skepticism and deep distrust towards anything that appears supernatural or magical.

He shrugs his shoulders: there must be some trick behind it. Not so Gatti. He has spent too long and investigated too thoroughly, and has experienced too many strange things on the Dark Continent, to be able to dismiss them with a shrug.

With profound seriousness and a certain pensiveness, he now recounts all those mysterious experiences from his thirty years in Africa. His descriptions are not only exciting and colorful, but also so convincing that we must agree with him: not everything is deception, and the African possesses sensory faculties that sometimes surpass our own.

His sense of direction, his powerful intuition and the astonishing instances of telepathy that Gatti describes here are truly impressive. The subtle story of the love goddess Bapuka, whom the serious researcher follows into the murderous swamps of an unexplored region because he simply has to follow her (and almost becomes her devotee), is told with the charm we have come to expect from this warm-hearted and sensitive writer.

Translator's Note

The book dates from 1963 and should therefore be read and understood within the context of the era -a time still heavily colored by a colonial perspective. Certain terms that were commonplace back then would not be used today. Nevertheless, we have chosen to translate the original text as faithfully as possible; it is not our place to alter Gatti's choice of language.

That said, his book Bapuka - much like his other works, and especially the way he engages with Skaimunga - reveals an open-minded approach and a genuinely warm regard for Black African culture. This is an attitude that, unfortunately, cannot be attributed to all of his contemporaries.

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Bapuka, the Goddess of Love

1. Bapuka: a goddess full of mystery

Long ago, Bapuka came into my possession. Perhaps it would be more correct to say instead that she, this ancient and barbaric goddess of love, source of life and fountain of bliss, took possession of me when we first met in the distant past.

Be that as it may, the fact remains that ever since then she has always been an important element in my life, enriching it in lavish measure with precisely that love, life and happiness which her name promised. And that is not all. Her unfailing, benevolent influence, coupled with the indelible memory of the dramatic circumstances of our first encounter, has had another profound effect. Ellen, my wife, and I have never forgotten, even for a moment, the role Bapuka played when she so unexpectedly brought us together in marriage. Naturally, this made us more than ever drawn to everything connected with those mighty phenomena which are usually lumped together indiscriminately - and rarely without an incredulous, condescending smile - under the rigid classifications of magic, witchcraft, native medicine, benevolent or evil sorcery, and so forth.

That is why, throughout our wonderful life in Africa, Ellen and I never missed an opportunity to investigate and study this particularly important aspect of the lives of the black tribes, whom we loved so sincerely and whom we did our utmost to understand properly. It is also why we never regretted for a single moment the often considerable sacrifices of time, patience and hardship normally demanded of us whenever we wished to add a new example of such 'mysteries' to our collection, and above all to follow each one through to its final conclusion. For whenever it seemed humanly possible, we were determined not merely to record every new case in its entirety, but also to try to catch at least a fleeting glimpse of its underlying psychological motives and

explain its workings in terms that would be understandable even to other people who were not as deeply fascinated by the subject as we were.

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One must not imagine that, along this arduous and difficult path, we never encountered more or less disguised fraud. Of course we did. But sooner or later, as events unfolded, we recognized it for what it was and promptly abandoned our investigation. On other occasions, to our astonishment, the exact opposite was revealed. What we witnessed with our own eyes seemed too fantastic, too unbelievably wonderful to be true. Then we investigated tirelessly and calmly searched for even the faintest trace of sleight of hand or deception. Yet in most of these cases we were compelled to arrive at the awe-inspiring conclusion that our senses had witnessed neither a mirage nor a miracle, but simply the actual, unmistakable manifestation of a mind which, from the standpoint of some of our conventional ideas, might appear primitive, yet was nourished by knowledge and guided by a wisdom that seemed impossible only because it extended far beyond the limits of our own understanding - an understanding confined, as it is, by the walls erected by the education, civilization and so-called sophistication of the white race. Whenever the slightest shadow of disbelief still lingered in our hearts, all we had to do was fix our eyes upon the enigmatic smile of our Bapuka, from whom we never parted. And then even the last vestige of doubt would dissolve completely, just as a light mist is dispersed by powerful rays of sunshine.

Naturally, the mere suggestion that this centuries-old, beautifully carved statuette made of rare wood might possess supernatural powers of its own could seem absurd to a sceptic. Yet it is my considered opinion and firm conviction that this ancient idol exerted a powerful influence on the course of our lives and saved both of us time and again.

Of course, it has occurred to me more than once that the events which led me to encounter Bapuka might simply have been a chain of coincidences, and that everything that happened after she came into my possession (or after she took possession of me) might have been nothing more than a coincidence as well. I would, however, be a despicable liar if I claimed that I had ever placed the slightest faith in such an explanation.

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Indeed, today - if such a thing is possible - I am even more firmly convinced than ever that this little statuette reflects some of the supernatural powers and extraordinary sensory faculties possessed by the Great Bapuka statue (of which my own is a lovingly crafted replica), enhanced by the wisdom of the sorcerers who, since time immemorial, have served as the consecrated high priests of her cult. For only a very short time ago, Bapuka 'spoke' to me once again - at precisely the moment when the darkest and most terrible tragedy of my entire life descended upon me.

But more of that later. All I wish to make clear here and now is that, although this book has its origins many years in the past, it is not intended merely to tell an old story. If, however, I am to do what I intend - to recount every fact faithfully and without embellishment, exactly as it happened, so that the reader may form his own opinion - then I must begin with the time when the whole affair first began. From there, we shall travel together through time and across a considerable part of the world, right up to the present day and the charming little Swiss town of Lugano, where this book was written.

2. Gatti saves Skaimunga from the crocodiles

It was on a swelteringly hot early afternoon in November 1928 that I received my first fleeting yet deeply moving impression of Skaimunga. Needless to say, at that moment I had not the slightest idea that this unknown, wild-looking native was destined to become the instrument through which the far-reaching hand of chance, a small twist of fate or - as I am more inclined to believe - the inscrutable influence of a distant, barbaric goddess had chosen to bring about the revelation of Bapuka, which was soon to follow.

I had not the faintest idea who Skaimunga was. In fact, circumstances were such that, in the normal course of events, I should never have learned that anyone by such a name existed, much less have become acquainted with the man who bore it. But no. On that very day, by pure chance, I broke the established rule which I, like practically every white man in Equatorial Africa, conscientiously observed: after lunch, to devote about an hour to the sacred siesta, however much one might sweat or feel uncomfortable.

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We were aboard the Kigoma. She was a paddle steamer originally from America, from the Mississippi. Around 1907, she had been purchased second-hand by a daring Belgian company, cut into sections, shipped to Matadi in the

Belgian Congo, transported across the Crystal Mountains and then reassembled in the Stanley Pool shipyards at Leopoldville. From those scattered fragments had emerged the proud flagship of the Congo fleet.

The Kigoma had three decks: first, second and third class. At the bow, these were surmounted by a shorter deck, where the Belgian captain lived with his wife, struggled with an endless flood of official paperwork and kept a constant, watchful eye on the native helmsman.

What on earth was I doing up there, standing aft on the scorching-hot roof of the first-class deck, when everyone might reasonably have assumed that I, like every other white passenger aboard, was enjoying a sound and healthy sleep? Why had I chosen this unusual time and this unusual spot to take photographs of crocodiles and hippopotamuses slipping from the sandbanks into the water as the ship approached? Surely those same scenes could have been photographed far more comfortably from the covered first-class deck, at almost any hour of the morning or afternoon. But, more to the point: why had I asked myself these very same questions at least half a dozen times since everyone had retired after lunch, and why had I nevertheless been unable to make up my mind to retire as well?

I do not know.

All I know for certain is this: had I done the conventional thing, had I behaved as was expected of me and gone to sleep in my cabin, or had I been able to make up my mind in my usual fashion - that is, much too quickly, if at all - then Skaimunga, instead of quietly entering my life, would have fallen into the terrible jaws of a crocodile and been swallowed by the monster. The captain would, of course, have been informed later, but far too late to intervene and offer any help. In all likelihood, he would have conducted a superficial investigation. A brief entry would then have been added to the Kigoma's logbook, something to the following effect: that at approximately 2.30 p.m. a native - name unknown, tribe unknown, origin unknown - had jumped or fallen into the river (cause unknown), where crocodiles had seized and devoured him before any attempt at rescue could be made.

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We passengers would never have heard a word about the accident. Even if we had, there would have been nothing we could do except shrug our shoulders and say, “Oh, the poor devil!” In any case, nothing would have

happened to alter my plans. My expedition would have continued southward as planned. Naturally, I would never have seen the “Swamps of Mystery.” A father would still be mourning the disappearance of his only son. And the goddess Bapuka would never have entered my life-with what consequences, I dare not even imagine.

As it was, however, I felt that I had now taken enough photographs of the monsters that were still extraordinarily numerous in the river at that time. And I had just reached the conclusion that I would be a complete fool if I stayed up there any longer without a sound reason. Even my stuffy cabin, with its humming, old-fashioned fan, must have seemed like an oasis in the desert compared with the infernal heat on that deck with its sheet-metal roof. Then a series of strange noises made me stop.

I leaned out as far as I dared and discovered that the disturbing sounds were coming up from the lowest deck, the third-class deck, where the native passengers were crowded together in the small space left free by the ship’s machinery, the boilers, and the stacks of wood used as fuel. Now I could hear better. And it did not take me long to understand what kind of disturbance it was. There was the crack of a whip, its blow against bare flesh, followed by a faint, frightened groan.

What was happening down there was, of course, no concern of mine.

Had I been Dr. Cicogna, the scientific leader of my expedition, I would have raised my eyebrows in disgust and walked away without hesitation to take the nap I had intended. One should not imagine that he was a man without compassion. But he lived only for his work and would not tolerate anything that interrupted it or disturbed him during the little rest he allowed himself.

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Had I been Charles, our cameraman, or Bob or Walt, our mechanics-good, pleasant young men, but inexperienced and impulsive-I would have rushed downstairs and punched the person wielding the whip, whoever he might have been, in the face. To be honest, that was also my first impulse. But suppose it was a Belgian official administering the punishment, or an overseer appointed by the captain? Or suppose the native being subjected to this barbaric treatment had in fact committed a serious crime? In either case, my intervention would not only have been unwelcome but entirely unjustified. It would also have been deeply resented. And it might have had the most serious

consequences for our undertaking, perhaps even resulting in all of us being expelled from the colony at once.

Since the responsibility for the expedition rested on my shoulders, and I had the experience of several years spent in Africa in my blood, I forced myself to think before acting. Besides, something about the whole affair was quite plainly wrong.

What was it?

The merciless flogging continued grimly. A crack, a blow, a groan. A crack, a blow, a groan.

It was enough to make one feel sick. But then, every prolonged and severe flogging I had witnessed in one colony or another had been equally repulsive, even when it was entirely legal. Apart from a few extreme cases, it had always struck me as foolish, brutal cruelty-and as a punishment that was certainly not generally necessary. I had proved this to my complete satisfaction by maintaining good discipline at all times in my camps and on my safaris, without ever having to threaten physical punishment, let alone actually administer it, to the hundreds upon hundreds of native workers and porters in my employ.

But what was so particularly disturbing about this case?

At the very moment I asked myself that question again, the answer flashed through my mind. “At every flogging I had witnessed, all the natives present had always accompanied each stroke of the whip with loud cries. Perhaps they were trying to encourage the culprit if they considered the punishment just. Or making humorous remarks if he failed to endure it stoically. Or voicing angry comments if the crowd thought he did not deserve it. In every case, there had always been plenty of loud shouting, laughter, or screaming. But now, apart from those sickening sounds and the muffled pounding of the machinery on the lower deck, there was a sinister silence.”

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Why were the ship’s crew and the passengers crowded together down there behaving so strangely? Particularly when the flogging was being carried on so cruelly, so mercilessly, and for such an unusually long time? A Negro overseer might easily have been so cruel to someone of his own race, but in that case

the onlookers would have rebelled against him long ago-at least by shouting their protests. It must therefore have been a white man. And if that was so, he had to be a man whom all the natives down there feared and hated so intensely that they were cowed into silence. The captain was out of the question. He was a huge, rough, ponderous Fleming, but he was fair, just, and respected. He might perhaps have been capable, on an impulse, of striking an insolent native, but he would never have been capable of ordering a flogging like this. Besides, I knew for certain that he was resting. I had seen the engineer and the maître d'hôtel-cashier, the only two other white members of the crew, hurry off to their cabins half an hour earlier. And they certainly would not have dared to stage such a spectacle-not under this strict captain. Who could it be, then?...

The relentless flogging stopped abruptly.

"Parle, sale cochon!" a hoarse voice rasped. "Speak, you filthy pig!" The voice was rough with anger, but kept as quiet as possible, obviously for fear of being overheard. Yet I recognized it at once. It was the voice of a dwarf of very doubtful, mixed French ancestry. He was a rather repulsive African version of a beachcomber-an ivory trader whom too long a life in the tropics and marriage to a dreadful native woman had reduced to rags, and who tried to hold himself together by constantly pouring down enormous quantities of beer.

The day before, a filthy little rowing boat that had come down one of the Congo's tributaries from the interior had brought him aboard. When the Kigoma had turned towards it to take him on board, we had all been astonished by the quantity of his luggage. His two surly, miserable-looking boys were struggling with stack after stack of tin trunks. Then one of the trunks began to slide and fell to the deck. Its lid sprang open, and amid general laughter dozens of beer bottles spilled out and rolled all over the deck. Behind each bottle raced a native, amid bursts of delighted laughter.

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The merriment, however, was short-lived.

"If you break one of those bottles," the mean little upstart had shouted at his boys, "I'll break your bones for it!" Then, turning to the others, he said: "Come on, pick up those bottles, all of you. And hurry!"

There was so much venom in his voice that the natives fell silent at once, and everyone except the two boys stood rooted to the spot, astonished. “Come on, pick up those bottles!” the little man shouted again, threatening an old former sailor with a raised hippopotamus-hide whip. “Hurry up, you pigs!”

We were all furious. But the captain was quicker than our anger. Before we knew what was happening, he had appeared on the lower deck. His ham-like hand came sweeping down, seized the Frenchman by the shoulder, and gave him a shove. “One more word,” he said calmly, “and I’ll throw you, together with your damned trunks, to the crocodiles.”

We watched the little man look up at the enormous Fleming, keeping his mouth firmly shut. We saw him glance at the crocodiles swimming beneath the surface of the water, and then at the expressionless faces of the natives standing motionless all around. A curse escaped his weak, dissolute mouth, and he tried to wrench himself free. After a while the captain let him go. But not before ordering him: “Go to your cabin and stay there. Until I give you permission to leave it again.”

Another curse, and the scoundrel was gone. At the captain’s command, all the natives present had helped carry the bottles and trunks to the second deck, near the cabin into which the hateful little man had disappeared.

All this now flashed back through my mind. Had the Frenchman sneaked out, in defiance of the captain’s orders? Now that he could be sure everyone was asleep? To vent his anger on his poor, helpless boys? Or on some member of the ship’s crew?

“Parle, sale cochon,” his voice rasped again. And once more the whip cracked, once more blows fell on bare flesh, and once more they were answered by a faint groan. This time it was too much. Quickly I took the strap of my camera from around my neck. “I’ll put it down here,” I thought, “run downstairs and punch him in the face!”

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But I was still holding my camera when I heard an angry shout and the rapid patter of bare feet on steel plates. My eyes caught a fleeting glimpse of a completely naked man, covered in sweat and blood, running towards the water. As he leapt into the river, my fingers pressed the shutter release involuntarily. “Captain! Man overboard!” I shouted, as I ran to my cabin.

I doubt it took me twenty seconds. But by the time I had seized my largest rifle and reached the railing, two crocodile heads were already approaching a desperately struggling human figure from opposite directions. I fired twice. “Quickly!” I shouted as I reloaded. “The current is too strong for him!”

I fired twice again. Then I heard the deck telegraph ringing repeatedly. The Kigoma came to a puffing halt and began to turn. From the lower deck came muffled curses in French. Then a native spoke in a sharp, commanding voice. Dozens of black figures leapt into the foaming, bloodstained water and swam noisily towards the spot where a shaven head had last appeared above the surface. Too late? No. Bill, Walt, and Charlie joined me in their crumpled pajamas just as a limp, lifeless body, its chest marked with ugly circular red welts, was hauled aboard. A few meters farther away, a violent commotion broke out in the water. Deprived of their human prey, the other crocodiles were already devouring the two monsters I had killed or wounded.

3. Skaimunga is rescued from his cruel master.

The shabby, pitiful little secret that had assumed such exaggerated proportions during the monotonous journey on a Congo steamer was quickly brought to light by the A.T. of Luka-Lela, the Territorial Administrator of the small, neat government post that we reached early the following morning.

Skaimunga, who had been treated by the captain and cared for by members of the ship’s crew, had recovered sufficiently from both the prolonged flogging and his desperate leap into the water to be present at the judicial inquiry. The moment he saw me, he greeted me respectfully by clapping his hands. His life, he declared, which I had saved, belonged entirely to me. It was mine, and I could dispose of it as I pleased. That would be so, he added, from the moment he had finished paying off his debt to the French white man.

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The Frenchman, whom the captain had locked in a secure cabin from the moment my shouts and rifle shots had raised the alarm, was sober for once and stubbornly refused to answer even a single question until he could obtain the assistance of a lawyer and the French consul in Leopoldville. For this reason, he completely ignored Skaimunga’s remark and every word spoken by the A.T. But the latter wanted to hear the truth, and he learned it piece by

piece from Skaimunga's calm, intelligent, dignified answers, each and every one of which was confirmed without hesitation by the Frenchman's other boy.

To put it briefly, the Frenchman had induced both boys to sell themselves to him, in a manner of speaking, as slaves. It was his usual system. He paid them ridiculously low wages, literally forced worthless trinkets on them at outrageous prices, and also falsified the figures in whatever way best suited his purposes. In this way he managed to make his boys toil for him, convinced that they were perpetually in his debt and that the police would pursue them if they ran away before paying what they still supposedly "owed" him. Tired of his vicious abuse, the whims of his native wife, and his frequent outbursts of savage brutality, no boy had ever stayed with him for long. Despite all his threats of police and prison, each one had slipped away after a few weeks of this hell and sought refuge in the most remote territories of his own tribe.

Skaimunga seemed to be the sole exception. To the astonishment of the other boy, who had been with the Frenchman for only ten or twelve days and was already planning to escape at the first opportunity, Skaimunga had stayed for many years. Apparently, he had never received his wages in actual money, but only occasional items of little value, such as a badly worn blanket, a cheap shirt, a pair of old shorts, or some musty tobacco.

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In his simple mind, he could not understand why, under these circumstances, he should still owe many francs. But he was a man of honor. And since his master claimed that he was in his debt, he would not leave him until those debts, which he could not explain, had been paid in full.

'Not even now?' the A.T. asked incredulously from the judge's bench. 'Now, after your master beat you so badly that he drove you to certain death?'

'No,' Skaimunga replied simply. 'Running away is not becoming of an honest man. And I regret having done so. But I could not answer my master's questions. I knew he would beat me again and again. So pain and despair drove me into the water. But now I shall work for my master until my debt has been paid. Then I shall work for the white man who saved my life - and my honor.' And he nodded humbly in my direction.

Of course, we were all deeply moved and astonished. One does not hear words of such noble feeling every day, whether in Africa or anywhere else. Only a man of the highest birth, of the most distinguished blood and with a glorious racial tradition, could feel in this way and express himself so naturally, yet so impressively.

Who, then, was this Skaimunga? Where had he come from, this warrior with the shaven skull, whose appearance was so unlike that of any other native in the Belgian Congo whom I had ever known? What did those elaborate, strange tattoos on his body mean? How had such a proud black gentleman come to be the slave of a beachcomber? What did all this have to do with the question his master kept asking him, or with the answer that no amount of torture could force out of him?

'I do not know,' Skaimunga repeated. 'I do not know.'

And it was impossible to doubt his sincerity or to misread the honest bewilderment in his decent, courageous, dark-brown eyes.

We took him to be about twenty-five. But he knew neither when nor where he had been born. Nor did he know who his parents, his tribespeople or his chiefs were. He did not know who had made the tattoos on his body, or what they meant. He did not know when or how he had entered his master's service, or why the latter insisted that his head should always be shaved. He did not even know what his master was actually trying to learn from him whenever he was excessively drunk, or why he was beaten so cruelly simply because he could not say something he did not know.

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'Gold or silver? Diamonds or emeralds? Mountains of ivory?' his master would demand of him during such outbursts of rage.

'Tell me what your tribe is hiding. And where! Speak, you filthy pig!' And again and again he brought the whip crashing down upon him.

It was always the same. But what could Skaimunga answer when he had nothing, absolutely nothing, to say? After all, apart from ivory, he did not even know what his master's words meant. Gold, silver, diamonds, emeralds? What were they?

But we knew those words all too well. It was not difficult to imagine what was going through the Frenchman's mind as he sat sulking on a chair, his unshaven face repulsively ugly, his lips pressed into a thin, stubborn line. During his few moments of complete sobriety, he had noticed the same features that had told us Skaimunga belonged to some distant, little-known tribe. Those features might have been even more conspicuous if accompanied by an unfamiliar hairstyle. So the Frenchman had made sure that his boy's head was frequently shaved, for fear that another white man might notice him and discover what he himself had so far failed to uncover. The idea had first occurred to him during one of his customary bouts of drunkenness. Gradually, he became convinced that Skaimunga refused to reveal the name of his tribe because it was hiding some great treasure that he wished to keep for himself. During his wildest fits of rage, this fixed idea became an overpowering obsession. Then he would try to whip an answer out of the poor young man whom he had maneuvered into a state of slave-like, perpetual indebtedness.

'But,' I asked Skaimunga gently, 'can you not at least tell me where your father's country lies? Or anything about how you left it?'

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'That is where I was born,' he replied, pointing to the southwest, 'but very, very far from here. All I remember is the wailing of many women, being driven forward by stern men in long white robes. And the glint of chains, the taste of bitter tears, the slow cooling and stiffening of a woman's tender arms. That is what I remember, and how a rough hand then seized me, tore me from the arms of my dead mother and beat me until I lost consciousness. I swear that I remember nothing more,' he added eagerly. 'I swear it by the holy name of Bapuka.'

By this time, the captain of the «Kigoma» had become restless. He grumbled something about schedules, missing connections, the necessity of avoiding any delay under all circumstances in the mail his ship was carrying, and so on. The A.T. agreed with him and quickly made a decision. The Frenchman was to remain at the police station until instructions arrived from Leopoldville, the capital of the colony. The «Kigoma» could continue her journey as soon as the man's baggage had been unloaded. The two native boys were also to remain behind as witnesses.



1. The boat ‘Kigoma’ on the Congo River.





2. Skaimunga with his blanket, after his hair had grown a little.
3. In the picture on the right: during the escape.



4. Upon our arrival in Leali, we met Yeta III (with his lion-like mane and little cap).



5. The two 'government canoes' that Yeta III hurriedly sent to fetch the district commissioner.

“Can't I take Skaimunga with me?” I asked on impulse. “If necessary, he can be questioned later, when we reach Leopoldville.”

“Certainly, if he wishes. And,” the A.T. added hopefully, “provided he does not wish to press charges.”

When Skaimunga was asked directly, he seemed overjoyed. No, he would not press charges. But what about the debts, then? They amounted to nearly 40 francs...

At that time, this sum was equivalent to about a dollar and a few cents. Even at the low wages paid to the natives, it represented only a small advance on a week's pay. Skaimunga was astonished by my explanation. Perhaps he could not believe it, for he modestly asked whether I would settle the matter myself. To save time and further discussion, I pressed this considerable sum into the Frenchman's hand. He stared at the two 20-franc notes as though he could not understand what it all meant. Then, furiously, he tore them to pieces, threw them onto the floor, and spat on them, still without saying a word.

But Skaimunga was already gone. Within a few minutes we were back aboard the ship; the siren of the «Kigoma» sounded three hurried blasts. And we set off.

“Later,” I told Skaimunga, “I shall buy you clothes and blankets. In the meantime, I have instructed the man in charge of the ship's crew to give you all the food you need. Now forget the ill-treatment you suffered at the hands of a white man who was sick in his head. And forget your debts and the whipping. Forget it all-and rest.”

17

“I shall rest and forget,” he said to me. “So that I may grow strong and work for you. For you are not only my master. You are my father, and all the blessings of Bapuka will gather above your head.”

4. Skaimunga tells of the goddess Bapuka.

“Bapuka,” I repeated to myself that night. “Bapuka.”

There was something familiar about the name Skaimunga had mentioned twice. Dr. Cicogna was my cabin companion, and the heat was keeping him awake too. I asked him.

“It must be some kind of spirit or forest god,” he replied. “I have never heard of it.”

Perhaps, then, I was mistaken. Yet I could not get that name out of my mind. Nor could I resist trying to recall something else Skaimunga had said. At the moment he spoke, it had struck a familiar chord. Then the questioning had continued, other matters had claimed my attention, and now I was unable to remember those strange words.

“Listen, Doctor…” I began.

But there was no answer.

“All right,” I thought, “tomorrow I shall have a long conversation with Skaimunga and find out.”

And with that, I too fell asleep.

The following day I had so much to do that I gave the matter no further thought. Two days later we reached Leopoldville. Unloading all our equipment, dealing with the various authorities, gathering together about twenty of my former boys-each of whom I had to extract from the confusion of his own little family-and coping with financial and tax difficulties made a week fly by.

Another hectic week followed. I had distributed uniforms and woollen blankets, assigned and explained each boy's particular task, purchased fresh supplies, and set the entire expedition in motion along the difficult road to Chitadi, Kanda, Bukama, Elizabethville, and the Rhodesian border.

The following month was sheer hell.

18

The authorities had warned us that the road was “difficult.” What they had neglected to tell us was that the new road was passable only in stretches-and even then, barely.

Between one such stretch and another, we discovered, there was nothing but steep mountains, enormous rivers, dozens of streams without bridges, vast areas of untouched jungle, and deserted, treacherous expanses of sand, rock, or mud.

Springs broke and had to be replaced. Cars became stuck and had to be pulled out. Trucks sank into the mud and had to be completely unloaded before we could push them back onto solid ground.

Whenever I began a job, someone would come rushing to fetch me. As soon as I had overcome one difficulty, ten new ones descended upon me. In between, I snatched a quick bite to eat and took a short nap. The rest of the time, it seemed to me, I was constantly running back and forth, day and night.

When at last we reached Sakania-Christmas and New Year's Eve having passed without our even noticing them-I was a wreck. We had arrived at the border between the southernmost province of Belgian Congo, that very Katanga which now so frequently filled the newspaper columns, and the northernmost province of Northern Rhodesia.

My four companions and our Africans were hardly any better off.

Therefore, as soon as we had got all our equipment through customs, I decided to set up camp near the little town of Ndola and stay there for about ten days, so that we could rest and gather some fresh strength for the long safari still ahead of us.

It was only toward the end of that brief period of peace and well-being that I became aware once more of Skaimunga's presence.

The task I had assigned him as soon as we had left Leopoldville was to keep the camp constantly supplied with generous quantities of fresh meat.

For a native of his kind, this had seemed to me a more dignified task than performing little servant's duties in or around a tent.

He had not only fully appreciated my consideration, but had also proved as reliable as I had judged him to be-and more besides.

19

How he managed it, I do not know. But no matter how early we set out, how hard he had worked throughout the day-building bridges, pushing cars, unloading and reloading trucks-or how late we stopped to make camp, every evening the story was the same.

Within about an hour, Skaimunga would usually return, laden with freshly killed game.

If the country seemed to us absolutely devoid of game, that made not the slightest difference.

Before the kitchen had been set up and all the tents pitched, Skaimunga would bring in an antelope, a couple of gazelles, or a fat warthog.

When I rose from a refreshing afternoon nap that day, Skaimunga was standing before me, holding three fine guinea fowl in each hand.

“These,” he said, “are for my father and his white friends. Plenty of other meat is already roasting over the natives’ fires.”

He looked exhausted. He was covered in mud, sweat, and scratches. Yet his eyes shone like those of a faithful dog that has just accomplished something of which its master would be proud. I reckoned that, to obtain these guinea fowl, he must have travelled farther than we could cover in a full day’s journey. He must have gone so far because the country around us was the poorest in game I had seen for a very, very long time. I would have given any other boy a present for such exertion. With Skaimunga, however, I felt that sincere praise and an expression of my appreciation would be worth more than any gift. He was the kind of man who impressed you as a human being - naked, primitive, poor, and alone in the world as he was.

“Nothing I can do for my father is too much,” he replied with his customary modest dignity. “And Bapuka always helps the righteous man who trusts in her.”

A righteous man! That was the expression that had tormented me that night on the Congo River! And now Skaimunga had used it again.

“Skaimunga,” I said in sudden excitement, “think carefully. The Baila and the Mashukolumbwe, near the place where the Kafue flows into the great Zambezi, are the only people who call themselves ‘the righteous men.’ And

now try to remember: they worshipped a goddess whom they call Bapugha. They believe that her father, Monze, is the mighty rain god, and that he lives in the 'Smoke that Thunders,' in the great cataracts that white men call the Victoria Falls.

Is your Bapuka not the same goddess? Was your father not a Baila or a Mashukolumbwe?"

20

Dr. Cicogna's voice rang out cheerfully from the neighbouring tent. "Damn it," he cried, "you've guessed it! Just look at his hair. It hasn't had enough time to grow yet, but instinctively he wears it like a Mashukolumbwe. That's why the French scoundrel wanted him to go about with a shaven head."

He emerged from his tent and continued, "And the way he hunts! No one but a Mashukolumbwe could be such an excellent, swift hunter. Skaimunga," he said to the boy, "just a few more days, and we'll be in the territory of your own people. Aren't you happy?"

Skaimunga was anything but happy. His body was rigidly upright. His brow was furrowed, and his eyes were closed, as though he were delving deep into the mists of his forgotten past. His face had taken on a greyish hue - the pallor of a black man. Both the doctor and I were considerably disturbed by the boy's strange attitude. What could be wrong with him?

"No, Musungu," he said at last. "I do not know the Baila. Nor the Mashukolumbwe. And the goddess I worship cannot be the Bapugha of the Baila. Her name is Bapuka; I know that for certain, because my mother often told me about her when I was a little child. I do not know where. But the 'Smoke that Thunders' is down there," he said, pointing south, "while I - I believe I was born there - exactly where the sun sets."

His left hand, still holding the three guinea fowl, pointed straight west. His eyes gazed in that direction with an expression of infinite longing. Twice he opened his mouth as though he wished to say more, but then he shook his head and fell silent.

"What is it, Skaimunga?" I asked him. "Would you perhaps rather leave me and go alone to the place where you were born? If that is what you want, I

will give you food, money, and a letter for all the white men in the administration."

"No, Musungu," he said solemnly. "Bapuka did not let my sorrowful path cross yours. Only Bapuka can now separate these paths again in happiness. I know it - because she speaks to me, many times."

A chuckle rose in the doctor's throat. That meant he was about to burst into one of his rib-shaking fits of laughter.

21

My elbow dug into his ribs, and he kept quiet.

"How does she speak to you?" I asked Skaimunga.

"In dreams," he answered, somewhat confused, as though he had sensed the doctor's disbelief. Then he said, "And now, Father, I will take these birds to the cook, so they do not spoil."

With that, he almost ran to the kitchen.

The doctor was deeply offended. "Must you break my ribs? Just to spare that boy's feelings?"

"You do not understand what this is about," I said to him. "It is not merely that Skaimunga is entirely serious and such a dependable, dignified man. I also have a premonition - that is what it is. I had it when he first mentioned the goddess Bapuka. It is stronger, clearer now. Don't you understand? If she is not the Bapugha of the Baila, if she is not a spirit or a deity known to you, to me, or to the local missionaries and officials - and we can check the latter very quickly - then this might point to a cult still unknown to the West. Perhaps it means an entire tribe whose existence has not yet been discovered. A tribe living in some part of this vast, young country into which no one has yet penetrated. Can't you see what possibilities that opens up?"

Give the doctor something to get his teeth into; hold something undiscovered before his long, pointed nose, and he will forget everything else and throw himself at it at once.

Two minutes later he was dressed and ordering one of our native drivers to take him to the Commissioner of the Ndola District.

5. On the way to the mysterious swamps

Two hours later the doctor returned, beaming with delight, and began spreading large-scale maps out before me.

“Nobody knows the slightest thing about this Bapuka! Just take a look at this map, which I borrowed from the District Commissioner. See? Nothing but blank spaces! Just a few names of Barotse villages along the Zambezi. Just a few little dots to mark what is believed to be the approximate course of the Lutembwe River. Believed, I say, because nobody has travelled more than a few miles up it.

22

The District Commissioner knew that perfectly well. Beyond that, there is nothing, although the region forms part of the province of Barotseland. Nothing, I tell you. Not a living soul that anyone knows of. It is even assumed that there is no solid ground there. Nothing at all, only pestilential, impassable swamps. The natives call them the ‘Swamps of Mystery’. They stretch all the way west, as far as the purely imaginary boundary with Portuguese Angola, and probably beyond it.”

Now that my premonition seemed to be coming true, at least in part, I suddenly began to have second thoughts.

“Well,” I said, “if there is nothing there but swamps, I don’t see much point in risking our lives simply to explore them. Do you? Just because they are still marked as blank spaces on the maps?”

This time it was the doctor’s turn to be persistent.

“But my dear fellow,” he pleaded, “nobody has ever travelled that way. Nobody. I have just established that in the small library of the District Commissioner. No one has ever made that journey: not the Portuguese explorer Lacerda, who in 1789 led the very first party of white men into the region now known as Northern Rhodesia; not the two Portuguese traders who followed in his footsteps a few years later and, like him, were forced to stop at Kasembe; nor Dr Livingstone, when he discovered and named the Victoria

Falls in 1855. As you know, it is true that he travelled through part of Barotseland. But he never got that far, and he too had to turn back. Besides," he added, with a mischievous gleam in his eyes, "have you suddenly lost faith in your beloved Skaimunga? Do you no longer believe in his magnificent goddess?"

In short, three days later, instead of following our previously planned route southwards, which was to take us to Salisbury and Bulawayo, then across the Transvaal to Swaziland and Natal, we were speeding towards Broken Hill. There we left the road. And then, with our hands clasped in prayer - metaphorically speaking - we began jolting due west across trackless country, over the inhospitable Kawandi and Mankoya plateaux of Barotseland. We fervently hoped that our vehicles would survive this terrible ordeal and that we would reach the Zambezi lowlands without suffering any serious mishap. For there lay Lealui, the official residence of Yeta III, the then king of the Barotse, the only man who could help us with our suddenly conceived undertaking - provided we could persuade him to do so.

23

But would he do it? And was Skaimunga pleased with the change in our route? Ridiculous as it may seem, we could not even answer those questions.

Throughout all those days as we crossed the plateaux, Skaimunga remained not only silent and expressionless, but seemed even to avoid us. And, to be perfectly honest, I did not have the courage to confront him and ask what he was feeling and why he was behaving so strangely.

I felt that, after having been treated for years as a human being of the third rank by that dreadful ivory trader, he might be weary of it all and react with suspicion if we kept questioning him. And there was more to it than that. On the strength of my African experience, I had made a vow never to torment him for nothing, since, however much he might have wished to do everything for me, he would not have been able to understand my questions - any more than he had understood the old, hateful questions about emeralds and diamonds. A suspicion that would later prove correct.

Nevertheless, duty came first with Skaimunga. Naturally, his principal task in this region, so sparsely inhabited and so rich in game of every kind, was easier. As soon as we stopped to make camp for the night, Skaimunga would set off, spear, bow, and arrows in hand. A few minutes later we would

usually hear the sound of the buffalo horn he wore around his neck. Some of our boys would then run to him and soon return, laden with meat for us all.

What Skaimunga did after fulfilling his duty as a hunter, nobody knew. Perhaps the shy local inhabitants, who had been frightened into hiding by the noisy approach of our motor caravan, would emerge from the bush because of him and talk to him freely. Or perhaps he simply sought solitude in order to put his secret thoughts in order and make sense of them.

Looking back today, I believe the second explanation was the more likely. Some instinct compelled him to concentrate intensely on the tiny fragment of knowledge or memory he possessed, while at the same time freeing his mind of every other impression and feeling. He wanted to be ready to receive fully and interpret correctly some immensely important message which, as he somehow sensed, was taking shape and being released towards him from the black mist of a great distance.

24

Of course, on my part this could have been no more than an impression formed in retrospect. Yet the fact remained that Skaimunga seldom returned before nightfall and often stayed away until the early hours of the morning. As soon as the loading began, he was there. He invariably performed his share of the work punctually, and more than that. Afterwards, while waiting for the signal to depart, and later during the day whenever we stopped for a brief rest, he would sit by himself somewhere. The other boys ate, chatted, and perhaps played some kind of dice game of their own.

He, on the other hand, kept at a distance, his gaze usually fixed unwaveringly towards the west - tense, anxiously waiting for something, silent and motionless as a statue.

This continued until we reached Lealui.

I still remember our arrival in the native capital of Barotseland quite clearly. It was early afternoon, but we were all utterly exhausted and soaked to the skin. The cause was not merely the incessant rain of the preceding days. Ever since the previous morning, when we had descended from the plateau, our vehicles had not so much driven as literally had to navigate their way forward. The low, more or less level floor of the Barotse Valley was almost entirely flooded. Here and there, small rises of ground still emerged above the

water. Some were crowned by a miserable little village, apparently deserted for the duration of the rainy season; others by a solitary, gigantic baobab, sixteen to twenty meters high and thirty meters or more in circumference.

Our cars and lorries had to move blindly and at a snail's pace from one rounded hilltop to another, crossing an endless expanse of yellow, muddy water. From time to time the leading lorry, on whose roof I had taken up my precarious and swaying position as an observer, would drop into a small, invisible hollow and come to an abrupt halt. Its chain-fitted wheels squealed angrily but uselessly. The water in the radiator boiled and hissed. The second lorry then had to help pull the first one out, only to get into trouble itself. Then every man and every vehicle had to be brought into action. And after hours of sweating, shouting, and pushing, we were moving again - until the next hole!

25

During our first day on the flooded plain, we had covered a distance of 22 kilometers in fourteen hours. On the second day, working like men possessed from sunrise until eleven o'clock, we managed 9.5 kilometers. At last, a hill larger than the others appeared on the hazy horizon. When we saw that it was crowned by a sizeable native settlement which seemed to be inhabited, our spirits rose so much that we covered the final three to five kilometers in three hours. At last we climbed onto solid ground, muddy and slippery though it was, and drove up to a large village - Lealui.

A tall native approached us, wearing on his head a straw hat decorated with a lion's mane. A group of chiefs followed behind him. He wore a European blouse and a brightly colored scarf with extraordinary dignity. His face and gestures expressed such a mixture of delighted surprise and cheerful pleasure that our spirits immediately lifted.

“If the king is so pleased to see us,” I said to the doctor, “there is a good chance that he will eventually help us.”

As we shook hands with King Yeta III, his courtiers, witch doctors, and chiefs, hundreds of warriors streamed out of their sharply pointed huts and gathered around us. They raised their spears in welcome and shouted greetings to us at the top of their voices.

This exuberant warmth and general good humor changed abruptly at the very moment the doctor mentioned the Lutembwe River.

Of course, it was typical of him to go straight for his objective, without allowing anything to interfere with his plans. But I could have strangled him. Before he had even finished explaining that we wanted canoes and paddlers to travel up the Zambezi as far as the mouth of the Lungwebumgu, and then to proceed up the Lungwebumgu and the Lutembwe itself, into the swamps lying between those two rivers, an icy silence suddenly descended all around us.

Yeta's face seemed to stiffen and grow hard. I tried to dispel the awkwardness with a joke, but nobody laughed. Then I began, in a casual manner, to list the many presents we had brought for the King of the Barotse and his elders, making it quite clear that we were not offering him these gifts because we wanted anything from him, but solely as a mark of homage.

26

My speech seemed at least to give Yeta an opportunity to regain his composure and calm. He completely ignored the doctor's request. In reply to my words, he expressed his thanks with restrained courtesy. Then he said that, as a first gesture of honor to us, a great dance would be held as soon as the rain stopped, which usually happened for a few hours shortly before sunset.

He then gave his elders a few brief instructions. None of us understood the language he used. But the manner in which he spoke gave us the impression that he was merely issuing perfectly ordinary directions concerning the dance that was to take place.

6. Mysterious disappearances

Some of the elders hurried away. The others, together with all the armed warriors, surrounded us and drove us, with King Yeta among us, almost like a flock of sheep towards his residence. When we arrived there, I turned round before entering the Great Hut to shout instructions to my head boy about where the vehicles were to be parked and where the camp was to be pitched. It was purely by chance that I noticed two large canoes - they looked to me like government canoes - speeding away from the foot of the hill in a south-easterly direction.

‘Where are those canoes going?’ I asked King Yeta. ‘And why are they in such a hurry?’

‘I see no canoe,’ he replied, although his head was turned precisely in that direction. Yet he was not lying. For before turning that way, he had firmly closed his eyes. This shows how cunning a Barotse can be, and how scrupulously he will nevertheless cling to the truth, even when he intends to lead someone astray.

While Bob and Walt went to the lorries to fetch the blankets, umbrellas, pipes, cigarettes, fishhooks and various other things, as I had instructed them, we entered the Great Hut alone, together with the king and his highest dignitaries. There followed generous libations, accompanied by an exchange of elaborate courtesies and gifts. The king's gifts consisted of a few giggling young women (which we politely declined), firewood, milk, goats and chickens (which we gladly accepted). This continued until the rain stopped. Then, from the veranda of the royal residence, we watched the dancing for a good hour and a half. All the men, women and children threw themselves into it with tireless enthusiasm.

27

Yeta III was a perfect host. Perhaps a little too perfect for my taste. I could not imagine where the canoes had gone. But it did not take much to realize that their mission had, in the end, nothing whatever to do with the dancing. Nor was it difficult to see that the king was making every effort to entertain us and keep us occupied, simply to prevent us from finding another opportunity to speak of our plans. Even the doctor took the hint, and we kept quiet, waiting for a suitable opportunity.

That opportunity did indeed present itself soon, but in a quite different way from what we had expected.

‘I am sorry, my dear fellows,’ said a cultivated British voice behind us, speaking in a sharply accented tone, ‘but it simply cannot be arranged.’

Now we knew where Yeta had sent the two canoes in such haste: to Mongu. They had travelled seven miles across the flooded plains to fetch the man who, as Yeta had shrewdly realized, was the only person capable of dissuading us from our undertaking: the Provincial Commissioner of Barotseland.

The Provincial Commissioner was very pleasant, very polite, but very firm. He was not one of those people who beat about the bush. Clearly, the king's messengers had told him what we wanted. And he was determined to frustrate our intentions on the spot.

'In the last two years,' he said, 'seven white men have gone up there to prospect, hunt, or establish trading relations with the natives. And imagine this: they did not even go very far. They spent only a few weeks along the banks of this stretch of the Zambezi, to the north of here. And they all came back. But then, one after another, they died of a malignant fever which none of our doctors has so far been able to cure. Something is badly wrong, I tell you. And we have decided to close this entire area to white men.'

'But,' I objected, 'what about those "Swamps of Mystery"? Surely your government ought to be delighted that we wish to explore them? Without any expense or trouble to you? You know that mere curiosity is not what is driving us there. We have travelled all the way from Broken Hill to get here because I have a strong premonition that we shall find something extraordinarily interesting there.'

28

'Will you please listen to me,' said the Provincial Commissioner.

'We do not care a damn what is or is not in those swamps. I firmly believe there is absolutely nothing there. But if I let you go, you will all fall seriously ill, and some of you will die. And then I shall have a great deal of trouble on my hands. As for your premonition…'

The Provincial Commissioner paused and looked around. Only then did we notice that King Yeta had discreetly disappeared, along with all the dancers. The rain began again, falling upon the silent, far too silent village.

'Let us go to my tent,' I said. 'And you,' I ordered Bob, Walter and Charles, 'eat a good supper and get plenty of rest.'

A servant brought us drinks: Scotch whisky and filtered water.

'Don't tell me anything about premonitions,' the Provincial Commissioner continued. 'Last year one of my youngest magistrates said exactly the same

thing. He had a premonition. He insisted so strongly that I finally let him go. And do you know what happened to him?'

'I am listening. What happened to him?'

'Nobody knows. He simply never came back. And yet he was a strong, athletic young man with years of colonial service behind him. He was resourceful and was respected and loved by the natives. He came here, obtained canoes and paddlers from Yeta, and reached the village of Noyo, seventy-five miles farther north. There he dealt with a government matter with the village elder. While a particularly severe attack of fever, which he believed to be malaria, kept him delirious in bed, the villagers went away. Only the seventeen paddlers, trustworthy young men from Yeta's own bodyguard, stayed with him. Eventually the magistrate began to feel better. It was difficult to persuade the paddlers, but he did manage to get them to take him up the Lungwebungu as far as the hamlet of Semusha. Another attack of fever stopped him there. He had further difficulties with the local natives and with the paddlers. But that magistrate was a determined man. One early morning they left Semusha. And that is the last we ever heard of them.'

'Do you mean that they all disappeared?'

'That is exactly what happened. I went to Semusha myself and took Yeta with me.'

29

I never fully recovered from that infernal journey. And we could discover nothing: not the slightest piece of information, not a trace; no body was found, nor any personal belonging. Nothing at all - except for the brief note the magistrate had left behind, which he had pinned with a knife to one of the poles of the hut where he had spent the night. We had the impression that a bottomless void had opened up before us and all around us. We lost many of the local people on that journey. The others returned just as ill as Yeta and I. I therefore regret to have to tell you that I can no longer allow any white men to venture into that hell. At least, not while I hold this post.'

The doctor and I brought forward every argument we could think of: our experience of Africa, the sound organization of our expedition, the resources at our disposal, and the precautions we could and certainly would take. I even offered to sign a declaration absolving the Provincial Commissioner in advance

of all responsibility and exonerating the government from any blame should anything happen to us.

But he merely shook his head. 'I am afraid my answer concerning the swamps is absolutely final. However,' he added hesitantly, 'I will do something quite exceptional for you. If you promise not to go beyond Semusha, I shall allow the two of you, together with whatever boys you need, to travel as far as that village. I will even give you every possible assistance with the local people.'

It was better than nothing, and I hastily accepted his offer. 'You have our word that we will not go beyond Semusha,' I promised. 'Not while you hold this post,' I added, trying to conceal my disappointment behind a feeble joke.

'Quite fair,' the Provincial Commissioner agreed. 'In any case, I shall be here for a good many years yet.' He then announced that, in order to 'assist' us - not, of course, to keep a constant watch on us in his stead - he would provide us with two African corporals from the Northern Rhodesian Military Police, as it was then called. 'I shall send the men to you this evening,' he said, 'in the same canoe that is about to take me straight back to Mongu.'

30

We tried to persuade him to stay the night, or at least to have dinner with us. But he would have none of it. 'This raincoat really is waterproof,' he said. 'And the natives keep good fires burning in the boats. Above all, I know that I shall soon have another attack of fever. And when that happens, I would rather be in my own bed, with my boys around me and the doctor close at hand. Not that he could do much for me, but you know how it is…'

And with that he went off, out into the pouring rain, leaving us in the gloomy mood of utter dejection.

7. The dangerous journey to Semusha

For one reason or another, our former enthusiasm had cooled so much that the doctor and I began over dinner one of those endless, foolish arguments that never reach a satisfactory conclusion. Each person does little more than contradict the other - and himself - dredges up the most absurd arguments, and, the more he does so, the angrier, more illogical and more insulting he becomes.

At last we had to call upon what little humor we had left to recognize that sheer exhaustion, discouragement and nervousness were making us talk ourselves into a corner.

Whether our journey had been worth the effort, or whether we had been risking our necks for nothing, no longer mattered. Having pressed the Provincial Commissioner so hard to wring permission from him, we now simply had to go to Semusha. Whether we liked it or not. Damn it all! How could we have backed out of this without becoming the laughingstock of the whole colony?

'Well,' I concluded, 'let's go to bed. Tomorrow we'll make plans and so on.'

The following morning was the gloomiest and most dispiriting I had ever experienced. Despite the long sleep, we were still utterly exhausted. Our bones ached terribly. Our spirits had become literally damp and depressed under the relentless downpours. The two military police corporals finished us off.

31

When they reported to us, they greeted us curtly.

'We have said goodbye to our families,' one of them said mournfully. 'Goodbye for ever.'

'Not one of your boys is willing to make the journey,' said the other, even more gloomily. 'Not one, except a man called Skaimunga.'

'In less than a month,' the first added, 'the floods will be so high that no vehicle will be able to cross the plains.' The second raised his right hand to the level of the canopy of the nearest lorry. 'The floodwaters,' he said, 'will reach up to here. And they will not go down for three or four moons. Only by canoe will the Musungu be able to leave the country. That is to say, those who may still be alive.'

This drew a cry from Dr. Cicogna. 'My collections!' he groaned. 'Two lorry-loads!' 'My films,' Charles lamented as soon as he understood. 'In this diabolical humidity, we shall not be able to save half a meter of them if we have to take them out of the lorry's dehydrator. Ten thousand meters of exposed negatives - and every last one of them will be ruined!'

Much as I wished to keep our word to the Provincial Commissioner, it looked as though we should have to abandon our plan. To risk all our films and all our collections was simply too dangerous.

I called Bob and Walt over. 'Do you think we could get ready to start back in a day or two?' I asked them.

They looked at me as though they thought I had taken leave of my senses.

'Good heavens!' cried Bob. 'We can't possibly set off without first taking every vehicle apart. We'll be lucky if we can manage it in fourteen days - and even that I doubt.'

'And if,' Walt added indignantly, 'those monkeys of boys don't deign to give us proper help, even three weeks won't be enough. Look here.' With that, he put into my hands a six-page list of repairs and replacements that he and Bob had drawn up the previous evening.

That naturally changed the whole situation once again. If the rough treatment our cars and lorries had endured now forced us to postpone our return for so long, then we might just as well fit in the journey to Semusha in the meantime.

32

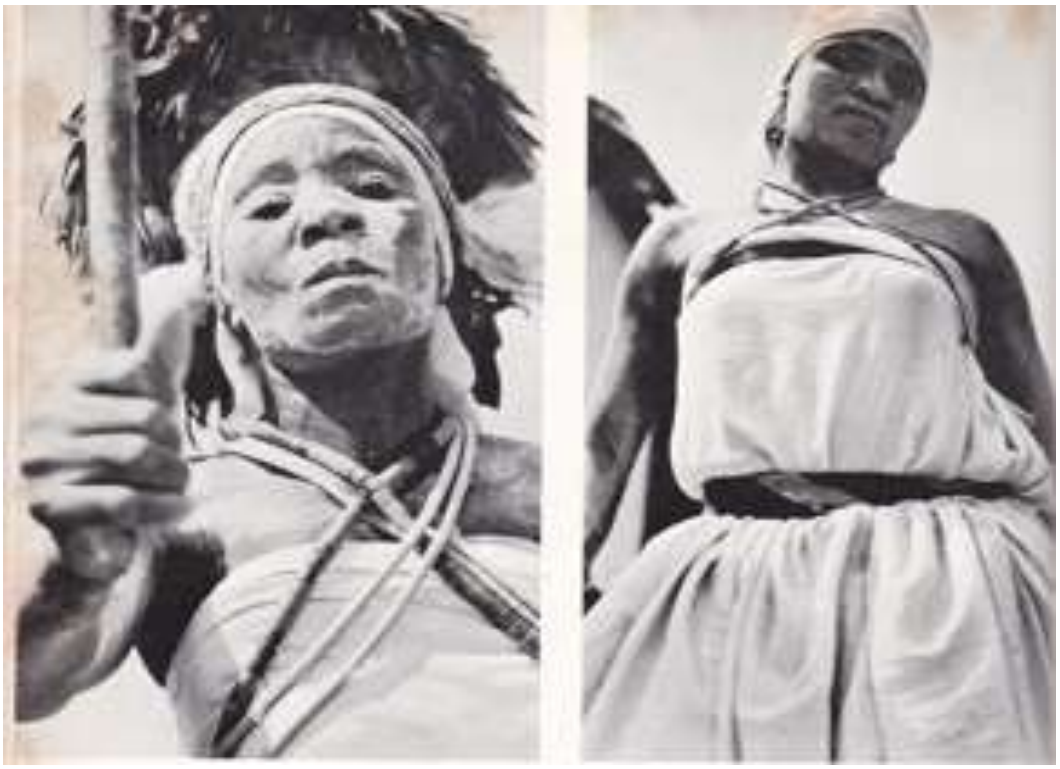
As so often happens in such circumstances, our mood swung from excessive pessimism to an equally excessive optimism. How long would it take us altogether to travel seventy-five miles up the Zambezi? And then another fifty or so miles up the Lutembwe? If we restricted our luggage to the absolute essentials, the journey, given the way Yeta's sturdy paddlers sent a canoe shooting through the water, ought not to take more than six days. If Semusha proved dull, we could leave again at once. The return journey, downstream, would take five days. Allowing a little extra time, two weeks in all. That was precisely the minimum time Bob and Walt needed. Even if Semusha proved so interesting that it held us there for about a week, we could still be back in Lealui before the end of February, out of the lowlands and up onto the high plateau before the floods reached their peak. By the middle of March, when the Zambezi Valley would become completely impassable, we could already be far away, travelling along the safe, good roads of Southern Rhodesia...



6. The ‘pleasures’ of travelling in a small canoe.



7. Whenever possible, we stayed under our mosquito nets, in the vain hope of escaping the fever.



8. Skaimunga's father, the high priest of the Bapuka.
9. On the right, one of the white female spirits.



10. Building one of the pontoons with which we intended to transport our vehicles to higher, dry ground.

It was as though everything fitted into this scheme and conspired to persuade us to undertake the journey - only a few minutes after we had decided to abandon it.

'All right,' I concluded, with mixed feelings. 'Let's get to work at once. After all, today is the first of February. We must hurry, all of us. And be ready to leave tomorrow morning.'

We set to work with great enthusiasm. The boys were pleasantly surprised that I did not even try to change their minds and persuade them to come along. They worked with extraordinary zeal and efficiency. Skaimunga threw himself into the work with his customary eagerness. He even persuaded the two corporals to lend a hand, although it was not part of their duties. King Yeta had to shout, threaten and thunder for quite some time before he finally assembled a sufficient number of paddlers. They were plainly irritated and in a bad temper. But there was little those poor devils could do against the will of their own king.

I had not expected us to manage it. But the following day we really did set off. The doctor sat in the leading canoe with a police officer and twelve paddlers. I sat with Skaimunga and the same number of paddlers in a second canoe. A third boat, commanded by the second corporal and manned by fourteen paddlers, was the largest and most heavily laden. It carried our luggage and some food supplies for the Africans.

33

My diary entry of 2 February reads:

'I always thought there was nothing more delightful than travelling by canoe. No effort required. A smooth, swift journey. The landscape unfolds peacefully in all its beauty.

Good heavens!

But where on earth is the landscape? All I have seen all day is water. Water, water, water. Above, below, all around us. It pours down on us without interruption, seeps through every pore and soaks us to the skin. And - not a soul in sight. Nothing but water and rain, rain and water. From eight o'clock in the morning until late afternoon, when we finally find a small rise of ground where we can set up camp.

Water runs out of the bedding. The badly prepared food makes us feel sick. In the air (if one can call this thick, soupy mist "air"), countless mosquitoes are buzzing about. Our native paddlers snore so loudly that sleep is out of the question. A stray leopard emerges from the dense undergrowth and, in the middle of the night, leaps at a native paddler who is standing near the fire, which has been extinguished by the rain. The native paddler would have been finished too, had it not been for Skaimunga's spear.'

The diary pages for 3, 4, 5 and 6 February are immaculately white.

The entry for 7 February reads:

'We reached Noyo this afternoon at four o'clock, two days later than expected.

The preceding days were exact repetitions of 2 February. The only difference: the effortless canoe journey has left my back feeling as though it were broken. All my muscles are cramped, my bones feel calcified and ready to snap.

And no more leopards. Yesterday, however, a lively hippopotamus silently dived underneath our first canoe. Through the dense fog I caught a blurred glimpse of the canoe rising upright, higher and higher. I thought I was seeing ghosts. The shouts of the doctor's native paddlers convinced me otherwise. The canoe capsized, throwing everyone into the water. The doctor's rifle was lost. "The hippopotamus took it away to use as a toothpick," he protested in his defence. The fact is that he is delirious with fever. His temperature is over 41 degrees. I do not know how much higher, because our fever thermometer stop there, although the mercury itself seems to disagree.

34

I am pleased that the chief of Noyo has prepared a new, spacious and very large hut for us. I cannot understand how he knew we were arriving, since I have neither heard the sound of a jungle drum nor seen a single native during all these days. We pitched our tents inside the hut. But the mosquitoes here have stings a mile long. They can pierce the thatched roof of the hut, the double roof of the tent, the mosquito net, our pajamas and everything else. Well, never mind. Perhaps I too am delirious with fever.'

10 February:

'I was delirious. I have no idea what happened during the last three days. The nightmare began with me nursing the doctor and ended this morning with the doctor nursing me. I have never witnessed or experienced such a violent fever. It was hell! Without Skaimunga's unfailing devotion and tireless attentiveness, I do not know where we would be. Now, he says, we shall have no further attack of fever for six days. Why? Both corporals confirm it. They say: "Hurry on to Semusha, because in two days' time we shall both be ill as well." Things just keep getting better!

14 February:

'Crocodiles, hippopotamuses, leopards, snakes. Rain, rain, rain. Why the devil did we ever come to Semusha? I'll be damned if I know. Arrived today at six o'clock in the evening. A miserable little village, offering nothing of interest. Miserable, surly natives, terrified to death for one reason or another. Twenty-two of the thirty-eight paddlers are down with fever. The corporals too (just as predicted).

This fever seems to follow regular cycles. Three days of insanely high temperature and convulsive delirium. Three days of exhaustion (after a few such attacks, these are replaced by three days of coma). Three days of relative well-being. Then it either skips you or stops. Or it starts all over again. Or it kills you. Splendid prospects.

Skaimunga advises us to wait a few days, because the remaining paddlers will soon be laid low as well. He himself, however, will not. Is he immune? Why? He does not know. In any case, I am opening a medical record for each individual. As soon as the majority promise to be relatively well for a few days, we shall hurry back by canoe. But - will we make it?'

35

8. Semusha: between fever, despair, and survival

We didn't make it.

On the 15th, the doctor was struck down again; on the 16th, it was my turn. By the 19th, I was free of fever once more, but this time I had to make a tremendous effort to get back on my feet. And four-fifths of our people were in

one stage or another of the illness, while the rest dragged themselves about like ghosts.

Skaimunga alone was up, healthy and active. How active, it is impossible to describe. An entire book could be written about the daily miracles of courage, loyalty, initiative, and ingenuity by which he kept us alive, properly fed us, and made us as comfortable as possible in that dank, flooded world of dense fog, endless downpours, overwhelming dampness, and swarming, crawling, buzzing insects, greedily lying in wait to bite, sting, and poison us.

Another book, a massive 400-page scientific tome, was written later by the doctor. For this little man seemed to consist of nothing but nerves. His consuming passion for his work seemed to supply him with an endless stream of fresh energy. Whenever he managed to escape a bout of fever, or the moment he had overcome the worst part of a new attack, he was up again, even when he could barely stand upright. And as soon as he was back on his feet, he threw himself once more into his observations and measurements of the natives, taking their bodily measurements and making plaster casts, endlessly analyzing his own illness and that of the others, working on his collections of insects, birds, rodents, and snakes, helping me gather meteorological data and study the topography and geography of the region, and poking his nose into everything and everybody's business.

The fact is that, despite our first devastating impression of Semusha and despite the despair that sometimes overwhelmed us, those terrible weeks and the ones that were still to come yielded an astonishing wealth of important observations, collections, and discoveries.

Even today, several scientists of different nationalities, who were occupied with other matters during the Second World War and the difficult post-war years, are still studying, cataloguing, and evaluating the wealth of results and data we managed to gather in those distant days of arduous pioneering work and almost continuous suffering. The credit - I hasten to say this - belongs above all to Dr. Cicogna. And, as I now wish to relate, to the unexpected role that Skaimunga was to play in the lives and deeds of all of us.

36

Meanwhile, in this book I want to speak of Bapuka - and not of the scientific work we somehow managed to carry out between one exhausting bout of fever and the next. So let us stay with Semusha and with a certain

terrible period when I believed the end was near - not only for the doctor and me, but for all of us.

It was not merely that six paddlers and the younger of the two corporals had died while we waited and waited until we had enough men and sufficient strength to dare undertake the return journey. There was much more that worried me. Before we realized it, it was mid-March. From the way we watched the waters around Semusha steadily rising, we had to conclude that even if we could return to Lealui immediately, it would be too late to leave from there in our cars and trucks.

Moreover, throughout the entire six weeks since we had left Lealui, we had received not a single message from our companions or the provincial commissioner, nor had we been able to send them any sign that we were still alive.

Now, to be perfectly precise, I had a vague feeling that we had both heard from them and let them know how we were faring. But only once. And through native drums.

“Tonight,” I had written in my diary on 5 March, “the chief of Semusha came to tell me that he had learned through jungle drums that the provincial commissioner was seriously ill, that Bob, Walter, and Charles were unwell, that everyone was worried about us and was asking us to return immediately. He also said that he had replied on his drum, describing our situation and asking for reinforcements to come and collect us. The only answer he had received was that a large canoe had set out a week earlier, had been overturned by hippopotamuses, and that all its occupants had been devoured by crocodiles. No one else dared to come. The chief urges us to leave the patients who cannot be transported with him and depart at once in a single canoe, if we can find enough men to man it.

I am so ill that I could not swear that the chief really told me all this. Or was it perhaps a hallucination?”

37

Or, if it were true, could it perhaps have been a trick by the chief to get rid of us? How could he communicate with other natives by means of drums when we had not seen a single person from Lealui to Noyo, and then from Noyo all the way here? I am no longer sure what to think. Nor am I sure what the

hippopotamuses might do to that one canoe, which was inadequately manned and which we were supposed to use for the return journey. The only thing I know for certain is that another attack of fever is on its way.

After that come six blank pages. They speak more eloquently than anything written could about the condition we were in. Both the doctor and I had reached a point where hardly either of us ever managed to skip a fever cycle. And that was not all. Whenever a fresh bout of fever laid us low, we now spent three days suffering from deliriously high temperatures and delirium, followed by another three days in an almost uninterrupted coma. Eventually, we would get up again, but in what a state!

On that twelfth of March, I was so exhausted that I had to ask Skaimunga to shave me. Although he tried hard not to let it show, he suddenly looked tired. Yet he had never been ill for even a single day. And, as always, he was cheerful, gentle and possessed of an indescribable composure. He told me that the doctor would sleep until tomorrow, sleeping the sleep of the sick. Supporting me firmly, he led me to my camping table. There, out of habit, I opened my diary. Slowly and with difficulty, I read what I had written down six days earlier. It seemed like something I knew nothing about, as though it had been written by another person, in another hand, in handwriting I could scarcely decipher. I asked Skaimunga.

'Yes, Father,' he replied, nodding solemnly. 'It is true. These are the words the chief spoke to you. They are the words the drums told him.'

'But,' I said, 'who passed on the messages? The sound of the drums cannot travel the 120 kilometers from Lealui to Noyo, nor the 80 kilometers from Noyo to here.'

What sort of men were they? I wanted to ask. Where were they? Why had we not seen a single one of them? Why did they not come and help us make our way back? But I no longer had the strength to argue. And Skaimunga either did not know or did not wish to tell me any more. He was already standing at the entrance of the tent.

'A good, tasty broth made from guinea-fowl breast will give you strength,' he said. And then he was gone.

38

The following morning, on the thirteenth of March, I was feeling better and was making my rounds among the sick when the doctor appeared. He was but a shadow of his former self. His gaunt face looked ghostly beneath his six-day-old beard. But his eyes were blazing fires.

'No,' he said, 'the fever is over. But I have had a dream. Let us set off. Quickly, before I forget the details again.'

'Set off? Where to?'

'To the place I saw in my dream,' he said impatiently. 'It is right here, on this hill. Less than four hundred meters from here. Wonderful Bushman paintings on a sloping slab of granite. Come on, let's go there.'

'You're mad!' I shrugged and shook my head. 'You, who never believe in anything, now believe in dreams?'

'What do we know about dreams?' he retorted aggressively. 'Have you never dreamed that someone fired a gun, only to wake up because something had actually fallen to the floor with a bang like a gunshot? Have you never heard of novelists who open their eyes in the morning, rush to their desks and write down an entire story that took shape in their brains while they were asleep? Don't you know the story of August Kekulé, the famous chemist, who dreamed that a snake was biting its own tail and whirling endlessly before his eyes? That is how he discovered the theory of the benzene ring.'

I did not feel equal to such a barrage of arguments.

'Yes, yes, but...'

'No buts! Look. There is the chief. I shall ask him.'

9. A discovery deep within the earth

The doctor's way of «asking» was to give a tremendous «Hey!» which he shouted at the chief.

'Take us immediately to the great wall of enormous stones that protrudes on the other side of this hill. Near the place where the water has now reached. To the rock that looks like a human head without a nose and balances on another rock that resembles a man's shoulders. It is the place where hunters of former times carved small figures of hunters and animals into the stone and

filled them in with ochre in various colors. There are little bushes scattered all around. And directly opposite that human head lie more great stones, one on top of another. So don't try to take me for a fool or tell me that you cannot find the place. I know it!'

The chief's expression was a sight to behold. He stammered that he knew with absolute certainty that no human being had been anywhere near that rock slab for years. Not the natives, because for some obscure reason, handed down to them by their ancestors, they believed that those stones contained an evil magic. And none of the very few white men who had ever come to Semusha had dared to venture that far. Since our arrival, neither we nor our boys had left the village. How, then, the trembling village elder asked, could the Musungu speak of that place as though he had actually seen it? And, he added after a moment's thought, why should the Musungu need a native to lead him there if he had already seen the place?

'The Musungu,' I hastened to say before the doctor could perhaps frighten the chief even more, 'has seen the place in a dream. The spirits of his ancestors told him all about it. While he was asleep.'

The chief gave a deep sigh of relief.

Like every primitive man, he was superstitious and believed in dreams. This was an explanation that made sense to him and which he readily accepted. Besides, if the Musungu's ancestors had taken the trouble to come and explain the whole matter to him, that meant it was all right to go near those stones.

The chief raised his voice to spread the news throughout the entire village.

It was the first sign of animation, indeed almost of amusement, that we had observed in this miserable place. People gathered around us. Others came running towards us. Someone began to laugh. At that very moment, the rain stopped. A ray of sunshine tried to break through the mountain of clouds above our heads. It was also the very first ray of good humor and happiness that had blessed us since we had left the road at Broken Hill. And its effect was contagious. We too began to laugh and shout. Even the surviving corporal and some of our least sick boys could not resist such a festive outburst of noise. They crawled out of their huts to join us.

40

'But,' the chief suddenly exclaimed, 'there are no figures at all on that stone.'

'They are most certainly there,' the doctor stubbornly insisted. 'I saw them in my dream. Nearly forty of them.'

The brief, cheerful interlude had done me so much good that I did not mind going along, even if it should prove to be in vain.

'Very well, let's set off and see.'

Practically the entire village joined us. At first, everyone was very eager. However, as soon as the 'human head' came into view, their voices took on a slightly doubtful tone. When all the stones lay before us, even the last of the daring ones disappeared. Everyone stood still and fell silent, as though expecting to be blown to pieces by those rocks, which we were approaching with such irreverent haste.

Apart from a few insignificant details, the granite outcrop was exactly as the doctor had described it. Full of hope, we examined the smooth surface he had mentioned: the sloping side facing the hill, which was best protected from the elements. We seized the sparse tufts of grass concealing the lower part of the rock and pulled at them with what little strength we had left.

In Southern Rhodesia, where they occur by the hundreds, the discovery of unknown Bushman rock paintings or petroglyphs would already have been an exciting event. But here, in Northern Rhodesia, where, as far as was known, none of those masterpieces of prehistoric human art, dating back ten to twenty thousand years, existed, the excitement was a hundred times greater. And the discovery would be a thousand times more significant.

We pulled and pulled until we were covered in sweat and trembling with exertion. At last, the sparse, low vegetation had been cleared away and the base of the rock exposed. There wasn't a single wretched drawing on it! The village elder had been right, and the doctor's dream had, after all, been nothing more than a fever dream.

'That was what I thought, and what I said aloud, but he did not even bother to answer me. Kneeling on the ground, he was already digging into the earth

with his nervous, strong hands. Swiftly and excitedly, like a terrier chasing a rat.

41

'It's here,' he gasped. 'Help me.' I seized the only pickaxe we had with us and helped him.

Curiosity finally got the better of the natives. They all gathered cautiously around us. When they saw how hard the two of us were working, the village elder and some of the bravest men came to lend a hand. And indeed, in less than ten minutes, the upper part of the first figures had been uncovered. As we continued our work like men possessed, more rock paintings came to light. One depicted a horned antelope emerging from behind a cliff; the other showed a man who had just released an arrow from his bow. Both were portrayed with astonishing realism: pictures full of action, movement and drama.

'Exactly as I saw them,' the doctor managed to gasp. 'There are seven more antelopes down there. And three more hunters. And on the left there are several women depicted with outstretched hands, engaged in some kind of game. There is also a man dressed like an Arab, something never before seen in an African Bushman painting. And a palm tree, a tree that has been extinct in this region for thousands of years. Let every man get to work and dig a trench. Before the water rises any further.' And with that, he fainted.

When he came round again a few minutes later, he was smiling with indescribable bliss. My extravagant promises of gifts had borne fruit. All the available men were working with the few pickaxes and shovels we had, or carrying away the earth in baskets and dumping it behind the 'shoulder rock', as we called the one on which the 'head' rested so precariously. Dozens of women and children added to the noise by building a kind of low embankment with the waterlogged earth, which was intended to protect the excavation from the rising waters for at least a few days.

Piece by piece, the figures described by the doctor emerged from their thousand-year-old concealment. After some of the earth had been removed - earth that could only have accumulated there over a hundred or more centuries - the first and only rock painting ever discovered in Northern Rhodesia was revealed in all its complete and unique beauty.

The doctor, the corporal and I took turns supervising the work. Towards the end of the following day, Skaimunga, who knew that the fever would soon creep back into our bodies, brought us our folding cooking stove and kept a roaring fire burning in it. Nevertheless, despite the fire and our heavy, waterproof, fur-lined coats, we were seized by such violent shivering before the excavation was finished that we could not even speak.

42

I remember quite clearly taking dozens of photographs of the petroglyph with a camera mounted on a tripod. I distinctly remember pointing the camera at us as we stood near the stove and taking a photograph of ourselves using the old-fashioned self-timer with which the camera was equipped. I only vaguely remember Skaimunga asking us to go to bed, leading us to our tents, undressing me and burying me beneath an enormous pile of blankets.

'Give them... give them all the presents I... I promised...'

The next thing I became aware of, as the village elder's tam-tam awakened me with its loud booming, was a pale morning. Apparently, I was ready to wake up, or almost ready.

I rubbed my eyes, opened them and saw Skaimunga tearing a page from the wall calendar. I had taught him to do that every day. It was the nineteenth. I tried to think: the eighteenth, the seventeenth, the sixteenth, the fifteenth, the fourteenth, I counted backwards.

'Five days since Skaimunga put me to bed.'

'Where,' I asked him, 'where is the other Musungu?'

'In his tent,' he said. 'Still so ill that his spirit has not yet stopped speaking through his mouth.'

How was it possible that the doctor was still delirious after five days? Was he getting worse? Would he die like the corporal and the six oarsmen?

We drank only water that had been boiled and then filtered. We swallowed as much quinine as we could tolerate. We never slept without double mosquito nets. When we were awake, during the most dangerous hours, we wore gloves on our hands and nets over our faces.

Could all these precautions prove useless after all? We had discovered a Bushman painting, if my memory served me correctly. And then what? Was it worth our lives? All that suffering? And what was the point of the whole thing if perhaps none of us would ever return to the outside world?

43

Now, Skaimunga would probably return – after he had buried us all. As far as I knew, he took no precautions whatsoever. Yet he had not fallen ill once. But now he was behaving strangely. Why was he staring at me so gravely and solemnly, instead of looking as delighted and relieved as he always did when I came round after a bout of fever? Had he perhaps received bad news that he was reluctant to tell me for fear of upsetting me? Yes, that had to be it!

Cold sweat beaded on my forehead. The doctor was dead too. Skaimunga had lied to me because I was so weak.

10. Bapuka calls out.

I closed my eyes and made a desperate effort to steady my nerves. Then I looked at the boy.

'I feel fine now,' I said. 'Go ahead. Tell me.'

'Musungu,' he began, 'I have had a dream.'

I'm going teetotal! I'm really beginning to have quite enough of all these dreams.

'Musungu,' Skaimunga continued quickly, as though he could read my thoughts, 'ever since we set course for Lealui, I have been desperately trying to hear a distant voice speaking to me. But the ears of my spirit could not open wide enough. After Lealui, there was too much sickness to attend to, too many things that had to be done – and the distant voice grew fainter and fainter. But last night the goddess Bapuka finally spoke to me. Before I went to sleep, I called upon her and pleaded with her on your behalf, with all the passion of my utter desperation. And after a while, she spoke. About you and the other Musungu. Very seriously. With great emphasis.'

Had he been anyone else, I would have told him to go to the devil at that moment, dream and all. But then, he was Skaimunga.

'What did your goddess say?' I asked. I must confess that, although it was hardly a noble attitude, I considered myself at least remarkably patient and accommodating.

'She said that, to save your own life and the lives of all your friends and servants, you must come with me,' he said. 'Alone. In a small canoe. For the space of two suns.'

44

Two days cooped up in a small canoe? In my condition? Had he taken leave of his senses? And yet he spoke as though he were simply relaying a clear message, one beyond all doubt, as though he were issuing an order that could not be disobeyed – regardless of all practical impossibilities.

Once again, it seemed that everything was conspiring to make me take steps against which my common sense and all my instincts – if one could call them that – were vehemently rebelling.

Had the doctor's dream not demonstrated only a few days earlier what dreams could mean, the very idea of such a journey would have struck me as repulsive, idiotic and utterly insane. But the doctor's dream had proved true and had yielded the only tangible and worthwhile result of all our efforts and suffering since the day we had turned westwards.

Had anyone else come to me with a proposition of that magnitude – that a two-day journey down the river to that no-man's-land might save my life and the lives of all the white and black people for whom I was responsible – I would have laughed or flown into a rage. But the man who was begging me to undertake such an absurd journey was the very man to whom we already owed our lives a dozen times over.

If I had had any choice, any hope of outside assistance, I could at least have postponed the decision for a few days. But no one had come from Lealui. And no one would come from there now, nor from anywhere else – and my people were desperately ill. Even if it was a desperate, seemingly ridiculous last chance, I had to take it. But how could I leave the doctor behind on his

own? With no one to look after him? And what about my promise to the Provincial Commissioner?

Skaimunga had his answers ready. The corporal had just woken from his bout of fever. Like me, he would be well for three or four days and would be able to look after the Musungu, exactly as Skaimunga had explained to him that morning, down to the very last detail.

As for the Provincial Commissioner, Skaimunga knew that I had promised not to go beyond Semusha. But now, he said, I could leave without breaking my word. The drums that had woken me had just spread the news. The fever had killed the 'White Man of the Government'. That very night. In the little hospital at Mongu.

45

I felt terribly sorry about the Provincial Commissioner. But his death not only released me from my conditional promise, as Skaimunga had explained to me. It also made me more aware than ever of the fate to which we were all condemned unless a miracle happened soon.

I got up and began to dress.

"Where," I asked, "did Bapuka command you to take me? And what are we supposed to do there, when I can scarcely stand on my feet?"

"I don't know," Skaimunga murmured. "I don't know, Musungu. But we must go. That way!" And he pointed due west.

I scratched my head. I thought of the country lying to the west – unknown, uncharted, uninhabited, pestilential swamps. I thought of the young magistrate and his seventeen paddlers – all of them had disappeared there without leaving the slightest trace. I thought of ourselves – of the wretched predicament into which I had brought my expedition, and of the poor black people whose king I had persuaded to force them into my service.

"It's the maddest thing I've ever heard!" I concluded aloud. "But let's get ready, and tomorrow…"

"Everything is ready already," Skaimunga interrupted. He helped me into my heaviest coat. "This way, Musungu."

I walked with great difficulty. My head was spinning, and the rain made my already blurred eyes completely blind. We did not meet a soul. We reached a canoe. It was small, but its middle section was sheltered by a newly erected canopy of reeds.

Beneath it there was just enough room for one of my folding camping chairs, which Skaimunga had wisely secured with ropes, for a tin box he had filled with food, and, between them, for a large earthenware bowl in which he had already kindled a good, slow-burning fire.

Skaimunga lifted me in his arms, waded into the water, settled me on the chair and smiled happily when I praised him for his thoughtfulness.

“But,” I asked, “where are your spear and my rifle?”

“He who sets out to beg for life,” he said, “carries the weapons of death with him.”

46

He gave the canoe a push, stepped carefully aboard and stood on a flat platform at the stern, no larger than a tray. Skillfully he began working a pagaye, which he first used to pole the canoe along. The little boat glided silently forward, out onto the vast expanse of water, with no horizon to confine it.

The monotonous drumming of the rain on the canopy, the comforting warmth of the fire and the soothing, slow gliding of the canoe proved too much for me. As soon as I closed my eyes, I sank into a deep, peaceful sleep. In a way, I had earned it; according to the rules, it should really have been my third day before coma. And yet I have never forgiven myself for sleeping so comfortably throughout all those hours while Skaimunga, protected only by the light blanket he now always wore, struggled on tirelessly in the rain.

I have also never forgiven myself for missing the unique opportunity to watch how he managed to find his way through unknown country. When I made the return journey the following morning, it revealed itself to me as an incredible labyrinth of islands: some of them flooded hills, floating vegetation – leafy branches of half-submerged trees –, mudflats that were treacherous

quicksand, and narrow, winding channels of clear water that only a magician could have discovered.

But most of all, I shall always regret allowing myself to sink into a sound sleep during those hours, which were to be the very last I would spend alone with Skaimunga. At the time, despite feeling so weak, so confused and so bewildered, I had no idea that he, who had become such an essential part of my life, would so suddenly, so soon and so irrevocably be taken away from it.

When I awoke, it was that late-afternoon hour when the rain usually stops for a while and the sun sometimes appears as a hazy, purplish-red ball.

I opened my eyes and felt a sharp pain in them; so intense was the brilliance of the opalescent, unreal glow through which we were gliding towards the blood-red ball of the setting sun.

“Musungu,” said Skaimunga behind me, “we are near.”

“Near what?”

“Near the place where Bapuka is leading us.”

How could he know where he was going when I could not even make out the dividing line between sky and water?

47

I asked him, and he said that he had done nothing more than row or pole the canoe westward. If an impassable stretch of water or the presence of too many crocodiles had forced him to alter course, he had simply gone round in circles until he was able to resume his original direction.

“Look!” he whispered. “Look, Musungu, there, just below the sun.”

Through the luminous mist I could make out, or rather sense, a jagged golden line, which meant solid, rocky ground. But why was he so excited about it?

“Smoke,” Skaimunga said tensely. “Smoke is rising from many huts.”

I could not see any smoke at all. But if there really was smoke there, it meant a village, inhabited by men, women and children. People who had managed to draw an impenetrable veil of mystery around themselves, their origins and their customs. People who had succeeded in evading discovery by the whites; people sufficiently proud and powerful to intimidate the neighboring tribes into maintaining absolute secrecy. That was why the villagers of Semusha had looked so frightened. And that was also why everyone had disappeared along the flooded lowlands as we approached. And perhaps this was the place where the magistrate and his seventeen paddlers had landed, where they might have been captured and killed – and perhaps even eaten, according to the good old cannibal custom.

"Musungu," said Skaimunga, "raise your hands, palms open, to show that you have no weapon in them."

I raised my hands and saw that he had laid down his punting pole and was doing the same. Now I could see better. Smoke was rising from the roofs, which were even steeper than those at Semusha. Large boulders lay scattered everywhere in wild confusion. The huts were partly concealed behind them. But where were the inhabitants? Not a living creature could be seen or heard.

"I am Skaimungaaa! Bapuka has summoned me here with my Musungu!"

Skaimunga's cry, amplified by his hands cupped around his mouth, carried a long way. But no one answered.

48

11: Bapuka and the Hidden Tribe

Skaimunga's face suddenly tightened with anxiety. He took up his paddling again and steered towards a place where several large canoes lay moored side by side.

I was just about to tell him to stop and wait, and give me time to think things over, when a loud voice called out: "Only those who do as they are told can come ashore safely," it rang out in the Barotse language.

"Tell them we will do as we are told," I ordered Skaimunga.

"They wouldn't ask that of us if all they wanted was for us to climb into a big pot and be cooked for dinner, would they?"

Skaimunga had already answered. The echo of his words had scarcely died away when a most impressive figure slowly emerged from behind one of the boulders. The man's face looked solemn despite its lavish white paint. His head was crowned with a magnificent headdress of scarlet feathers. He held a straight stick rigidly in front of him. His piercing eyes examined us closely. There was something astonishingly majestic about his appearance.

He did not move as the canoe ran aground on the beach, nor when I jumped out of the boat as lightly as I could.

"Welcome, Musungu," he then said. "I have been waiting for you." He cast a thoughtful, curious glance at Skaimunga, who had come to stand beside me.

"This is Skaimunga," I said. "He is a good man, and means no harm."

A strange smile lit up the old man's eyes. "I know."

As he slowly relaxed his rigid posture, female spirits emerged from behind every boulder. I say "spirits" because these women wore white robes, had covered every exposed part of their bodies with white paint, and seemed to glide forward in strange ceremonial dance steps, without uttering a word or making a sound. It was the eeriest scene I had ever witnessed.

"Of Bapuka's subjects," said the man with the scarlet feathers, "I am the highest of all."

Aha, I thought, so there really is a Bapuka. He is her supreme sorcerer – a kind of priest, so to speak. But why is he letting us…

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"Unwittingly," the sorcerer continued, "you, White Man, have healed Bapuka's wound." Me? How? When?

"Wittingly," he continued, "I shall heal your illness, and that of the men who are with you. The white men and the black men alike, without distinction." My God, if only that were true! I thought to myself. These people all look strong and healthy. They seem immune to fever. Who knows how long they have lived here? It is hardly surprising, then, that they have discovered some natural remedy, some kind of concoction…

“But as soon as you have regained a little strength,” said the sorcerer, “you must leave. For only those who have taken in Bapuka’s antidote with their mother’s milk are forever protected against the consuming heat of the swamp fevers. But come now.”

He added a command word that I could not understand. It sounded something like “Banguayaluwitu”. Whatever it meant, the “spirits” glided out of our sight. And three men whom I had not seen before emerged from a hut and came towards us. They were muscular, just as tall, powerfully built and broad-shouldered as Skaimunga, perhaps even more so. Their eyes were expressionless slits. Their hair, which they had braided into numerous long plaits, framed their broad, utterly expressionless faces. They wore necklaces and earrings made of a yellow metal that seemed to me more like gold than brass - although the gleam might perhaps have been an effect of the setting sun.

When I was taken back to the village of Semusha the following morning, I was able to take a snapshot of these three men. But even today I do not know who they were, or why they followed us up the goat path along which the sorcerer was leading us. I suspect they were some kind of subordinate priests of the Bapuka cult. The only things I could make out at that moment, in my bewilderment, were their plaits and their earrings. Was it not a strange coincidence? Skaimunga, too, wore rings in his earlobes, though much smaller ones. And he, too, had achieved a kind of braided effect with his hairstyle. Did he belong to another tribe that also lived in those swamps and was still unknown to the white men? Was that why he was immune to those bestial fevers? And why had he felt so persistently drawn westward, with an instinctive, almost overwhelming force?

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“May your step be cautious now,” said the sorcerer. We had reached a clump of dense, dark bushes. He pushed the branches aside and revealed the narrow entrance to a cave. I followed him down into it, feeling my way and stumbling in the sudden darkness.

After about twenty short, cautious steps through that passage, we came into a vast cavern. A dim light filtered through a small opening in the rocky ceiling. As far as I could judge, we were in an irregularly circular chamber about fifteen meters in diameter and height. In the middle stood a dark object.

To my great surprise, I thought I could make out a gigantic statue in it. I estimated that it was at least three and a half meters tall; it towered that far above our heads. At its feet stood a large basin filled with glowing charcoal. The three plait-haired men bent down and busied themselves with something I soon recognized as primitive goatskin bellows. At once, tall flames leapt up, illuminating the statue all around in the most dramatic fashion. It was an impressive work of primitive art, carved with considerable skill from a kind of wood I did not recognize. A sobbing gasp came from Skaimunga, who was standing to my right. “Bapuka, Musungu,” he whispered in my ear. “Exactly as I have so often dreamed of her!”

Then he stood motionless, his eyes, filled with indescribable reverence, fixed on the face of the statue.

I could scarcely believe my eyes. I had never heard of natives in that part of Africa worshipping gigantic idols of this kind. Never had I encountered such a perfect, magnificent work of art. Never had I seen anything carved from wood that looked so old.

The sorcerer interrupted the frantic rush of my thoughts. “Musungu,” he said in his deep voice, which echoed through the silence of the cave and was amplified by the rhythmic sighing of the bellows. “Three times a hundred moons of ten have passed since the day when those mangy dogs, the Arab slave traders, came with the old king of the Barotse and claimed to be friends - only to kill and massacre. And to steal the surviving men, women and children. To sell them as slaves.

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So many of the Arabs died by our spears, and so many more died later of fever, that their bastard race never even dared to attempt to return here. Yet we had lost the flower of our people. And we, who had never harmed anyone, took a solemn oath to destroy anyone who approached our island - even our black Barotse brothers, should they ever dare to bring a stranger here.”

In the heavy, absolute silence that followed, it took me no more than a minute to make up my mind. “I swear,” I heard my own voice say, “by my own gods, I swear that I, too, will never bring strangers here.”

“That is Bapuka’s wish,” the sorcerer agreed, as though in thanks. Then he continued thoughtfully: “Three times a hundred moons of ten have passed,” he repeated, almost to himself.

“My old father was killed by the Arab dogs. And when I, his only son, defended Bapuka, they nearly killed me. But I did not die. Bapuka - goddess of love, source of life, fountain of bliss - healed me. And she promised me that one day my own only son - whom the Arab dogs had carried off together with my wounded wife - would be returned to me.” He paused for a moment and swallowed hard. “For,” he added, “I must teach him the ancient secrets, the magical powers of Bapuka’s cult. So that after my death he may serve her. As my father did. And his father before him. And a long, long line of his direct male ancestors before him.”

An oppressive silence weighed on everyone for a few moments. Three hundred moons, I calculated. That would be about twenty-four or twenty-five years. Rhodesia was then still a completely untamed country; its predatory chiefs devoted themselves solely to slaughter and attacks on other tribes, in order to sell hundreds of thousands of slaves to the Arabs on the coast...

12. The farewell to Skaimunga and the blessing of Bapuka

The sorcerer emerged from the shadows into which he had withdrawn and handed me a light basket. A quick glance showed me that it contained a few dry leaves of a pale, silvery green. They looked a little like sage, but gave off a strong, bitter aroma.

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“One leaf,” he said, “must be chewed every day at sunset. Slowly. Until nothing remains of it in your mouth. Wait until the fever has not returned for nine days. Then leave, Musungu, leave, you and your white friends and your black friends. For these leaves grow only on this island. And they are rare. I cannot give you any more. Every pregnant woman must eat them daily until her child is born, and continue doing so until it has been suckled for a full nine moons. For only those who have taken in Bapuka’s antidote with their mother’s milk are forever protected against the consuming heat of the swamp fevers.”

So that was how simple it was. Later, the remedy proved to be every bit as miraculous as the old man had so plainly explained. At that moment, however,

I was even more fascinated by the mysterious aspects of my adventure than I was interested in the faint hope those dry leaves might inspire in me. “But,” I began, “why did you wait for us? Skaimunga’s dream...”

“The goddess,” the wise man interrupted, “sent me dreams too. On the night before this day, I saw a friendly, unarmed man coming, accompanied by an eager, unarmed black man. Musungu, Bapuka cannot be mistaken. You are the white man. All her blessings will protect you; for you have healed her wound, you have brought back to me my long-lost son. Look!”

With an unexpectedly nimble movement, he seized Skaimunga by the shoulder and tore away the blanket in which he was wrapped. “This is not Skaimunga. It is Ingulu, my own and only son. Look!” And with a slightly trembling finger he pointed to the intricate tattoos covering the young man’s body, and then to the very same markings adorning the body of the statue.

“I,” he continued, “I myself drove these indelible tattoos into Ingulu’s tender skin when he was six moons old, only a few suns before the Arab dogs came!”

That night, it was a long time before I even thought of taking my camp bed out of its cover - a task Skaimunga had offered to do for me, but which I had firmly refused to let him undertake. I was alone in the remote, immaculate hut to which the sorcerer had led me. Outside, the rain had begun again.

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Inside the hut, with the fire blazing brightly, wooden bowls of appetizingly prepared food surrounding me, and not an insect in sight, I felt more relaxed and happy than I had for months. I cannot say whether the hut was better constructed, whether the island was freer of insects than Semusha, or whether the odors rising from the basket of leaves kept the pests away. In any case, it was too wonderful for words to be left in peace at last. And the one leaf I had just finished chewing brought a long-forgotten strength back into my body, a new clarity into my mind, and fresh hope into my heart.

“Soon I shall be well again,” I repeated to myself over and over. “I shall be able to make the doctor, the corporal and the others well again and return to Lelui! I shall be able to look after Bob, Walt and Charlie. And we shall all be able to make the return journey, even by canoe if necessary.”

The films? The scientific collections? Damn it, we would surely find a way to save them too. How? Well, what on earth had been wrong with me? The problem was not complicated at all. Now that my mind was beginning to work again, the whole thing suddenly seemed perfectly straightforward. All we had to do was obtain enough canoes and lash them together, so that we would have several pontoons, each large and sturdy enough to carry one of our fully loaded vehicles. It would take a great deal of work, but it could certainly be done. And it could be done before the nine fever-free days promised us by the old sorcerer had passed. King Yeta would surely be only too happy to help us once he realized that this would get rid of us for good!

In this way, even when the floods were at their highest, we could reach the high plateau without unloading the collections or removing the films from the great dehydrator. The most important thing was to get away before that meagre supply of leaves ran out. To get away with the doctor and Charles, with Bob and Walt and all our Africans!

All our Africans? No. That was impossible, even if not one of them had succumbed to the fever during our absence. Skaimunga, by far the best of them all, was lost to us. Even if he were allowed to bring me back, it would be the last time I ever saw him.

54

Good, magnificent, wonderful Skaimunga! How he had stood there before his goddess and his father when the old man tore away his blanket! He had tried to conceal the overwhelming feelings of his heart behind the mask of indifference that a well-bred, 'upright' man was expected to wear - but not quite as successfully as he had wished. I actually felt a hot, stinging sensation behind my eyes; so deeply moving in its simplicity and dignity was the reunion of the father with his long-lost son, whom the old man's faith had never given up hope of finding.

To conceal my feelings, I had turned away and examined the statue as closely as the flames allowed: its tall, lovingly carved coiffure, its absurdly small but so humanly smiling face, its narrow shoulders, its asymmetrical breasts, its body so artfully tattooed. And the faithfully rendered ornaments around its neck, wrists and ankles. Most astonishing of all was the 'Impande' hanging above its breasts, the precious shell that for so many centuries, before the arrival of the white man in Central and Southern Africa, had been the insignia of the greatest black potentates.

Was it not the very same Impande that the distant Baila believed had been introduced in time immemorial by Bulongo, one of their semi-divine, mythical ancestors? But of course! Now I remembered clearly. Not so long ago, in preparation for my expedition to the Ba Ila, I had studied whole pages in highly authoritative newspapers and books. Even now I could still see entire sentences clearly before me, almost as though enclosed in quotation marks.

'Among the tribes using the Ila language in the Kafue Valley (so Smith and Dale had written), certain ancestral spirits are greatly revered, but of all the figures in the Ila pantheon, the wisest is the most important, the supreme demigod Bulongo... He is the Muzhimo of the entire country; there is not a single community there that does not pray to him... And Bulongo was also a human being and came from the Salaland... The Impande shell came from the Salaland; for when Bulongo's people came down from there, they brought the shells with them - shells and all kinds of riches, such as the great Bukolwe and Manbulukutu beads.

It is also said of this interesting culture and the rites associated with the worship of Bulongo that people in ancient times found them here when they came to this region long, long ago, and that they made offerings to Bulongo blindly, simply because they knew of him by hearsay...'

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Was there some connection between Bapuka and Bulongo? And if so, what was it? The old sorcerer seemed not to hear my questions. But when I asked him about the disappearance of the magistrate and his seventeen oarsmen, he listened at once, and his voice was full of genuine concern. What an expression came over his face as he explained what had happened! How vivid, how convincing his dramatic words were! As he spoke, I could almost see those seventeen sick, frightened black men, secretly deliberating through endless nights about what they should do, about which of the many evils mercilessly closing in around them would be the lesser. Should they run away and abandon the fever-stricken white man they loved to a miserable, lingering death? And be dishonored forever? Or should they continue with him through the 'Swamps of Mystery'? And risk his discovering the island on which they knew in advance that they would all be killed without mercy? And what would then become of their king and their tribe if a man from Semusha, once the rumor had spread, were to speak out and reveal how the white man had met his end?

At last they had reached a decision. 'Tomorrow we shall go,' their drums had announced faintly in the darkness of the night. 'Because the white man insists that we do. But we shall perish. We shall starve and die and find our graves in the bellies of crocodiles. All of us. And the white man too. For he will not live much longer anyway.'

And stoically they had carried out their desperate decision. Incredible? No. Not in that gloomy cave where the goddess Bapuka had reigned for countless centuries. Not when the tragic story was retold so solemnly and yet so simply by that old sage, who was bound by a sacred oath and whose mouth, as I knew, did not lie and could not lie!

I was still sitting there, reliving those moments in Bapuka's cave. I was trying to imagine the magistrate's final hours of agony, which had most probably been rendered painless by the blessing of unconsciousness. I was still reflecting on the recent events, while part of my mind was already busily occupied with plans for our immediate future, when a glimmer of light came through the cracks around the door. The bark door opened, and the venerable sorcerer appeared. His three assistants with their braids followed him, one of them holding a torch. And while they silently carried out the few belongings I had with me, the old man spoke with the impressive dignity that was natural to him.

56

"The day has not yet dawned," he said. "But before you leave, so that you may reach the Semusha shore while the villagers are still in their huts, there are words that must be spoken."

It was a farewell of such exquisite courtesy as I had rarely received. Yet I could understand his point of view. "My son," he continued, "has opened his heart to me. He has also told me of the misery of his past. His sufferings were great and many. But when he was on the very point of losing his life, you saved him. When he was in chains, you freed him. Throughout the time he was with you, you were a loving father to him. Now Bapuka will be your loving mother. If bonds hold you back, Bapuka will set you free from them. If your life is in danger, Bapuka will save you."

And with a princely gesture, he offered me, on his outstretched hands, a heavy wooden statuette: an exact, 35-centimetre-high replica of the goddess Bapuka, whom I had examined so closely in the cave.

I tried to answer, but could not utter a word. Yet the old, wise man could read my gratitude through my confusion.

“This,” he said, “is the only small likeness of Bapuka in existence - the one that, for countless generations, has watched over the hut in which the goddess’s highest servant lives alone, meditates, and interprets the dreams and other signs she sends him.

Now she has commanded me to give it to you. And Bapuka’s blessing will always be with you. But do not give Bapuka away - except in a way that would allow you to please her for as long as the bliss of life and love can remain with you. For remember: to live is to love. And to love is to live.”

At that moment I was too astonished, too confused and too tired to make any sense of the old man’s words. Nor did he give me time to ask questions. He was already making his way to the door. All I could do was seize my sun helmet, cover myself, Bapuka and the basket of dried leaves with my heavy coat, and follow him outside into the rainy darkness.

57

I did not see Skaimunga again until we reached the canoe. He was busily supervising the loading of the luggage, tending the fire and giving instructions to the men with the plaited hair. One of them, naturally, was to row me back. The other two were to follow in a second canoe, which my rowers would return to the island.

“May peace remain with you,” I said to the sorcerer. I held out my hand to Skaimunga. He seized it and clasped it in both his hands, squeezing so hard that he nearly broke my bones. Neither of us seemed capable of uttering a word. Only when the canoe had been gliding away for several minutes did Skaimunga’s voice reach me: “May peace go with you, Musungu,” he said, barely containing his emotion. “For all time.”

“E-èh!” I replied, in the manner of the Barotse.

A double “E-èh!” came back across the rapidly widening distance. Then there was profound silence, broken only by the drumming of the rain and the soft sound of the water stirred by the oars, wielded with powerful strokes.

13. The Medicine Man’s Curse

That is how it was. Should one believe in magic? Or, more simply, in sincere blessings? Can one decide whether a heathen goddess - or at least the grateful, wise minds, the hearts of her highest servants, who wish someone well with all their hearts - can influence a person’s life? Should one suppose that autosuggestion might have had something to do with what later happened to me?

Of course, it all depends on a person’s frame of mind. If someone’s natural inclinations make him receptive to the supernatural, he will interpret these events as a hazy but nonetheless astonishing proof of the mysterious forces that govern the dark world of primitive man and that - according to him - also direct the days of anyone who penetrates that world deeply and completely, and identifies the greater part of his own life with it.

If, on the other hand, anything that goes beyond the limits of the five senses and generally accepted knowledge merely irritates and repels a person, he will arrive at an entirely opposite view. Such a person will regard what happened during the many years that followed as purely accidental events, proving or disproving absolutely nothing - except perhaps that fate can play some very strange tricks on us.

It would argue for a very, very large number of coincidences. But here again, only one thing can settle the matter: the facts.

58

Since that night when Bapuka was given to me, when I left behind the island whose exact geographical location I had solemnly promised never to reveal (and which, as far as I could ascertain, remains unknown to every white man even today), and the faithful Boy, to whom I feel an immeasurable debt of gratitude, many strange things have happened.

Not only did the magician's dried leaves temporarily restore our health, and for long enough to enable us to emerge from the flooded lowlands with our pontoon-supported safari. No, for a while we even felt so rejuvenated that

the doctor and I, before the fever seized us again, were able, energetically assisted by our three technicians, to carry out a considerable amount of research and collecting in Semusha, in Noyo, in Lealui, and also in that section of the Zambezi which at the time was practically unexplored.

Naturally, that malignant fever returned later, at much longer intervals and gradually in a milder form, until it finally ceased altogether.

In fact, that region was so wild and so overflowing with mysteries of every kind that had yet to be solved - and we felt so much better and once again so full of confidence - that, as soon as we had reached the dry ground of the Mankoya and Barotse plateaus again, our enthusiasm for pursuing several scientific objectives simultaneously led us to split into two or three separate groups.

Most of the time, the doctor set off with a few tents and the two trucks that carried our steadily growing collections. He drove one vehicle, while one of the mechanics drove the other.

Charlie took a different direction in the truck containing two folding camp beds, the precious film dehydrator, and all the filming equipment. The second mechanic acted as driver, since Charlie wished to spend most of his time travelling on the roof of the vehicle with his cameras always ready to shoot, in order to capture some scene involving the native population or big game that he found interesting or had been commissioned to record.

59

As for me, well, I once again had the pleasure of wandering about at will with complete freedom of action, poking my nose into one thing or another, or stopping whenever I wished.

I used the smallest truck, which towed a camping caravan: a two-wheeled box that could be opened in a few minutes and transformed into a very comfortable tent with a veranda. The tent contained two good beds, raised well above the dampness and insects of the ground, as well as a table and a chair. The veranda, which was sealed all around with tent canvas at night, served as a kind of second room - half bathroom, half dining room.

Each of these units was supplemented by a more or less good cook and other African personnel.

And since roads did not actually exist in those days, and nobody had even begun to dream of radio telephones for communication between vehicles, before separating we could do nothing more than designate a meeting place: one of the very few place names marked on our otherwise mostly blank maps.

There we would meet again after weeks of immersion in the most ominous regions, after wading through rivers and circumventing excessively steep elevations or impassable obstacles, in order to exchange results obtained or clues discovered, repair everything that had fallen into disorder, enjoy better-organized meals and relatively longer periods of rest for a while, and sometimes plan our next journeys, which, according to their nature and requirements, would be undertaken together or separately once again.

It goes without saying that these meetings perhaps took place on time once in a very long while. In most cases, however, they occurred with delays of days, if not weeks.

And this was due to one of a thousand possible causes, including not only the enormous difficulties created by the wild terrain and, consequently, the continual breakdowns of the vehicles, but also the fact that one group invariably became hopelessly lost whenever one of us was stubborn enough to rely on his own hunches and instruments instead of the unfailing instincts of the Africans. (But more about that later.)

Alternatively, another group would become hopelessly stranded at the most unexpected moment, for the simple reason that its native assistants had suddenly run away out of some superstitious fear, or because a mysterious spell had bewitched most of them and made them ill, so that they were unable to move from the spot - something equally sudden and inexplicable.

60

I would like to single out two examples that occurred to me during these journeys across the vast expanses of Northern Rhodesia and which I have never forgotten. Partly because of the fear and delay they caused, but above all because of the new horizons they opened up for me as I came to know and increasingly appreciate the varied wisdom, profound psychology, and astonishing powers of African witch doctors.

Perhaps the strangest of these events began on the morning when Soap, my laundry boy, completely breaking the etiquette of camp life, entered my camping caravan to wake me and bring me a morning cup of tea.

That was enough to make me realize that I had opened my eyes in a world full of serious events. And the taste of the tea - or rather, its complete lack of taste - immediately confirmed that impression.

If the first departure from customary practice meant that some mysterious occurrence had deprived me of the services of Cigarette and Penny, the tent boys, the second announced that the cook and Tikky, his assistant, were also missing.

Only when Soap decided to tell me a long, laborious story about evil spirits, the souls of ancestors, evil spells, and I don't know what else, was I at least able to learn that his four colleagues had suddenly fallen ill and that there was therefore no chance of my camp being struck early that morning, as agreed, and moved on.

I was, however, far from imagining what this disruption would soon teach me about the sense of justice of a Barotse and the swift and rough methods that this Barotse customarily employed to obtain his rights when he happened to be a first-class witch doctor.

The epidemic, whose nature was unknown to me and which had so suddenly struck the native section of my camp, was certainly displaying rather alarming symptoms.

In the hut they shared, my four boys lay there looking seriously ill.

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Their eyes and lips were swollen, their foreheads covered with cold sweat, their hands cold and stiff. My repeated attempts to wake them and encourage them only elicited groans from the sick boys and loud wailing outside the hut, where Soap had stubbornly remained and had assured me heatedly that the inside of the hut was filled with evil spirits who wanted to carry his companions away, and that he had no desire to join such dangerous company.

During the following twenty-four hours, the boys showed no signs of improvement either, despite the generous quantities of castor oil, quinine, and

aspirin that I forced them to swallow. On the contrary, their condition seemed to grow steadily worse. And since the nearest doctor was more than 300 km away, no roads led there, and I knew absolutely nothing about the nature of this strange illness that had afflicted the boys, I had become seriously alarmed.

When, therefore, I saw an old man slowly approaching the camp and recognized him by his white goatee and the large necklace of monkey tails he wore, he seemed to me as though sent by God.

I had seen him only a few days earlier, when he had come to ask me whether I knew anything about some animals that had been stolen from him and were extremely valuable because they had been intended for a highly sacred ceremony.

I could no longer remember whether they had been cows, goats, sheep, or chickens. What I had not forgotten, however, was that he was a witch doctor and evidently a very important one; for during his brief stay in my camp, all my boys had kept well away from him and displayed an entirely unfamiliar degree of submissiveness.

Let me see whether he can do something for my sick men, I thought.

But there was no need to ask him, for when he recognized me, he greeted me and said:

“I have come to visit those who are in the hands of evil spirits.”

It was strange that he knew about them, for our camp was so remote that, in the few days since my arrival, I had not seen a single native apart from the old man.

But that was of little importance at the moment. And, without a word, I followed the old man, who had already set off towards the boys’ hut.

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14. The judgment of God: a mysterious illness

Experience has taught me that one of the things in which a witch doctor is infallible is his ability to judge a white man who happens to observe him while he is practicing his art.

If he notices that one is prejudiced against his methods, that one considers him a charlatan, or that one wishes to watch him merely in order to make fun of him, then one can be certain that he will either leave in silent indignation or, if circumstances compel him to practice in the white man's presence, bring the matter to an end within a few minutes with a few gestures and words that are nothing but comedy and bluff.

If, however, his intuition - and I repeat that it seems to be infallible - tells him that one shows genuine interest and a feeling of respect - let us call it that - for his arts, and that one does not speak or disturb him with incessant questions, he will generally have no objection to demonstrating his magical practices in the most natural manner.

He will allow one to follow him step by step, observe him, and even photograph every stage of the procedure.

That is what happened in this case.

As soon as we reached the hut, the witch doctor stopped at the entrance and began murmuring a few "magical" words and stamping his feet on the ground in a kind of dance.

Then he entered, and I followed close behind.

Immediately, he threw three pinches of a powder that looked like dust into the air. He had taken it from a small pouch that he carried at his side.

Examining the patients and establishing a diagnosis, as we would normally do, was not part of his programme at all. He contented himself with staring intently at the boys one after another from the corner where he had settled.

Whether what he did next was carried out according to a preconceived plan or was the result of his examination, I cannot say.

But this was certainly one of the most impressive examples of magical power I had ever witnessed, because of the mathematical precision with which the witch doctor worked, the speed and urgency of the results he achieved, and the direct course he pursued in order to obtain justice.

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From a small antelope horn hidden in his extravagant necklace, he carefully drew out a long, black hair which, judging by its coarse texture, clearly came from some animal.

Approaching Cigarette very gently, he took the hair delicately between his fingers and began stroking the boy's forehead with it, very lightly, back and forth, back and forth. The boy lay there as if dead, his eyes closed and his lips tightly pressed together.

The old man continued the slow stroking, back and forth, for several seconds. Then he bent over Tikky, the cook's assistant, a boy, indeed almost still a child, and began stroking his forehead with the hair in the same manner.

But at the very first touch of the hair, a strange sound broke the silence of the hut: the bleating of a little goat.

To my astonishment, I realized that the sound came from Tikky, who lay completely motionless except for the opening of his lips as he uttered that plaintive cry, which sounded exactly like the bleating of a young goat.

The witch doctor repeated his slow stroking four times, and each time the bleating was repeated with the inhuman precision of a mechanical toy.

The same thing happened when the old man turned to the cook. Only the limp body of the poor man was immediately shaken from head to toe by a violent shudder.

However, the stroking with the hair had absolutely no effect on Penny, the last of the four.

The witch doctor, whose eyes lit up with satisfaction, looked at me for a moment, as though wishing to enjoy the silent compliment contained in my astonished and interested expression.

Then, turning his back to me, he bent over Cigarette first and then Penny - the two who had not reacted - and performed certain manipulations over their bodies which I could not see, but could only infer from the movements of his head and elbows.

Finally, he straightened up, walked calmly towards the hut's exit, and beckoned me to follow him.

About thirty paces from the hut, he stopped and fixed his gaze on the doorway through which he had just emerged. I too stared at it, although I do not know what I expected to see.

Several minutes of complete silence followed while I waited behind the old man.

Then Cigarette and Penny came out of the hut, their faces free of swelling, their bodies supple and strong, showing none of the remnants of the illness that had just been so alarming.

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Yet, unlike their usual carefree behavior, they hung their heads as though ashamed, did not greet us, and immediately made their way towards the bush at the edge of the clearing.

Although I did not want to disturb the witch doctor with unnecessary questions, I could not help asking what had happened and where the boys were going.

"Wait, Musungu," was his only reply.

But his eyes looked at me with a fleeting smile.

A quarter of an hour passed as I stood there, looking first towards the hut and then towards the dense undergrowth into which the two boys had disappeared. Yet nothing happened.

At last the witch doctor spoke to me:

"Look, Musungu," he whispered.

And I saw the two boys emerge from the bush, each carrying a black, pitifully bleating young goat in his arms.

As the two boys approached us, I finally remembered that when the witch doctor had visited me a few days earlier, he had specifically asked about two such goats.

I also realized then that the hair with which the foreheads of the four boys had been stroked must have come from one of these animals, which had been intended for a tribal ceremony.

“The twins dedicated to the great god Monze,” the witch doctor murmured, more to himself than to me.

“But where did the boys find them?” I asked.

“They knew about them, although they did not steal them. They knew where those other two”-and he nodded indignantly towards the hut-“had hidden them after the theft.”

And he spat angrily on the ground.

The face of Soap, who emerged from behind a hut with his eyes bulging, caught his attention.

“I saw this one myself down at the spring on the day of the theft, washing clothes, and I knew he was innocent. That is why the illness passed him by.”

It was now clear that the illness affecting the four boys had been deliberately inflicted by the witch doctor himself.

But how? By what mysterious means?

And how had he so masterfully banished that illness from two of the boys?

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But the witch doctor spoke again. “Those two,” he said, nodding once more towards the hut, “will see another sun pass before their suffering ends, so that the future will not seek them in vain.”

And with a greeting he went on his way, as imposing as ever, although he had a kid tucked under each arm. I wish I could give a complete explanation of the witch doctor's arts. Unfortunately, that is not possible. I can only clearly remember the many conjectures that went through my mind at the time, and how eagerly I waited to see what would happen to my cook and Tikky. I gave them no further medication, but merely looked in on them from time to time to see how they were doing. Yet their condition remained unchanged until the following day. They lay, as it were, in a state of unconsciousness, groaning now and then, while the terrible swelling of their lips and eyes persisted unabated.

Then suddenly-exactly twenty-four hours after the witch doctor had left-the boys came back to life. I saw them emerge from the hut in perfectly normal physical condition, spread out their blankets, and wash and scrub themselves thoroughly, as was the rule in camp.

Then they passed near me, murmuring the saddest and most guilt-ridden greeting of their lives. And without waiting for my orders, they hurried over to the other three boys and packed up the camp together with them, making a touching attempt to regain my favor through an utterly unprecedented display of diligence.

15. Atakufa Kesho: The Curse of the White Rhinoceros

The second example I mentioned took place several months later, much farther east, on the other side of Northern Rhodesia, at the border with Portuguese Mozambique. Once again I had set out on my own, even more so than usual. The terrain was so uneven and rocky that I had to leave my truck and caravan trailer behind and continue on foot for several days. A few carriers hired locally reluctantly transported on their heads a small emergency tent, my camp bed, and a couple of crates of food and ammunition, along with a few other indispensable items.

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Cigarette and Peany, Soap, the cook, and Tikky had not been granted permission to cross the border. I had therefore been obliged to pay them off and give them a good bonus so that they could return to their villages in Barotseland. Instead, I had been forced to hire a few boys on the spot, whom the handful of Portuguese immigrants and the customs officials had

recommended to me as reasonably reliable. They came from the same village near the border as the carriers, who by then had already fallen a considerable number of miles behind me. Or, to put it more precisely, they had come.

For they, the carriers, and the two guides had all vanished silently, en masse, during the previous night. Thus, on that oppressively hot August afternoon, I could have challenged the whole world to find another living creature anywhere on the thorn-covered Tsenan Plateau who was half as lonely and disheartened as I was.

In disgust, I mentally surveyed my various possessions scattered all around me, trying to decide which of dozens of urgent tasks I should tackle first, when something quite unexpected happened. The most unattractive, insignificant specimen of an indigenous man I had ever laid eyes on suddenly stood before me, as though he had glided down out of the air. And yet, without this native, I might never have learned anything of the absurd “Curse of the White Rhinoceros”-nor later witnessed with my own eyes a human being transforming in a way that I must almost call a miracle.

At a cautious distance, the slender, exhausted figure stood hesitantly. His dwarf-like legs tense and spread apart, his light spear held half-raised in suspicion, the man watched me attentively, as though ready to flee at the slightest sign of displeasure on my part.

“Well,” I asked gently, “what are you afraid of?”

Only then did he dare to come a few steps closer and utter a few words of greeting. He spoke Swahili, a language with which I was fortunately already quite familiar. After a few encouraging words from me, he modestly explained how he had learned of my predicament. In the middle of the morning, he said, he had been at the spring drinking when several men, speaking loudly, had approached. He had hidden and listened to their conversation.

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Although he had not been able to understand everything they said in their own language, he had gathered that they were bad men, who thought nothing of walking away from their work and abandoning their bwana.

When the men had quenched their thirst and gone on their way, he had decided to come and see whether he might be fortunate enough to take their

place. For he needed a great deal of money. And urgently. So he had followed their tracks back - and here he was.

It seemed too good to be true. Yet a few minutes later a cheerful fire was crackling in the collapsible kitchen stove. A little while after that, thorny branches had been piled up at the most strategically important points as protection against nocturnal raiders.

And before sunset the little man trotted off happily, laden with empty canvas water bags, to fetch a fresh supply of drinking water.

The following morning I asked him his name. He seemed quite dismayed by my question. Then he said, “I am the son of Masakini.”

That was a truly odd answer. Firstly, Masakini means “The Unfortunate One”. Secondly, I had never heard of an indigenous man giving his father’s name without first revealing his own.

Slowly, as though searching for the right words, he added, “I am the grandson of the Cursed One.” And once again, as on the previous evening, he looked tense and frightened, ready to flee.

“Why would a mother wish to call her son ‘The Cursed One’? Wouldn’t that bring him bad luck?”

“It was not his mother,” said the little man. “My father’s father was given that name when he was old - because of the misery he had brought upon his village.”

The beginning of the story, it seemed, reached back almost a hundred years, to a time when his grandfather, in the prime of his youth, was a wealthy chief in the north.

His wealth came not so much from the revenues of his tribe as from the kanga, the white rhinoceros, of which there were still plenty in British East Africa in those days. The grandfather was the most ruthless of all hunters and had methods of his own. For although he never took even one of his subjects with him, he managed every year to kill dozens of the much-feared kanga, particularly the females, since in this species the females are the ones with the longest horns.

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The little man's grandfather had turned his hunting speciality into a gold mine, for rhinoceros hides, and even more so their horns, were of great value. But the white rhinoceros (which is by no means white, but rather field-grey in color) reproduces very slowly. As the most powerful and, apart from the elephant, the largest of all land animals, it gives birth to only one calf at a time, and then only at long intervals. The persistent slaughter of the females with the largest horns quickly led to the almost complete extermination of the kanga in the chief's territory.

The chief then found another way to maintain his wealth: he began selling his subjects to the Arab slave traders on the coast.

A few years later, this source of income also dried up, for anyone who could run fled and hid in the bush. The slave traders, dissatisfied with the increasingly dwindling supplies of "black ivory", attacked the village by force. This time they captured the chief himself, along with twenty-two of his adult relatives. They fastened metal collars around their necks and linked them together with a long iron chain. They loaded the men with the "white ivory" of elephant tusks and drove their captives before them towards the coast.

As the long line of these wretched, unarmed people crossed a clearing, an enormous rhinoceros came trotting out of the bush. While the Arab slave traders scattered in every direction, the rhinoceros, snorting and blowing furiously, charged straight at the captive chief.

The gigantic monster, weighing six tons, struck with terrible force. It not only impaled the old chief on its five-foot-long front horn, but the impact was so tremendous that all the other twenty-two slaves broke their necks at the same instant and died on the spot.

This tragedy had an enormous effect on the few survivors of what had once been a numerous and prosperous tribe. The witch doctors saw in it a curse that would haunt the family of their former chief for all eternity. They therefore changed his name and called him "The Cursed One". His only surviving son was given the new name Masakini, "The Unfortunate One". He and his mother were banished from the territory of the tribe.

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Approximately thirty years later, the curse struck again. Masakini, who had found refuge in southern Tanganyika, married there and raised a family on his small farm. Suddenly, he was attacked and killed by a white rhinoceros – the only one that had strayed into that region within living memory. His wife died shortly afterwards, but not before urging her only young son to keep moving farther and farther south, to lands where there were no kangas. And so the little man had grown up, staying a few years here and a few years there. Whenever rumors spread through the bush that a rhinoceros had been sighted somewhere nearby, he had hastily made himself scarce. At that particular moment, the Tsenan Plateau seemed to him an entirely safe place. Yet he knew beforehand that the old curse was still pursuing him. One fine day, a rhinoceros would undoubtedly appear nearby, even here, and he would have to flee once more. Otherwise, the curse would come true for him too.

'Is that why you don't want to tell me your name?' I asked him as gently as I could.

He nodded shyly. Then, resignedly, he shrugged his narrow, bony shoulders and said, 'My name is Atakufa Kesho.' No wonder he looked like a hunted animal cornered by its pursuers! Literally, the name meant 'the one who dies tomorrow'. But there was more to it than that. It reflected the relentless pressure under which he lived, his fatalistic acceptance of the doom that would inevitably befall him sooner or later, and the aversion that other natives must have felt towards him, as though he were some kind of living corpse.

Yet, he explained in all seriousness, throughout all this time he had been filled with a hope that occupied his every thought. If only he could manage to raise enough money to consult a certain wise man, then the heavy burden would be lifted from his frail shoulders.

'I need money, a lot of money. Enough to buy two cows,' he sighed. 'And I need steadfastness to take the wise man's teachings to heart.' He squared his bony shoulders and thrust out his frail chest. 'Steadfastness, however, I do have,' he continued. 'As for the money, I can earn the price of one cow by working for you, Bwana. I have already saved enough for the second cow. Here is the money, Bwana.'

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With that, he drew from his loincloth a small, heavy parcel of coins, wrapped in the dirtiest piece of cloth imaginable. When he asked me to keep it for him, I could not refuse. He handed it over with such pride and such a magnificent flourish, as though it contained a collection of precious diamonds.

Atakufa Kesho was not exaggerating when he said he possessed steadfastness. Of course, there must have been moments when he managed to snatch a brief nap or a little something to eat. But I never saw him eat or sleep. He was up long before I awoke. He worked incessantly, like a man possessed, stayed around me until I retired for the night, and then kept the fires going throughout the entire night. He seemed to anticipate my every wish and was of greater assistance to me in my research than any African, and even some of the white men, whom I had taken along on my expeditions.

The only miracle that even he was unable to perform was finding porters, simply because there were no natives anywhere in the surrounding area.

As my study of the Tsenan Plateau drew to a close, Atakufa Kesho once again became my savior. I explained to him where I had arranged to meet my companions and gave him a note to deliver to them. Not only did he have little faith in the success of this mission, but he also knew of a detour along which one of our lorries could reach the place where I was camped without much difficulty. Provided, he added suspiciously, that the other Bwana would allow him to ride in the lorry so that he could show my men the right way. He went one step further and left me enough water and food for ten days, promising to return by then.

And incredible as it may sound, on the ninth morning I heard the approach of a steady rumbling sound – that of our largest lorry. And that extraordinary little fellow drove it, without the slightest hesitation, straight to a spot no more than twenty meters from my tent. After a brief exchange of greetings and news, Charlie, one of the mechanics, and six of their best boys began packing and loading, energetically assisted by none other than the man we now called ‘the little man with the great steadfastness’.

And what happened then? Much as it broke my heart, I had to tell him that the hour of our farewell had come!

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Poor Atakufa Kesho nearly fainted when he heard the news. He had worked for me for less than a month. By his reckoning, he had not even earned the price of a cow's leg, let alone that of a whole cow. I, however, took a different view of the matter and was able to pay him ten times the agreed amount, while still feeling that I had saved money, quite apart from my gratitude towards him. My companions, who had by now heard his entire moving story, also added a few small gifts of money.

When he added all this to the money he had entrusted to me for safekeeping and calculated the total amount, I genuinely thought he was going to collapse with joy. As our heavily laden lorry bumped and rattled across the uneven, rocky plateau, following the barely visible track that Atakufa Kesho had so thoughtfully shown us, I watched in the rear-view mirror as his touching, slender figure grew smaller and smaller. He continued waving slowly and sadly until he disappeared from sight.

'Farewell, poor little fellow,' I thought to myself. 'I shall never see you again, I know that. And I am glad of it. For nothing could be more dreadful than having to witness the curse come true upon you, with some gigantic monster of a rhinoceros trampling you to pulp…'

But the future was to prove that I was mistaken. And how terribly mistaken I was!

16. African independence: blessing or curse?

Even today, when four-fifths of the African continent has so suddenly cast off its colonial shackles (although, in most cases, in such a catastrophic manner) and risen, in less than three years, to become some thirty more or less 'independent' nations, no one acting in good faith and possessing even a little knowledge of the facts can deny one thing: namely, that the intervention of European powers in Africa during the past century, and the network of police stations and officials, missionaries, hospitals and schools that they had established across virtually every territory, however remote, has in many respects had the most beneficial effects on the native population. This is so even though, in some cases, these beginnings were almost, if not quite, as bloody as what has recently occurred as a natural consequence of freedom attained prematurely and too suddenly.

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It has, in practical terms, brought an end to the appalling horrors of slavery and to the endless wars of annihilation waged by tribes against one another. It has opened up regular and lasting sources of food and put a stop to the spread of the most dreadful epidemics. It has improved and multiplied the yields of agriculture and livestock farming. To a large extent, it has abolished barbaric ceremonies involving human sacrifices and cruel punishments in the form of various kinds of torture, including one of the most horrific of all: impalement.

Yet, however hard I try, I myself cannot summon much admiration for the unseemly haste with which these same European powers suddenly withdrew and brought about a situation in which the black race, so to speak, covered in a single second the enormous distance that we white people have painstakingly traversed, centimeter by centimeter, over thousands upon thousands of years and at the cost of so many sacrifices, bloodshed, discipline, suffering and acts of heroism.

I myself had to spend almost twenty years learning before I was sufficiently prepared to take my place in the world. And during those years – as well as many years before them and many more afterwards – I lived within a family that was itself the product of a civilization which had gradually travelled the long road from the Bronze Age and left behind milestones such as Cicero, Caesar, Dante, da Vinci, Columbus, Volta, d'Annunzio and Marconi, to name but a few.

And am I supposed to regard myself and all the generations that preceded me as such a collection of fools, compared with the Negro, that he can cover in a few years the distance it took us dozens of centuries to conquer?

Of course, there are exceptions – relatively rare ones: the individual Negro who displays promising intelligence and potential for development. For the most part, however, he appears to me to be a pathetic creature – a precocious plant artificially forced to grow in a greenhouse and then exposed to the mists and snowfalls of winter. Once left to his own devices, he generally finds no place in the world prepared to receive him, and his own superficial education is insufficient to enable him to create such a place for himself. And so he often becomes an unhappy misfit.

73

I recently had the opportunity to discuss this question openly with a young Bantu of this class. As the son of a distinguished chiefly family, naturally alert, quick-witted and intelligent, he could have lived a contented, happy life in his village on the west coast, respected by everyone. The income from his herds of cattle and his garden would have provided him with a comfortable existence and still left him ample scope to apply and develop his good qualities in the exercise of his inherited chiefly duties.

But civilization took him away from his home and first placed him in a local missionary school, then in a college in Europe and finally at an American university, in order to give him a taste of the emotions, comforts and amusements of white people, to allow him a fleeting glimpse of a new and wonderful world, and then suddenly to tell him: Take it – it is yours!

Then came the rude awakening. He felt dissatisfied and miserable both in his own country and in the Eldorado of which he had caught a fleeting glimpse. How could he return to the miserable, filthy huts of his village and lead a life of almost idle leisure and the utmost simplicity after having learned to appreciate hygiene and baths, motorcars and beautiful houses, theatres and libraries, ballets and cinemas and concerts?

But how could he acquire these wonderful things when that very same civilization which had awakened his desire for them now slammed shut in his face the social and economic doors leading to this paradise? Nor could he even attempt to force his way through those doors, which were closing around him in such a bewildering fashion. The inferiority complex resulting from his sudden transplantation had become so powerful that it had replaced the natural self-assurance of the proud son of a great chief.

'Are we to blame?' he asked me earnestly. 'You white people came and occupied our land and told us that you were doing so for our own good, to save both our souls and our bodies. You told us to forget our customs and traditions and our way of life, and to live your own way, in which we would have the same rights and duties as you.'

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Then, so unexpectedly that it took one's breath away, my country was granted independence and became a nation. We have our own flag and national anthem. We have our own president, a prime minister, our ministers, ambassadors and delegates to the United Nations, and so on. I could have

been one of them, doing good work and taking pride in it, but only if I had belonged to the right party. I was a member of the wrong one. When I hurried home to offer my services, I was thrown into prison. Without a trial, of course. With the help of friends I managed to escape - but not before I had been beaten half to death.

And now, what can I do? I certainly shall not return to our capital while that party is in power. Perhaps I might be allowed to return quietly to my village. The fact remains, however, that I no longer have a place in the sun. Not among my own people, who admire me because I despise them, and still less in your world, which despises me simply because it has taught me to admire it.'

As for matters of the soul, it took thousands upon thousands of years of struggle and persecution and dawning enlightenment before Jesus Christ could appear. Then nearly twenty centuries have passed, and still we have only vague, divided and contradictory ideas about his teachings. How, then, when we ourselves have neither unity nor precision in our understanding of religion and science, can we presume that these hard-won fruits of our civilization should penetrate the minds of a great and alien race in a few short years?

The great majority of the civilized Bantus with whom I have broached the subject have had a great deal to say about God and the saints. But whatever faith they may profess in their new religion, it is merely a new form of superstition that has taken the place of the old. Unfortunately, it lacks the strong roots, the open-minded yet profound philosophy, and the childlike - but, from their point of view, just and logical - account of the great facts of creation that their old pagan religions taught them.

75

If we examine closely the Christianity of a baptized Bantu, we shall discover that the new God whom he worships, as he puts it, is nothing other than the God of his forefathers – except that a long white beard and a throne made of clouds have been added to Him, upon which He sits majestically, and that He is wrapped in a light-colored robe, with some misty, circular object suspended behind His head. Jesus Christ and the Apostles he has simply elevated to the rank of super witch-doctors, who are believed to have performed even greater miracles than the sorcerers of his own tribe. Incidentally, he has by no means entirely lost his confidence in the latter.

As for the Virgin Mary, I shall always remember the explanation given to me by a Zulu who had been educated at a Catholic mission station. 'Mary is the Madonna,' he said, 'and the Madonna is a python priestess. Only a much more powerful one.'

The vices, shortcomings and excesses of the white man have, unfortunately, been adopted by the Bantus quickly enough, but not his virtues. It will take decades, not days, before our notions of honour and justice, of sincerity and decency, of compassion, responsibility and what we call 'democracy' are implanted in the heart of the native, rather than merely painted onto the surface of his personality.

Meanwhile, in adopting the new customs, he forgets the innate virtues of his own race and loses a great part of that wonderful wealth of instincts and intuitions which his ancestors possessed and which, through countless generations, they had continually sharpened through their constant contact with nature and its visible and invisible, beneficent and harmful forces.

Even if we disregard such exceptional individuals as that magnificent Skaimunga or, in his own way, the poor little Atakufa Kesho, we shall find that the average native, when observed in his natural, untouched environment, is 90 per cent attractive, cheerful, happy and carefree. Modest in his nakedness, graceful in his movements, and exceedingly hospitable with the little he has at his disposal, he is loyal, good and honest. In all the many years I have spent in Africa, I have associated with thousands of 'uncivilized' Africans and have never, truly never, encountered one who was a complete scoundrel.

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Dozens of times I have left a lorry, loaded with tinned food and valuable equipment of every kind, standing completely unguarded at the roadside for weeks or months, and it was never tampered with, nor was its contents ever searched through. Only once have I been robbed, and I must say that the scoundrel who stole my wallet when I left it in my car in Kampala for a few minutes was such a civilized native that he could read and write quite well. I discovered this when he later used these abilities to send me a letter demanding that I buy back from him the personal documents he had found in the wallet, which were of no value to him.

Admittedly, millions of Bantus have now obtained Uhuru, the independence they had dreamed of for so long. But what has happened? The many white people, who, for all their faults, had also spread health, justice and relative prosperity among those entrusted to their care through their hard work, have in most cases been displaced and replaced by small cliques of black politicians. Seized by the intoxication of power, they think only of advancing their own careers and enriching themselves, while the masses under their regime no longer have employment or any human rights, but instead starve, are imprisoned, murdered, raped, robbed and practically enslaved all over again. And this is when they are not being decimated by epidemics that have re-emerged and are no longer kept under control, or by renewed massacres between races, tribes and even political parties – although very few people have any idea what these political parties actually stand for.

These are my personal convictions, and I have enough common sense to shrink from claiming that I am right and that others who do not share my views are wrong. But just take a look at what has happened (and is still happening) in the former Belgian Congo and Katanga, in Togo and Cameroon, in Ghana, Chad, and so on.

This, however, is not a book about politics, sociology or other such matters. The point which, in my opinion, nobody can refute is the fact that the first effect of hastily stamping our civilisation, mentality and political customs onto the character and nature of the native is that it deprives him of his most precious ancestral heritage.

77

I am thinking of that inheritance of marvellous gifts and powers, incomprehensible to us, which enable primitive indigenous people to communicate with one another over great distances, to maintain a perfect sense of orientation and direction under the most extraordinary circumstances, and to find food and water in ways and under conditions that almost border on the miraculous.

These are powers that also equip many of them with the ability to overcome numerous diseases, both to cause and to cure them, to exercise authority over most poisonous snakes and, with an extraordinary sense of justice, to master complicated situations which, one might think, would require the maturity of experience, reasoning and deductions of our shrewdest judges.

And, most remarkable of all, there is the gift that enables some of their highest witch-doctors to see into both the past and the future with the same clarity with which we are able to see the present.

Call them what you will: instinct, intuition or a sixth sense, or lump them all together under the vague and often wrongly used term 'magic power' – these gifts and powers, which guide, sustain and govern the entire life of the native when left to himself, cannot be denied.

As far as I am concerned, I must repeat that ever since my earliest days in Africa, and even more emphatically since my encounter with Bapuka, they have exerted such a powerful fascination over me that I have never grown tired – and presumably never shall grow tired – of studying their infinite and varied manifestations, which I have been able to observe and the most remarkable of which I now intend to describe.

17. A peculiar sense of orientation

One of the abilities most widely found among Africans of every race is undoubtedly that of retaining their sense of direction and orientation, even during the night, in unfamiliar territory and under the most difficult circumstances.

The maps, compasses and other instruments that we have invented for this purpose may sometimes prove inadequate and leave us stranded somewhere.

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However, I have never seen a native in such a desperate predicament – with the exception of a few cases in which I wished to be guided by some rogue to a particular place which he preferred to avoid, usually because of some strong superstition associated with that location.

One day I conducted an experiment with Tikky, my cook's assistant and, without doubt, the stupidest boy in my camp. I took him into a hut, firmly blindfolded him and spun him round and round, first in one direction and then in the opposite direction. A dozen times I brought him to a halt and called out: 'Where does the sun rise?'

Slightly frightened, yet giggling at this crazy game of the white man, Tikky unfailingly pointed east – with the precision of the most perfect instrument.

The reaction of foolish Tikky, the almost daily examples provided by so many Bantu and Pygmy guides that it would be impossible for me to list them all, and the marvelous certainty with which Skaimunga, blinded by rain and mist, steered my canoe around every kind of obstacle and straight towards Bapuka's little island on that distant, dark night, all these things came back to my mind when, quite recently, I read detailed reports of systematic research carried out to determine the extent of PSI (parapsychology) or other forms of ESP (extrasensory perception), which have been observed in certain lower animals.

For four years, for example, Dr G. Kramer in Germany and Dr G. V. Z. Matthews in England have been conducting experiments with homing pigeons without tiring. The former used birds that had never flown more than 16 kilometers from home. Suddenly, they were transported in completely light-proof boxes to places 130 kilometers away and then released. Of the 27 birds with no previous experience of long-distance flights, most immediately set off towards home within a few seconds. Fourteen returned to their loft on the same day, and ten on the following morning. Only three were lost (unless they were shot during the return journey or perhaps fell prey to large birds of prey).

Dr Matthews, on the other hand, experimented with young pigeons that had been specially trained to return home from only one direction, namely from the north. Once again, the birds were transported in completely light-proof boxes and released at a point 130 kilometers west of their loft. Without hesitation, the birds immediately flew eastwards. In another experiment, they were released 145 kilometers south of their loft. Most of them immediately headed northwards, while the others followed within about ten seconds.

79

A large number of physical and physiological hypotheses have been put forward in an attempt to discover how a pigeon knows which direction it must take. One of these hypotheses is that pigeons orient themselves by the sun. Very well. But if that were the case, their nervous system would have to possess something like a built-in chronometer, a sextant, navigation tables and even a calculating machine, in order to relate the solar data observed at the point of release to the data previously observed at the pigeon loft.

Moreover, all these calculations would have to be made and successfully completed within a maximum period of 40 seconds. The birds are given 30 seconds to adjust to the light after a night journey in a cage covered with tarpaulins. And after being released, they have the 10 seconds during which most of the experimental birds had already set off directly on their homeward flight.

Just as untenable is the kinaesthetic theory that, thanks to the semicircular canals of its inner ear, which supposedly enable it to perceive the 'Coriolis force' resulting from the Earth's rotation on its axis, a pigeon always knows exactly where it is.

For this reason, in these experiments some of the pigeons were transported to the release point in stationary cages, while others were carried in cages mounted on turntables that rotated at different speeds during the journey (rather as I had done with Tikky in that hut, although in a less scientific manner).

Were these latter pigeons confused because, throughout the outward journey, they had to find their way back to their pigeon loft or towards the equator from a constantly changing position? Not in the slightest. One group of pigeons flew home just as quickly and without hesitation as the other.

Another hypothesis that proved unfounded was that pigeons are also sensitive to the Earth's magnetism. This would mean that pigeons find their way back to their loft by relating their perception of the 'Coriolis force' to that of the Earth's magnetic field, which varies at different points on the Earth's surface.

An increasingly complicated explanation – but one that can easily be disproved.

Once again, the experimental pigeons were divided into two groups: magnets were attached to the wings of one group, while non-magnetic objects of the same weight were attached to the wings of the other.

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The first group was therefore supposed to fly within its own field, which was so strong that the birds could not sense the Earth's magnetism. Yet both groups made their way home with exactly the same confidence and haste.



11. Repairing a log bridge that had been washed away.



12. The terrain played many nasty tricks on our vehicle.



13. In the impassable Karoo Desert.



14. Limbabwe, the mysterious 'City of Silence'.

In other words, we still do not know how pigeons find their way home, nor why cats do the same thing over extraordinarily great distances – such as the now very famous Fluffy, who spent two years travelling the 560 km that

separated her from her owner's house. Nor do we know why so many migratory fish and birds continually repeat their fantastic journeys, for which no one has yet found an explanation.

Parapsychology has now come to the fore as a possible solution. If one day it turns out that it applies to pigeons and cats, to fish and birds, then I see no reason why the same parapsychology should not be used to unravel the mystery of the unfailing sense of direction possessed by a Skaimunga and a Tikky, by the Pygmies and every Bantu, whose natural abilities have not yet been too greatly affected and spoiled by civilization as we understand it.

18. The African person: hidden instincts and powers

On one of my first expeditions, I discovered that a monkey in my camp was not only a delightful pet, but also a useful guard. Ever since then, I have always tried to have a monkey with me. I let it sleep in a box beneath the veranda of my tent or on the roof of my caravan. When I am then woken in the middle of the night by its irritating chattering, I can be certain that some dangerous animal is prowling around the camp, perhaps a leopard or a lion, and uncomfortably close to every one of us.

My monkey also knows how to repay my hospitality with other services. Whenever I find an unfamiliar fruit or vegetable whose appetizing appearance raises hopes of some variety in the monotonous menu of meat and tinned food, I try it out on the monkey. If it reaches for it with its customary greed, I do not hesitate for a moment to use more of it for our meals.

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If, however, it throws it away with a comical gesture of contempt, then in nine cases out of ten a chemical analysis will reveal that the harmless-looking fruit contains some irritating or harmful substance, if not an outright deadly poison.

If no monkey is available, it is not an unkind comparison to say that the same test can be carried out with an unspoilt native. Even if he is a stranger in the country, he will act exactly like the monkey, guided by the same infallible instinct and displaying the same spontaneous, unfailing judgment.

And anyone who takes the trouble to make such observations can be sure that if his boy suddenly rises from sleep, stokes the fire until the flames leap

high, then nestles even closer within its protective circle of light and miraculously avoids being completely roasted, some invisible enemy is lurking nearby. The native has received a silent warning of the presence of an intruder, one that works just as effectively as the shrill sound of an electric burglar alarm that wakes a sleeping householder in the city.

The attraction of Nyama (meat) for the native is no less powerful, and obtaining meat is the principal occupation of primitive man. There is a striking example of this uncanny ability, which tells the native where and when Nyama is available for him to obtain his share, that I witnessed in the Budjumu lowlands of Ruanda-Urundi and now recall.

I urgently needed to obtain some fresh meat for one of my companions who was ill. Yet although I went on several hunting trips, I could not find even the smallest game animal. As I passed through a small village, I saw a fresh hide from an eland, and the villagers told me where the animal had been killed and where I might hope to find more.

The next morning I set out and crossed the bare plain until, through my field glasses, I spotted a lone eland in the distance. Again and again I tried to approach it, but each time it galloped away before I could get within shooting range. I tried everything: I crawled forward inch by inch along the ground, made wide and cautious detours, and then suddenly ran towards it at full speed.

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But it was all in vain. The eland was always in sight, but never within shooting range. Finally, discouraged, I sat down and, although it was still 100 meters away, I took the most careful aim I could through the telescopic sight and fired. The animal did not move, but as soon as I stood up, it galloped away.

How those natives had managed to kill an eland with a spear in a country where game was so scarce, while I had had no hunting luck at all despite having my vehicle, binoculars, rifle and telescopic sight, remained a mystery to me.

But the following day, driven by necessity, I decided to try my luck once more, and was already at the same spot at daybreak. I left the vehicle behind a few bushes and, ridiculous as it may seem, tied several leafy branches to my

body in the hope of deceiving my quarry, then set off hunting. Whether I was successful or simply lucky, after several hours of maneuvering I managed to creep close enough to a group of four eland to kill a large bull.

By then I had walked several kilometers, and a stretch of impassable, swampy ground separated me from my vehicle. I scanned the horizon in every direction through my binoculars, but there was not a hut in sight, nor a single native. I therefore had to decide to cut off as much meat from the animal as I could carry and leave the rest behind.

In the middle of this rather repulsive task, I scanned the horizon once more. Far away, just barely visible through my binoculars, I saw three natives who appeared to be coming towards me. I looked through the glasses again and saw that small human figures were approaching from other directions too. In less than an hour, nine natives had reached me, finished skinning the animal and carried all the meat I wanted back to my vehicle. Then they hurried off again towards their huts, very happy with the Nyama they had shared with me in a brotherly spirit.

Back at camp, I added two new questions to my collection of unanswered ones. What had summoned those natives from such a great distance, where they could neither have seen my movements nor heard the report of my rifle?

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And what had told them the previous day that my shot had missed, and that there was no need for them to appear, since there would be no meat to obtain?

A phenomenon very similar to this, in my opinion, is the occult attraction that water exerts upon almost every native.

A particularly interesting demonstration of this suddenly took place in the Karru Desert. We were approaching the end of the dry season when, one day, a sudden wind arose unexpectedly early and blew relentlessly across the whole country, day and night. The small rivers that had supplied us with enough water immediately dried up. Every bird and every other animal disappeared, and even the sparse vegetation withered and quickly died.

We immediately began rationing the small amount of water we had left, allotting each member of our party a generous half-liter for drinking, cooking,

washing and shaving. In this way we hoped to make the water last until we reached the next village five days later.

Our truck, however, paid no attention to any water rationing. The resistance of the wind and the fine sand blown into the radiator made the engine boil like an old-fashioned locomotive, and we had to watch helplessly as our water supply disappeared into its insatiable, round mouth.

Only someone who has experienced the agonies of thirst can understand our state of mind. Although, of course, we were not yet seriously suffering from a lack of water, the discomfort was considerable.

“I wish I were a water diviner instead of an anthropologist,” groaned one of my companions.

A water diviner! That gave me an idea. Here was one of the very few forms of the sixth sense that had resisted the influence of civilization and survived in a handful of white people. Surely it must still be active in primitive man. I called for Milk, our cook and general factotum at the time, the only native within a radius of 160 km.

“Upi manzi?” (Where is there some water?) I asked when the boy appeared.

“Apani asi” (I don't know), he replied with a carefree, cheerful laugh. I pointed to a few empty buckets. “Bring these back to me full of water,” I told him, “and do it quickly.”

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Obediently and cheerfully he set off, defying the cutting wind that nearly swept him off his feet.

We waited for almost two hours, but then Milk appeared again, grinning from ear to ear, his two buckets filled to the brim with beautiful spring water.

After gratefully drinking the delicious, cool nectar, we asked him where he had found it.

“Lapa,” he replied vaguely. “There!” We followed him to see where “lapa” was, and he led us to a hole one metre deep that he had dug with his hunting

knife. A spring bubbled up at the bottom, and we soon filled the tanks and every available container from it.

On each of the three following evenings, when we made camp for the night, Milk confidently set off into the desert in search of water, with us following behind. And every time we reached a place that showed no outward signs whatsoever of the presence of water, or even of sufficient moisture, Milk would suddenly stop and say, “Lapa.”

When we broke camp on the fifth day, I glanced at the barometer of our little meteorological station. The needle stood exactly in the middle of the word “dry”.

“Hey, Milk,” I said half jokingly in my Swahili, “when is the rain coming?”

“Today, musungu,” he replied in his English.

“Today? Well, that's the limit!” the anthropologist said irritably. For a particularly strong gust of wind had briefly parted the yellowish cloud of dust in which we had been living for a week, revealing a meagre patch of hard, blue sky.

“Yes, musungu,” said the innocent cook with a broad grin and an emphatic nod.

During the afternoon, dark clouds suddenly unleashed a cataract of rain upon us which, as we knew, would not stop until the end of the rainy season.

Milk, who seemed very pleased with himself, turned to the professor.

“You see, musungu, today it’s raining cats and dogs,” he said, convinced that he had learned the English word for rain.

And our barometer?

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When I consulted it again, it appeared to me as a meaningful emblem of all those series of instruments, devices, inventions and contrivances to which, through painstaking labor, we have successively transferred the protective qualities that primitive man has preserved more or less intact in their natural

form – perfect and effortless, subject neither to losses, strikes, breakdowns nor failures.

Only when the plain had been transformed into an endless swamp and we were floundering about like drowning rats did the barometer's needle reach the word “Rain”.

And the beautiful, gleaming instrument itself also seemed exceedingly proud of itself.

19. Beyond the boundaries of time and space

One of the members of a scientific congress, a professor with a luxuriant and impressive beard, entertained the gathering with the results of the excavations he had carried out in Babylon. Having found a small piece of copper wire during his excavations, he claimed that the Babylonians must therefore have known about and used the telegraph.

Whereupon another scientist, unwilling to be outdone, sprang to his feet and declared that during his excavations in Zimbabwe, the mysterious Rhodesian “City of Silence”, he had found no wire whatsoever, and that its prehistoric builders must therefore have known about and used wireless telegraphy.

This story, which an old friend of mine had once told half in earnest and half in jest, came back to me one day as I was walking from the hospital in Broken Hill, in Northern Rhodesia, back to my camp nearby.

A short while earlier, at about one o'clock that morning, I had been talking with one of the doctors in his office when a native assistant rushed in and hurriedly whispered a few words to him. A white man, a prospector, the assistant said excitedly, had been attacked by a leopard. Before his native companions could come to his aid, he had engaged in a fierce struggle with the predator, and only after several minutes of terrible wrestling with the beast had he managed to kill it with his knife. The white man had been badly wounded, and his native companions were now carrying him to Broken Hill.

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The doctor apologized and hurried out with his black assistant. When he returned a few minutes later, he surprised me by calmly sitting down and taking up the thread of our conversation again.

“And what is to be done about the prospector?” I asked him.

“Oh, there is still plenty of time,” he replied. “A doctor and two nurses have gone out to fetch him in the ambulance.”

“But I thought I understood your boy to say that the accident had happened this morning?”

“Yes, that is what he said,” the doctor replied. “An hour or two ago, I believe, but in Kabenda.”

Now, the village of Kabenda, on the Kafue River, lies approximately 320 kilometers from Broken Hill, and at that time the only connection between the two places was a road which, for the most part, was little more than a rough track. Along it, apart from the District Commissioner's station, there were only three or four scattered farms.

“Of course,” the doctor continued, “even my twenty years in Africa have not taught me how on earth the natives are able to transmit messages in this fashion. But Karimo delivered this message with an expression on his face that showed he was absolutely certain of his facts. And I hope the ambulance will arrive in time.”

The doctor, with his long experience of Africa, had therefore accepted this message and acted upon it without the slightest hesitation or doubt, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

And there is really nothing more to be said about it. That is simply how it is. The “scientist” in the story at the beginning of this chapter may not have been quite as ridiculous in his assertion as it might appear at first sight – at least, had his assertion referred to the natives of today rather than to the unknown builders of Zimbabwe.

We are so proud of our latest inventions, of the newest improvements in wireless telegraphy, or of the possibility of perfecting television to such an extent that it can cross the oceans or be “reflected” everywhere by satellites orbiting in outer space.

Yet we know that, behind the scenes, whole platoons of scientists have to toil away in magnificent laboratories to develop and put these wonders into operation; that billions of dollars are spent on research; and that entire regiments of mechanics and operators must work with enormous installations, costly apparatus, labyrinths of wires and immense quantities of the most ingenious aerials.

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Then we come to Africa, and we see that through the damp shadows of the dense equatorial jungle, across the scorching, almost desert-like dryness of the endless plains, over the pestilential swamps, the enormous lakes and the mighty rivers, an entirely different system of wireless telegraphy and television is operating, one that is equal to all our modern inventions and sometimes even surpasses them.

Neither a scientist nor a mechanic is required to operate it. Only the black children of nature herself. We see their instruments. No laboratories or apparatus, just a few old tam-tams, hollowed out of tree trunks and closed at one or both ends with tightly stretched animal skins. Sometimes it is something even less complicated: columns of smoke during the day and flickering fires at night, passing messages from hilltop to hilltop.

And at other times, not even that – nothing at all. Nothing, absolutely nothing, that our five senses can see, hear or perceive in any way.

How the Africans do it, I do not know. Nobody knows. But the fact remains that they have a method, and have always had one, of somehow overcoming the mysterious boundaries of time and space, boundaries with which our scientists are nowadays experimenting in such fascinating ways.

It is one of the most astonishing phenomena that continually presents itself to anyone travelling in Africa. And anyone who has acquired some genuine knowledge of the natives can cite example after example of experiences of this kind.

For instance, when has a traveler ever succeeded in reaching a native village without his arrival having already been anticipated? Under certain circumstances, the natives may pretend to be surprised; that is true. But only

when it suits their purposes. The greater their apparent surprise, the more certain one may be that it is merely feigned.

And when a white man lives in the neighborhood – a farmer, a missionary or an official – the natives know about an impending visit long before the visitor himself does, even if he has a telephone, a telegraph or a short-wave radio station at his disposal.

Moreover, the natives know not only that a visit is imminent: they know where the traveler is going and why, what he wants and what he is doing, what his most outstanding characteristics are and often even what his secret weaknesses are, of which he himself may not even be aware.

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And, of course, they know his name, or at least the name that other natives have given him, which usually conveys, in one or two words, an accurate physical and mental portrait of the man.

How does it happen? If one has heard the messages of the tam-tams booming through the air, or has seen the signal fires flashing at night or the columns of smoke rising during the day, then the explanation is simple. But what if nothing has been seen or heard?

No white man has ever succeeded in penetrating the secret of this mysterious native system of telegraphy and television, and I do not believe that anyone will ever be able to approach it through materialistic channels.

As I strolled along, I thought about these things, and in particular I found myself pondering once again the little scene I had just witnessed in the hospital. If the message conveyed by the assistant to the doctor was accurate, and had indeed reached him in less than two hours across a stretch of 320 kilometers of sparsely populated country, then the matter was truly remarkable. Especially because the receiving station, so to speak, was not a native in his remote village, but someone living in the center of a town, in an atmosphere as distinctly European as that of this hospital.

But there was still that one “if” to be considered, and I resolved to investigate it as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, I reflected that this incident was more or less a repetition of something I had experienced years earlier in Italian Somaliland.

I remember that it was July 1924 and that, naturally, I had not yet become an American citizen. One night, while inspecting my Askari camp just outside the gates of Mogadishu, I happened to overhear a few words exchanged by my Somali orderly and another Askari beside the fire.

"Yesterday the Great King of the 'English' gave a present to the Great King of Italy."

Curious, I questioned the man, but only after much insistence did I manage to extract an explanation from him: the gift consisted of "Refuge Bay and a great, great deal of desert behind it and all around it, and thousands upon thousands of Somalis living there".

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When I told him that it was all nonsense, he grumblingly volunteered the dimensions of the territory as proof of his claim. But I was unable to make sense of his complicated calculations, which were all based - as was customary among the Somalis - on measurements such as: so many times the length from the elbow of one arm to the tip of the middle finger of the other hand, plus the width of the right hand and the distance from fingertip to fingertip of a man with his arms stretched out horizontally, and so on. Every conceivable part of the human anatomy was brought into these calculations.

I curtly forbade him - at that time I had many fewer years of experience of African life and African ways behind me - to go about spreading such foolish news. But he was not convinced and informed me politely, in the most correct and disciplined manner, that everybody already knew.

That same evening, assuming that 'everybody' included the man closest to the Governor, his Chief Secretary, who was a good friend of mine, I mentioned it to him. He took great pleasure in teasing me about it.

Ever since the end of the First World War, he finally told me, there had been talk of granting Italy colonial compensation. But although diplomatic discussions on the question had been under way in London and Rome for six years, and two commissions had now been considering the matter somewhere in Kenya for several months, not even the Governor himself had the slightest

idea how many more months or years the discussions might continue, much less what the exact extent of the territory to be given to Italy would be.

He added, however, that according to a general rumor the territory would include Refuge Bay and Kisimayu. I concluded from this that my orderly had probably picked up the rumor from some servant at the officers' mess. And that seemed to settle the matter.

Yet a few weeks later, in August, the news was published that Kisimayu and its territory had been handed over to Italy. Neither the Chief Secretary nor I knew what to think when I told him that the date on which the agreement had been signed was the very same day on which my orderly had received the news, complete with all its details.

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His information had been so exact that, when one of the Somali clerks worked out a calculation from that whole jumble of fingertips, arms, shoulders, hands, and so forth - which my orderly knew perfectly by heart and was only too eager to repeat in every detail - the result came to just under 2,000 square miles. The territory specified in the official communiqué, on the other hand, covered an area of 33,000 square miles. But perhaps this discrepancy was due to a miscalculation by the clerk, who may have based his calculations on his own bodily measurements. And he was a very small man.

The words of Karimo, the doctor's African assistant at Broken Hill, proved equally accurate, as I discovered when I went to the hospital that evening at nine o'clock. I was prompted not only by the desire to establish whether the information was correct, but also by the wish to find out who had been the victim of the accident.

The ambulance had just returned with a seriously injured patient, and I discovered that it was a man whom I had met several times along the banks of the Kafue River, where he was prospecting.

He was a rough but very likeable fellow, a big man, 1.95 meters tall, thin and wiry, wearing an enormous cowboy hat perched at an angle on one corner of his small, fair-haired head. Usually, some distance behind him, there followed a little caravan of natives, who used all their energy to drive on ten or

twelve very small, impossibly overloaded donkeys. The animals trotted along in a desperate and hopeless attempt to keep pace with their master's long legs.

This was also what had made the accident so serious. For when, that morning, the leopard had suddenly and quite unexpectedly sprung out of a dense thicket and landed on the prospector's back, the caravan was, as usual, so far behind that by the time it reached the spot, the struggle was already over.

All the natives could do was bind their master's wounds as best they knew how, place him on an improvised stretcher, and carry him to the road leading to Broken Hill. There, some hours later, the ambulance came upon him.

Fortunately, the doctor and the nurses had arrived in time, and although the prospector had to remain in hospital for more than two months, he eventually recovered.

Later, he confirmed to me that the accident had happened shortly after ten o'clock in the morning, on the opposite bank of the Kafue River, in the direction of Kabenda. In other words, more than 320 kilometers from Broken Hill - and less than an hour and a half before Karimo had given the doctor an accurate account of the mishap!

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20. Telepathy and clairvoyance

At the time when they occurred, the visions, dreams (or whatever one wishes to call them) of Skaimunga, his father and the doctor, to whom the hidden Bushman rock paintings were 'revealed', seemed to me not only supernatural but also quite extraordinary manifestations. The only thing I could then bring into even a vague connection with these events was the very well-known, conclusively proven and generally accepted case of Dr Emanuel Swedenborg, who is still recognized today as one of the world's great mystical philosophers.

It was in the summer of 1759 that Swedenborg suddenly became very agitated one evening. He was staying with friends in Gothenburg, about 500 kilometers from his home in Stockholm. At around six o'clock he was suddenly seized by intense uneasiness. A dangerous fire, he said, had just broken out

in Stockholm. It was already spreading and had engulfed the home of a family he knew well, while his own house was in serious danger.

Swedenborg's agitation continued unabated until eight o'clock in the evening, when he gave a somewhat relieved sigh. At last he announced that the fire was under control and that his house had fortunately been spared. This was by no means the first example of the philosopher's mysterious but unfailingly accurate 'second sight'. Naturally, his friends in Gothenburg were extremely eager to discover whether this ability of his would once again prove correct.

This happened more than 200 years ago, when the transmission of news was quite different from what it is today. It therefore took almost three days for messengers to arrive from Stockholm. But when they finally appeared - including government officials and representatives of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry - they confirmed in every detail the account Swedenborg had given while the fire was still burning.

Nowadays science has advanced so far that people believe such cases (and it seems there are quite a number of them that have been positively and accurately recorded), as well as those I have mentioned earlier, can be explained by entirely natural laws. The only difficulty is that these laws have not yet been understood - no more than they were in Swedenborg's time.

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My wife and I, however, have witnessed or confirmed so many other African examples since my (for me) memorable stay and adventure in the 'Swamps of Mystery' that they have almost become everyday occurrences. For us, I mean. Yet, since we have not become in the least blasé about these matters, I feel that there are still a few more examples worth describing here, and I trust that the reader will find them as interesting and bewildering as they seemed to us.

A classic and well-documented example, which was of the greatest importance at the time, occurred in West Africa during the early years of the Second World War. It proved so significant that it prompted the Allies to abandon a very important base and led the local inhabitants to call the waters off Freetown 'the white man's graveyard'.

After France had been defeated and Dakar had been lost to the Allies, Freetown, only 920 kilometers farther to the south-east, had become the most

valuable West African port for the Allied nations. It had been founded in the eighteenth century as a harbor for the wretched people rescued from slave ships by British cruisers. In 1940 Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone and its only town of any considerable size, suddenly acquired a new and vital role.

Strategically situated at the intersection of the shortest sea routes from the Belgian Congo, Portuguese Angola, South Africa and the East, endowed by nature with a spacious, well-protected bay, and recently equipped with modern port facilities, Freetown represented the most logical and safest meeting point for ships being assembled into convoys for the final leg of their voyage to Great Britain.

Inland, Sierra Leone is still surrounded by the sparsely populated, untamed regions of French Guinea, Liberia and the Ivory Coast. Telegraph and telephone lines, railways and roads are certainly not entirely unknown in this part of West Africa. But what exists could more accurately be described as a showpiece collection than as a proper system suited to the modern age. In 1940, these modern means of communication and transport consisted only of isolated, rudimentary short stretches. They were certainly always overcrowded, but never difficult to control, since they remained under the strict supervision of a handful of white officials, assisted by a few trusted African employees. The conditions of the strictest secrecy, essential for a port where convoys were to be assembled and dispatched, therefore seemed assured from the outset.

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Instead, shortly after Freetown began to take the place of Dakar, which was no longer available, ominous incidents occurred with malicious persistence.

Whenever a convoy was assembled, aircraft appeared in the sky - apparently sent by the Vichy government, which was under German control. Every convoy, although the ships' routes were constantly changed and disclosed only at the very last moment, was attacked by submarine units as soon as it reached the open sea. These submarines seemed to have been lying in wait at precisely the places where they could inflict the greatest damage. In a short time, the losses of damaged and sunken ships assumed alarming, catastrophic proportions.

Naturally, the authorities doubled every precaution within their power. The secrecy surrounding departure dates and routes was guarded even more jealously. The already strict censorship was tightened drastically and extended to every conceivable channel of communication.

But none of these measures proved sufficient. The nightmare continued unabated. Eventually, the conclusion was reached that the information could only be reaching Dakar by means of the little-understood, often-ridiculed 'bush telegraph'. The culprits might have been disloyal natives, or even perfectly harmless ones, whose insatiable curiosity and irresistible appetite for gossip were being cunningly exploited by a few resourceful agents. But the fact remained, and something had to be done about it.

Hill Station, Freetown's official district, became a scene of frantic activity. Naturally, it was quite impossible to control and change the traditional customs and the very nature of hundreds of thousands of secretive, inscrutable semi-savages across the immense expanses of the African wilderness. But an enormous effort was made to suppress at least every visible or audible method of communication used by the natives within a radius of 15 to 20 kilometers of the harbor. Smoke signals no longer rose into the sky by day, fires no longer flashed at night, and the dull booming of drums and the sound of horns no longer broke the silence of day or night. Regulations were tightened ruthlessly; violations were detected promptly and punished severely.

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Yet as soon as a new convoy had been organized, the familiar aircraft, which had completely disappeared during the weeks of inactivity in the harbor, returned at such an indiscreetly chosen moment that it could hardly be attributed to coincidence. As if magically attracted, U-boat units reappeared at sea, in the most dangerous zones. During the nights that followed, more ships of incalculable value were sunk; more crews of brave sailors were lost, along with further urgently needed troops and thousands of tons of irreplaceable cargo, all swallowed up by the "Graveyard of the White Man".

It was enough to drive one mad; for it was obvious that information was still leaking out, reaching the enemy with inexplicable speed and unfailing accuracy.

How was this possible, when every channel of communication with the outside world had been blocked with such painstaking effort?

The reason was simple: the widest channel of all was still wide open. It was a channel that no human power could shut off, or even attempt to control, at least not as long as native dockworkers in the harbor went aboard ships to unload or load cargo, or to deliver fresh supplies. Not as long as the chattering wives of these dockworkers sat beneath the palm trees in their villages, idly watching every movement of incoming ships. Not as long as, in every shipping and trading office in Freetown, native clerks handled correspondence and papers, and in every house in the city and at Hill Station, native servants picked up scraps of conversation while serving at table or bringing in drinks.

For everything these people saw, heard, absorbed and thought about was transmitted almost instantly, in their minds, to distant friends and relatives. These, in turn, mulled over the news they had received at a distance and passed it on, quite innocently, further and further afield. Until it reached Senegal and Dakar – and a handful of devilishly clever, resourceful white agents who knew how to pump such information out of these boys and who immediately put whatever they learned to use.

Too far-fetched? Impossible?

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Not in the least. It was so far from being impossible that the assembling of convoys in Freetown eventually had to be abandoned, with the result that the blue-green waters off the coast of Sierra Leone, where such lively activity had prevailed for so long, soon became completely deserted. And the dockworkers, deprived of all employment, sat sadly beneath their palm trees, gazing in silence at the empty, glittering expanse of water of the “Graveyard of the White Man”.

The telepathic powers of the black man had been employed and exploited in the white man's total war. And this “secret weapon” of the African – as real, infallible and compelling as his unquestionable ability to foresee changes in the weather, to maintain perfect orientation even under the most unusual circumstances, and to find food and water in ways and under conditions that border on the miraculous – had freely broken through every barrier and security measure erected by man, and had played its effective part even in so vast a conflict as the Battle of the Atlantic.

This astonishing phenomenon, the ability of the primitive native to “see at a distance” events taking place hundreds of kilometers away, and to transmit messages – perhaps unconsciously – over enormous distances, without any visible instrument or explicable means of communication, is one of the most remarkable phenomena continually encountered by anyone who travels through Africa for any length of time.

Personally, I should like to emphasize once again that I firmly believe this ability to be only one of the gifts with which Nature has endowed mankind. It is not confined to one particular man or one particular race, but is probably possessed by all human beings, everywhere, as demonstrated by the case of Dr Swedenborg, which is by no means an isolated instance.

What has happened to most of us white people is simply that, over generation after generation, we have become increasingly detached from Nature and the earth, and have consequently lost the knowledge of, and the ability to use, this invaluable gift.

But matters are quite different with a human being – such as the African, for example – who is still at a primitive stage of development. For he remains so closely bound to Nature, so truly a part of the earth, just like the animals: the antelope, which gallops away from an approaching hurricane hours before it can be predicted by our most sophisticated instruments; the pigeon, the cat and the horse, which unfailingly find their way home, even across unfamiliar country; the dog, which has been barking for a long time before the humming of any seismograph announces an earthquake; the buzzard, which appears out of the blue sky and flies straight towards the invisible spot where prey has just been silently killed, and so on and so forth.

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I regard it as an ability or a sense which, originally, may have been just as powerful and acute as the ordinary faculty of physical sight. Just as we see objects and observe events taking place within the limited field of vision of our eyes, binoculars and telescopes, and just as our children naturally and instinctively learn to see, to focus their eyes and, without any special instruction, to coordinate what they perceive, so the faculty or sense of seeing at a distance and transmitting messages over great distances develops naturally and instinctively. It becomes sharper and more accurate as the child

of the primitive, unspoilt human being grows up in his natural, untouched surroundings.



15. A clairvoyant girl.
16. She made it possible for Gatti to save her father.



17. Preparations for departure from the Tsenan Plateau.



18. We came to a place so densely strewn with granite boulders that we could neither go around them nor turn back.



19. The church in Pretoria.

The native's lively curiosity takes care of the rest. His needs are few, simple and easily satisfied. His mind is free from all our complicated, endless worries; he gives little thought to the past and regards the future with fatalistic indifference. He is concerned primarily with the present.

The ships entering a harbor where he earns his living, the impending visit of a white man to a remote village, the possibility of earning money immediately, the whims of the weather, the movements of wild animals, and an adequate supply of food and water – these are the things that interest the African.

Very little of this will escape his attention, and whatever little does will be brought to his notice through his constant conversations with others of his kind. And every scrap of information he acquires is then broadcast freely in every direction by his mind, through a kind of mental Esperanto broadcasting system which transcends distances, national boundaries and differences of tribe and language, reaching any other native who may be receptive to it and find it useful.

Perhaps these are the very same powers that we, too, must once have possessed, but which we have gradually transferred and delegated to our mechanical inventions and instruments: radio, telephone, telegraph, television, radar and sonar, not to mention the compass, sextant, barometer and so forth.

In a sense, we have improved upon these abilities, for we can use substitute instruments whenever we wish. And we know how these substitute instruments work.

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If, however, we are once separated from our mechanical apparatus, if it fails to function adequately or breaks down altogether, we are helpless. The powers of the savage, on the other hand, are immediately at his disposal the moment he needs them, even if he happens to be standing there naked and empty-handed.

To move from events of such tremendous importance as, for example, the affair at Freetown, to almost laughable incidents, I should like to relate a very simple experience. It was precisely because of its simplicity (and because my wife and I happened, as it were, to be sitting at its two opposite ends) that it made such a deep impression on us.

Down in the legendary mountain country of Rwanda lies a small lake called Gabine, home to a particularly wary flock of wild ducks which, during one of

our recent expeditions, had frustrated all my efforts to shoot a few for our table.

One afternoon I suggested to my wife that she remain in the car while I set off on foot. We agreed that I would give a signal with the police whistle I always carried with me whenever I wanted her to come and pick me up.

The place where she remained was right on the shore of the lake, which was bounded on the opposite side by a high mountain. About 800 meters ahead of her, this mountain curved around and completely blocked her view of the rest of the road.

The only other human being anywhere in the vicinity was a young Bahutu, a native boy of ten or eleven, who was tending a herd of goats on the mountainside.

Ellen knew just enough of his language to say hello to him and offer him a cigarette, which he accepted with obvious delight. After that, the conversation came to a standstill, although he remained where he was, eagerly watching the strange white woman.

After about forty-five minutes, the young shepherd suddenly addressed her in great excitement.

“Bwana!” (The master!) “Bwana!” he cried, putting two fingers into his mouth and imitating the sound of my whistle.

My wife thought that the native boy's keen hearing had picked up the sound of my whistle, but she was impressed by the accuracy of his mime, for she was certain that he had never seen such a whistle in his life.

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Meanwhile, she started the car, and when she had rounded the bend in the mountain, she saw me walking towards her along the road.

“A little boy told me that you had whistled,” she said as she pulled up beside me, “although I didn't hear anything myself. Isn't it wonderful how good their hearing is?”

“It is more than wonderful,” I replied, “because I had only just taken the whistle in my hand. I hadn't actually blown it at all. I was walking back to a place where I thought you might be able to hear me!”

Thus, the telepathic sense of this child had conveyed to him a clear picture of my intention to give a signal with my whistle. The picture had been so clear that he was able to reproduce both the sound and my movements, although he had never seen or heard of an instrument like the one I was using.

And here is another example: an experience that happened some time ago to an old friend of ours, a famous engineer who later became managing director of the Broken Hill mines in Northern Rhodesia, when N'dola was still nothing more than a mine and a small government outpost.

This engineer was driving from Broken Hill towards N'dola, accompanied only by his cook. The road passed close to a game reserve, forming its eastern boundary.

Suddenly, a magnificent, large leopard appeared in the middle of the road. Three meters further to the right and it would have been outside the reserve. With a well-aimed shot, my friend brought the animal down. Within a few minutes, the cook had skinned it, placed the hide in a box in the car and buried the carcass.

The hunter looked carefully around him. The grass-covered plain was deserted in every direction, and there was not a single vehicle to be seen on the road. Absolutely certain that he had carried out his deed in complete secrecy, he drove at a good speed towards N'dola, which lay fifty kilometers to the north.

An hour later he arrived there and found the only white police officer in the place already waiting for him. The officer greeted him with a stern expression and the pointed question:

“And what about the leopard you have just killed in the reserve?”

My friend, more astonished than annoyed, immediately produced the skin and cheerfully paid the fine. Naturally, however, he was curious to discover how the police officer had learned the news.

The latter could only tell him that, an hour earlier, while his boy was working with him in the garden, the young man had suddenly burst out laughing.

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'A white man,' he had blurted out, as though greatly amused, 'my Great Chief, who is coming in the car, has just killed a leopard on the road in the reserve.'

Shaking his head and talking to himself, he had then gone on planting lettuce.

At that time there was neither telephone nor telegraph in this part of Northern Rhodesia. My friend was absolutely certain that he had heard no drums, seen no fire or smoke, and encountered no human being before reaching N'dola. Even if a native had been hiding in the grass and had witnessed the shot, how could the news have been conveyed across fifty kilometers of uninhabited country? The only other person who knew of the incident was his faithful old cook. Could he, unwittingly, have broadcast the news?

Intrigued, my friend went into the garden with the police officer to question the boy, who was still working there.

'How do you know that the Bwana has killed a leopard in the reserve?' The boy looked bewildered and muttered that he simply knew; he had, so to speak, 'seen' the whole thing.

'But how?' my friend insisted.

An 'Oh, Bwana!' and a loud laugh were the only answers he received. This is a familiar way for the natives to evade a question they cannot or do not wish to answer.

I have just noticed that, so far, I have mentioned this gift of clairvoyance only in connection with men, beginning with Skaimunga and his father and ending with the police officer's gardener. Was this because Bantu women do not possess the gift? By no means. The only reason is that, during an expedition, one inevitably has much more to do with men than with women. Even in a camp or in a white household, all the tasks we ordinarily regard as

women's work are performed by 'boys': washing clothes, mending, ironing and, when there are white babies or sick people in the household, looking after them. The women remain more in the background and have quite enough to do with their huts and kitchens, their own children and the family garden.

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Of course, it hardly needs to be said that women in Africa chatter and gossip just as much as they do anywhere else. The only difference is that in Africa they do not communicate solely by means of their voices, but also by receiving and transmitting thoughts and messages – just like their menfolk.

This is illustrated by an incident witnessed by my wife, several of our technicians and myself during our last expedition. Our enormous camp had been set up on the Kavirondo Gulf of Lake Victoria. As we were soon to discover, this great lake could be as smooth as a small pond one moment and, within a few minutes, turn into a raging, terrifying cauldron with waves as high as houses, as dangerous as the stormiest sea.

One afternoon, such a storm suddenly sprang up. It raged for a while and gradually began to subside when one of our cameramen came over and informed us that a Luo girl wished to speak to me about something extremely urgent and apparently very distressing.

"Please," she said as soon as she had been brought to our large caravan, "please go and save my father's life!"

Although she was very shy, we managed to hear her story within a few minutes. Her father had gone fishing in a fairly large boat. Another man had been on board with him. However, he had gone ashore in another fishing village to visit some relatives for a few minutes. But then the storm had blown up, and a strong current and the violent wind had carried the boat away. Alone on board, her father had tried to cope with the flapping mainsail, but without success. The mast had broken, and the storm had torn away the entire sail.

"Well," I said, "surely he has oars? Can't he make his way back that way, even if it takes him some time?"

"He can't!" she almost screamed. "The broken mast, which flew away together with the sail, struck him on the head. And now he is lying out there, wounded, losing a great deal of blood, unconscious and helpless! Please,

Bwana, take one of your little boats out there and save him! Otherwise, he will die."

"And where is he?"

"There." And she pointed with great certainty in a particular direction.

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I searched the entire area with my binoculars but could not see a single boat, neither a boat in distress nor any other vessel.

"He is over there, Bwana. Please, please go!"

Ellen asked me a question in English that should have occurred to me earlier.

"Why is she so certain? And who told her all this about the other man who was left behind in the fishing village, and so on?"

"Yes," said one of our men, who had gathered around us, "couldn't the person who told her all this have gone to her father's aid immediately instead?"

I now put the question to the girl. Shyer and more desperate than before, she shook her head and shrugged her silky-smooth shoulders.

"No, no, Bwana. Nobody told me anything. I have seen it all with the eyes of my heart. And he is over there, exactly where I told you. Please, Bwana!"

Perhaps someone else might have doubted and hesitated. But neither Ellen nor I did.

"Well, then, I think you had better go," she said simply to me. "The girl apparently knows what she is talking about."

A few minutes later, I set off with three of my companions in two of our fast, little aluminium boats, equipped with outboard motors, a first-aid kit and a coil of rope. So here we had another case of "television"!

At full speed, we raced in the direction indicated by the girl. After a while, behind a sandbank covered with papyrus, we spotted the boat without its sail

and with its broken mast. As we approached it, we saw the fisherman lying unconscious, stretched out on the little aft deck in a pool of blood. Blood was flowing from a nasty gash in his head, exactly as his daughter had described.

We climbed aboard the boat, brought the man round and cleaned and bandaged his still heavily bleeding wound. I gave him a stimulant and asked whether he could sit up and handle the helm while we towed his boat back to its usual mooring place.

He thanked us, said that he was able to do so, and confirmed word for word what the girl had said about the other fisherman, who had been left ashore when his boat was carried away by the current.

It was completely dark when we returned. Nevertheless, we could make out the girl, who was actually supposed to have stayed behind with Ellen, but was now standing there at the little harbour.

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"Why didn't you stay in the camp, as I had told you to?" I asked when we came ashore.

"Oh, Bwana, I saw you reach the boat and fasten a rope to it after you had brought my father back to life. So I came to help him and cook for him. And to thank the other Bwanas. But above all, to thank you. Asante sana, Bwana M'Kubwa!"

There you have it again!

21. Atakufa Kesho: the curse is overcome

I would not claim that what follows was another case of clairvoyance. It was probably nothing more than the result of a train of thought. The fact remains, however, that I knew with absolute certainty – a good twenty-four hours before Atakufa Kesho actually reappeared – that our paths would cross once again. Or was it a premonition (whatever one may understand by that), such as almost everyone experiences from time to time?

Be that as it may, I was so certain of my conviction in advance that I had wagered a small fortune on it – and won. In any case, when that premonition, as we shall call it for the moment, proved correct, I gained something far more

valuable than money. For the money would long since have been spent and by now entirely gone – whereas the experience I gained from this second encounter with the “little man of great steadfastness” still stands vividly before my mind's eye today. My companions and I cherish it as though we had the privilege of experiencing it all over again ourselves.

But let me begin at the beginning.

We had spent a number of months on the Tzenan Plateau in Mozambique, and the time was approaching when, having completed our research work, we would have to continue our journey through roadless country until we somehow reached the main road leading to the customs and immigration post on the border between Portuguese territory and Southern Rhodesia.

After crossing the border, we intended to travel southwards and eventually reach the Transvaal. There, since we were already almost a year behind our original schedule, we planned to store our equipment, leave all our vehicles behind for a thorough overhaul, and ship our rather impressive scientific collections via Durban.

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We then intended to return home by ship from the same harbor, taking with us our mountains of crates filled with films and photographs. Only after all this material had been developed and printed could I set a date for my return to the Transvaal, with fresh supplies and probably an entirely new team of personnel. There I would resume and bring to completion the task that was to take me across the entire Union of South Africa as it then existed – the present-day Republic of South Africa.

As we travelled on, following the general direction of that customs and immigration post with only limited assistance from our maps (beyond which, as I knew, we would find reasonably good roads), I suddenly found myself in a far from unusual predicament. From my truck, which was leading the convoy, I could see no further route along which we might proceed, and I had to give the signal to stop.

We had been wandering around for some time, searching unsuccessfully for a passage through the excessively dense, thorny bush, when we came upon a small patch of yellowish grass and discovered a furrow running almost perfectly straight across it.

“Damn it all,” said Charlie, who had never seen anything like it before, “why on earth would anyone want to plough this miserable little patch of ground?”

I hurriedly ordered him to be quiet, for the furrow was very fresh, and whispered: “A white rhinoceros made it. The beast feeds exclusively on grass, mostly at night. As it does so, it drags its front horn along the ground, leaving a sort of trench behind it. The rhinoceros that made this furrow may not be far away. And white rhinoceroses must not be shot, except in an absolutely clear case of self-defense. We had better hurry and get away from this spot as quickly as possible.”

That, however, was easier said than done. We were on a slope so steep and uneven that our heavily laden trucks could not get moving without first having a passage cleared for them. This would be a lengthy, arduous and noisy undertaking, which would undoubtedly attract the rhinoceros's attention.

The track along which we had come was so strewn with large granite boulders that reversing or turning around was practically impossible.

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The only possible solution was to unload almost everything, carefully reverse the now much lighter vehicles for several hundred meters until we reached more suitable ground, then turn around and have the few Africans who were still with us carry the equipment, piece by piece, to a place where it could safely be loaded again.

We started immediately, but I knew that, with our shortage of manpower, the entire operation would take us almost two full days. In the meantime, we would have to live and work and make a great deal of noise in the vicinity of a prehistoric-looking monster that could charge at us at any moment and, with a single forward thrust of its enormous bulk, demolish one of our irreplaceable trucks and scatter the precious fruits of months of work in every direction.

“Let us hope it stays away,” I thought.



20. At our camp on the Kavirondo Gulf of Lake Victoria.

At that very moment, Atakufa Kesho came vividly into my mind. So vividly, in fact, that I even looked around, almost certain that he was somewhere close by, or perhaps even watching us at that very moment. This feeling of his nearness grew stronger and stronger, although I had other things to think about until the following day – and there were certainly plenty of them.

And then, there he was, standing right in front of me – and I must confess that I welcomed him just as warmly as I had the first time.

I must admit that my pleasure also had a selfish motive. Here, I told myself, was another pair of hands! Someone who might look frail and insignificant, but who could take on three other men!

Yet even before he came closer and spoke to me, I knew that this time he had not come merely to lend me a hand. Not merely. My companions also immediately noticed that his face, his appearance, his entire body and his

expression had changed. He seemed stronger, healthier, more confident and more composed.

He smiled with a wonderfully radiant smile.

“Once again, my path crosses yours, Bwana,” he said. “I have been following your trail for weeks. Many times I found the ashes of a camp that you had only just abandoned, still warm. But yesterday I caught up with you. From the top of a distant termite mound, I watched you studying the furrow made by the kanga. It is a good omen,” he added, “that I should encounter a kanga at precisely the moment when you, who have been so kind to me, are nearby – just as the wise man instructed me. For now the wise man has made me strong.”

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‘He has taught me much knowledge and sent me out to hunt the wildest of all animals. He has even given me a magic weapon against the Kanga. The very same one, he says, that my grandfather used in his early, better days. But come, Bwana, I will show it to you.’

I followed him away from the bustling activity of the camp and some distance farther on. I had no idea what I was expecting to see. And it is probably needless to say that I was more than a little skeptical.

‘Wait, Bwana,’ said Atakufa Kesho, crawling beneath a dense bush. A second later he emerged again, holding in one hand a small bundle wrapped in gazelle hide. In the other he carried two light poles, around which something had been wound.

He dropped the bundle, took the two poles, each about 1.25 meters long, and drove them into the ground roughly 1.25 meters apart - as far apart as the net of thin leather straps connecting them would allow. Attached to this crude kind of net were many dozens of little cotton strips in bright, vivid colors, which immediately began to flutter in the wind.

The little man’s eyes shone and sparkled. His whole being seemed to vibrate with extraordinary confidence, with fervent faith. ‘And what is in the bundle?’ I asked, still utterly bewildered. ‘A deadly poison?’

'Birdlime!' he exclaimed. His voice rang with pride once more. 'Now you go, Bwana. And do not fear the great Kanga, for I shall stop him. I must make him kneel before me.'

'You must - what?'

'Make him kneel before me,' he repeated. 'Then the curse will be lifted, and my fears will be buried forever. Then at last I shall be safe. And a man again, happy and prosperous.'

From the vehicles came a chorus of voices shouting my name again and again. My companions had apparently forgotten the danger of drawing the rhinoceros's attention to themselves. I wished Atakufa Kesho good luck and went back, admiring the courage of the little man, but at the same time wondering whether he had gone completely mad.

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Early in the evening, after a makeshift camp had been set up for the night, I took my heavy rifle and set out on an inspection round. I was walking towards the great trees that Atakufa Kesho had pointed out to me earlier when his voice made me stop. I could not see him, but he could not be far away, since he had recognized my footsteps. His voice came from ahead, astonishingly loud, almost shrill with hysteria.

'The tree near you, Bwana. Climb it, quickly, quickly!' I hesitated for a second. Then the ground beneath my feet began to tremble. A distant snorting reached my ears. There could be no mistaking it. The rhinoceros was coming.

I slung my rifle over my back and hurried up the tree, climbing higher and higher until I could see the Kanga.

What a monster it was! Nearly two meters at the shoulder, about 4.75 meters long and scarcely less in girth, it looked like a bulldozer with an inverted ploughshare jutting out in front - its 1.25-metre-long frontal horn. The animal's enormous feet were hidden by the grass. With its nose close to the ground, the rhinoceros came on at a swift trot, heading almost directly for the camp.

I unfastened my binoculars and straightened up. Only then did I see the rows of cotton strips fluttering in the wind. It was Atakufa Kesho's invention, gleaming in the sunlight, and he was hiding behind it.

'Don't shoot, Bwana!' he shouted without turning his head. 'Don't speak. Just watch.' So now he was giving me orders!

The rhinoceros turned towards the shouting. Its trot quickened, and its snorting grew angrier. From where I stood, the animal seemed to be only inches away from Atakufa Kesho when the latter suddenly leapt aside. He had barely taken shelter behind the massive trunk of the next tree when the beast charged. It raised its horn and rammed Atakufa Kesho's contraption with tremendous force. The whole thing collapsed limply over its head and stuck to it all over. The monster had expected to impale its enemy and hurl him through the air. Instead, it had met no resistance at all, only this inexplicably light object, which clung to its ears, eyes and nostrils, stubbornly covering and enveloping them.

Driven almost to madness, the rhinoceros snorted and grunted, shaking its misshapen head in helpless fury. Then it picked up the human scent in front of it once more and hurled itself against the tree. A sharp impact, a dreadful splintering crash, and the enormous tree trunk was almost shattered.

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But Atakufa Kesho had already leapt forward towards another tree. From there he deliberately provoked the white rhinoceros once more. The animal immediately turned and charged at him. Another crash, another tree trunk shattered, another shout, once again from behind a different tree.

The half-blind rhinoceros spun around in another fit of fury and launched a fresh attack, only to be tricked by its enemy once more and then immediately lured in a different direction by a fresh torrent of taunting words.

It was beginning to pant a little now, and when another tremendous crash announced the sudden destruction of yet another tree, I could not help but marvel at the infallible wisdom of the sorcerer who had taken this human wreck in hand and, with patience and infinite care, had gradually restored him, body and soul, to this astonishing state. I had never considered myself a coward, the thought flashed through my mind. But I knew that I would never

have had the nerve to do what Atakufa Kesho was doing - so calmly, and with such impeccable timing!

Cautious rustling and cracking sounds reached my ears from below and behind me. I looked down. My four companions, drawn by the successive explosive crashes, were approaching with their rifles ready to fire. I whistled and signaled for them to climb up my tree as quietly as possible. Soon we were all watching the deadly game continue.

Atakufa Kesho was quick and nimble, driven by a blazing sense of confidence and sustained by the knowledge that victory was within reach. The murderous monster, by contrast, was becoming increasingly unsteady. Exhausted by so many attacks, its brain already badly battered by the repeated explosive shocks, it was nevertheless still driven forward by its own insane fury.

There was no doubt that it was a cruel way to send an animal to its destruction. But its death would put an end to one man's hellish torment, erase countless years of suffering and miserable fear of death, and transform him into a man of absolute self-confidence.

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The great white rhinoceros launched its eleventh attack, but then began to stagger and came to a halt. It was finished. Once more it shook its enormous head, from which scraps of the net smeared with birdlime were still hanging. Then it let out an absurd-sounding, almost pitiful squeal and sank to its knees.

Atakufa Kesho ran out of his last hiding place and stood before the trembling colossus. One final twitch passed through the animal’s body; then it crashed onto its side and lay motionless. The little man looked towards us.

‘Thank the gods!’ he cried, gasping for breath.

‘The curse is broken. And my name is no longer Atakufa Kesho. It is Rasi Malamu.’

‘The victorious one, the fortunate one,’ I said to my friends. Rasi Malamu was breathing heavily. He was covered in sweat and dust, with caked mud and a mass of scratches all over him. But he had taken on a new appearance.

He had become a man. And thanks to the extraordinary wisdom of a wise man, his equally extraordinary faith and his steadfastness, he had become a man in the fullest sense!

22. Unusual medicines

Only now, in the year 1963, is our own science becoming fully aware of the extraordinary effects that can be achieved through the use of a number of new drugs. Two of these substances are said, when administered in small doses and under the strictest supervision, to accelerate, among other things, 'psychotherapy through increasing insight'. This has been demonstrated to a certain extent.

To be more precise: two young American psychologists have conducted extensive experiments with these 'mind-altering' substances, which psychiatrists call hallucinogens (that is, drugs that produce hallucinations) or psychotomimetic drugs (that is, drugs that imitate psychoses).

One of these substances, discovered some time ago, is mescaline, which is extracted from the flowers or tips of a cactus commonly found in Mexico, where it is known as peyote. It also grows in mountainous regions of Central Africa, where it is called Uchokuzu. The newest of these substances is psilocybin. It is now produced synthetically, but was originally extracted from mushrooms that are also readily found in both Mexico and Central Africa.

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There are two points I would like to emphasize. First, the experiments conducted by the two young Americans have shown that, among the many effects produced by varying the doses of these different drugs administered to the patients, one stands out above all others: the lives of the majority of these human guinea pigs acquire 'a new meaning'.

The second point is that the good African medicine man possesses far greater knowledge than we do of the secret properties of an endless variety of plants, leaves, roots, fruits, berries and so on. He has commanded this knowledge for God knows how many generations. It is therefore not so far-fetched to imagine that he and his predecessors have been using the essence of these very same cacti and mushrooms for a very long time. This is no more implausible than claiming that the South American Indians learned how to use curare* - albeit in relatively large doses, sufficient to kill large animals or

human beings - many centuries before our own scientists and doctors tentatively began, only a few years ago, to use it in almost infinitesimal quantities to cure or alleviate illnesses, or as an important aid in a number of life-saving operations.

Having considered these two points, and having discovered, while thoroughly searching through my old notes, that the 'little man of great steadfastness' had casually mentioned that the wise man had often given him a Dawa (medicine) to drink, which had a strange, strong taste, I cannot help wondering today whether something resembling our psilocybin or mescaline - though not chemically pure - or perhaps even a combination of both ingredients, might have helped that witch doctor to 'increase the insight' of the little man, by penetrating his deeply rooted inhibitions and giving him 'a new meaning in life'. This may have contributed enormously to the almost miraculous transformation that my companions and I had witnessed with our own eyes, when the despised, accursed Atakufa Kesho became 'the Victorious One, the Fortunate One', Rasi Malamu.

* *This powerful poison paralyses its victims by blocking the transmission of impulses from nerves to muscles. It is obtained from one of the 59 species of New World shrubs in the genus Strychnos, which yield curare rather than strychnine. The Indians obtain the deadly poison for their blowpipe darts by leaching the essential substances from the roots and stems of the shrub with lukewarm water. The solution is then concentrated by heating until it has evaporated into a thick paste. South American Indians, who know the deadly properties of the finished product, do not hesitate to put their hands into it or even taste a drop to judge the strength of the poison by its degree of bitterness.*

Naturally, curare-makers are only 'specialists': medicine men, sorcerers, or wise old men and women who work in secret, at very specific times and in accordance with strict rules. For example, a new vessel must be used for every new batch, and anyone involved in preparing curare must abstain from sexual intercourse throughout the preparation period.

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Naturally, I can offer not the slightest proof of this here, nor can I hope ever to find any. At the time, I was scarcely thinking any longer about this particular aspect of the miracle that the witch doctor had, in a manner of speaking, performed, when, after spending approximately six months in Europe, I returned to the Transvaal via Durban with a new expedition. This

was especially because, almost before I knew it, I found myself involved in another unforgettable adventure of the mind.

For, without the slightest conscious intention or any merit on my part, I happened by chance upon another case of witchcraft, magic, sorcery, or whatever it might have been called, which for a long time seemed not merely inexplicable, but simply incredible. In fact, it was a startling mystery, reminiscent of a fairy tale, whose key and explanation I would not discover until some twenty years later.

The whole affair began shortly after my return to the Transvaal, in the native ward of a Johannesburg gold-mining hospital. It was an admirably constructed and managed, ultra-modern hospital. But to us it meant something more: it was a paradise for anthropologists, where we had at our complete disposal human types from at least a hundred different tribes, all gathered in one place, where we could study, question and measure them and, in most cases, even take plaster casts of them.

Our work progressed rapidly (although it was a little monotonous, since everything was so readily available and effortless), until one morning all sense of boredom suddenly vanished from me.

“You will soon die,” a trembling voice murmured behind me.

What astonished me was the fact that the man was speaking in the Lingala language. This dialect, spoken exclusively by the people living along the banks of the upper Congo, is a language one would hardly expect to hear in the residential districts of Johannesburg. Although thousands of native workers are continually brought into the Transvaal to extract gold worth a quarter of a billion dollars each year from its fabulously rich mines, international agreements restrict their influx into the zone lying between the Cape of Good Hope and the 22nd parallel of south latitude. This means a distance of some 8,000 kilometers of African wilderness from the lands where Lingala is spoken.

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“Tata,” the weak voice said again, “you will soon die.” It was such a faint murmur that I could not make up my mind whether it was a question requiring an answer or the feverish monologue of a man suffering intense pain. I knew that “Tata” was a title of respect.

I glanced at my companions: a Dutch doctor from the hospital and Professor Arnou, a French anthropologist who was the scientific director of this new expedition of mine. Both were completely absorbed in the plaster cast they were making of a native lying stretched out on the floor. Their faces gave no indication that they had heard the strange words coming from the beds behind us. Apparently, they were too engrossed in their delicate work.

Without turning around or showing the slightest sign of interest, I edged backwards as far as I dared, and in doing so caught the reply. It was only a whisper, spoken slowly, as though it came from someone whose strength had completely ebbed away.

“Take this, Bandakwe.” Then, after a pause during which he breathed heavily: “We shall both eat of it … now … so that we may die quickly.”

I had already spent many years in Africa, and I had learned a great deal about the customs of the native peoples. Now the same instinct that had prompted me to listen so intently to the first words told me that, whatever might be happening behind me, it was something of considerable importance.

Of course, I knew that if I turned around, I would see nothing but two empty, utterly expressionless black faces. Yet those men could hardly simply have intended to put an end to their suffering. I had never heard of natives committing suicide. And even if it did happen, certainly not in order to escape an illness. Clearly, there was more behind the words I had happened to overhear than appeared on the surface. An even stronger urge to discover what was really going on took hold of me.

At that very moment, the professor straightened up from his uncomfortable kneeling position.

“Voilà!” he exclaimed, beaming. “C'est fini!”

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I could have given him a tap on the nose. Instead, I made an awkward movement with my feet and knocked the chin off the mask, which had only just dried. I hastily apologized. The professor gave vent to his feelings in the most elaborate language, but then bent down to his work again. The Dutch doctor smiled kindly and poured some fresh plaster into the mixing bowl.

Apparently, none of my tricks had been in vain. The voices behind me fell silent.

I was just beginning to lose patience when my little ruse was finally rewarded. The man who had spoken first uttered a word. It sounded like “fefelo” or “fifero”. Then silence once more. The man certainly lived up to his name, for Bandakwe means “tortoise” in the Lingala language.

Then I heard the words: “And tomorrow, Tata, will deliverance come tomorrow?”

“Damn it all,” I said to myself, “are these men mad?”

I knew that they were suffering from silicosis. That enormous ward, with a hundred beds on each side of the wing where we were working, was filled with workers suffering from silicosis-tuberculosis. This terrible disease was caused by clouds of fine quartz dust stirred up in the bleak tunnels several hundred meters underground, where the gold-mine workers toiled away. Despite the most elaborate safety precautions taken by the gold mines, it was impossible to prevent a man's lungs from constantly inhaling this dangerous dust until they had become hopelessly petrified. It was a dreadful death.

Yet, although we had worked in that ward for many days, I had never noticed patients suffering from silicosis being afflicted by hallucinations. Nor did the voices of these two men sound as though they were delirious. What, then, were they talking about? They intended to commit suicide today, yet at the same time expected to be delivered tomorrow? It was sheer nonsense.

And yet the man addressed as Tata said: “Deliverance will come.” He was breathing heavily, as though speaking required an enormous effort.

“The others know … they will come before sunrise … and take us away from the cold stone of the dead … before the doctors come with their knives …”

This time our work was truly finished. But while I packed my cameras as slowly as possible, I managed to catch a few more words.

“But,” gasped the Tortoise, “will the tree of life and death …”

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Here the professor once again interrupted with a grumbling remark, and I could no longer make out the words I was so desperately eager to hear. He was a nervous, loud, conceited little man, a good scientist, admittedly, but what a chatterbox! This time I did not even hear what he was saying. Instead, I turned, as though by chance, towards the two men behind me. Their eyes were closed, their features had slackened, and their faces resembled death masks.

“Do these men come from the Upper Congo region?” I asked the doctor.

“They do,” he replied, after studying the medical records above their beds. “They are Bakumu Walengola from the Aruwimi territories, near Stanley Falls.”

I thought of what Tata had said: “The others know.” Surely that referred to other members of his tribe. I asked the doctor how many Bakumu Walengola were employed throughout the entire mine. He consulted a book lying open on a nearby table.

“There are exactly 13,658 native workers employed in this one mine at present,” he said. “Among them, there are only 36 Walengola. They all arrived here together about three years ago. According to the employment records, they were the first of their kind we had ever employed.”

“But,” I asked, “don't all the workers sign up for three years?”

“That is also correct,” the doctor replied. “The thirty-six Walengola will be leaving us in twelve days. That is, all of them except these two here.” He looked down at them. “They will not live to see this evening.”

I asked him whether he would mind if I tried to speak to them.

“Not in the least,” he replied, “but I am afraid they have been unable to speak for several hours now.”

“That is what you think,” I said to myself as I stepped into the narrow passage between the two beds.

The Tortoise, as I could now see, was about twenty-two years old. The other man, I estimated, was in his mid-forties. His name was recorded on the medical chart as Gorogoro.

Apart from their agonizing, rattling breathing, there seemed to be no spark of life left in either man. As I could see, both had a few crumbs of a light-red substance in the corners of their contorted mouths.

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The doctor followed my gaze.

“What the devil have they eaten?” he exclaimed. “No medicine they have been given has a colour like that.”

He picked up a few of the crumbs between two fingers and, muttering something about wood, sawdust and damned fools, walked over to the window.

I seized the opportunity to speak to the men.

“Bandakwe!” I said emphatically. “Gorogoro!”

Neither of them gave any indication that he had heard me.

“Tata,” I said then.

Immediately, the older man opened his eyes. And I have never forgotten those eyes. They were not the eyes of a man standing on the threshold of death. They looked at me without hesitation, sharp and intelligent. A shiver ran down my spine. It seemed as though two men were embodied in that single person. One was the man lying there in agony, whose body and face had the rigidity and ashen color of death itself. The other was a man whose mind was fully alert, detached from pain and the anguish of dying, whose eyes could still calmly and thoroughly examine the face of a stranger.

“I am a friend of the Bakumu Walengola,” I said to him.

“Tell me your wishes, O Tata.”

23. A secret society

A new, kindly light appeared in his serious, dark-brown eyes. Then they closed. His mind made one final, tremendous effort to compel his exhausted body to obey its commands once more.

“Mundele,” he finally whispered, “I must die. Immediately.”

His eyelids closed over those remarkably lively eyes before the doctor approached. Bandakwe, on the other hand, had not moved at all, as far as I could tell.

For once, the doctor was unusually annoyed.

“It really is some kind of wood,” he said. “Some filthy native medicine, I suppose. What I would like to know is how they get hold of the stuff. Whatever it is, it has certainly finished them off.”

He bent down, felt their pulses and lifted their eyelids.

“They are dead,” he announced.

He nodded to an orderly, who quickly and efficiently pulled up the blankets and covered the dead men's faces.

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‘I'll dissect her early tomorrow morning, Manuel. At nine o'clock,’ said the doctor. ‘Make sure everything is ready.’

He beckoned me to follow him to his office, where the professor, having no audience to listen to him, had already gone ahead to wash.

What was I to believe? What was I to say? I said not a word. I remained silent until we were back at our camp. Then I could not resist the temptation to tell Professor Arnou about it. He had never practiced medicine, but had obtained his doctorate before becoming an assistant in anthropology at the Sorbonne. He had already spent a year with one of my earlier expeditions and had witnessed many stranger things with his own eyes than he cared to admit. I assumed he would certainly believe me.

Instead, he burst out laughing before I had even finished my account.

‘Mais c'est ridicule,’ he exclaimed, ‘absolutely impossible!’

I could not even bring myself to tell him that Gorogoro had been perfectly conscious before my very eyes and that he had spoken to me less than twenty seconds before the doctor had pronounced him dead.

‘You are overtired,’ the professor chuckled, ‘and you spend far too much time in the sun without your tropical helmet. That's when people start hearing and seeing ghosts.’

I felt like a complete double fool. That night, in my tent, I almost began to doubt what my own senses had perceived.

But the next morning I dragged the professor out of bed an hour before the time he normally liked to get up. And ten minutes before nine, we were at the hospital, knocking on the black door of the isolated, square building that housed the mortuary.

No one answered. We began pacing up and down, waiting impatiently for nine o'clock to arrive.

I felt a strange sense of unease. I tried to peer inside. But the front wall had only one opening: that very heavy, locked door. There were large windows on either side, but they were much too high above the ground. And no one could even approach the rear of the building, because directly beneath it flowed a raging, muddy stream: the 6.5-metre-wide channel in which water under tremendous pressure carried away 80,000 tons of dust every day, the pulverized remains of the ore that was crushed and processed throughout the entire mine within a period of 24 hours.

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Only a few minutes had passed when the doctor suddenly emerged through the door of the hospital ward. I knew at once that my premonition had not deceived me. The doctor's customary composure had completely deserted him. He came literally rushing towards us, followed by an agitated Manuel. A whole little procession hurried along behind them, including the director of the workers' settlement, the chief engineer and the managing director himself.

Manuel was standing in front of the door to the mortuary. While he tried with trembling hands to slide back the bolt, the professor and I shook hands with everyone present.

'You must understand,' said the managing director, 'that something very strange has happened. During the night, two bodies have disappeared.'

'You don't mean the two Bakumu-Walengola?' I asked.

'Eh? What did you say?' he burst out at me. 'How do you know that? I have only just found out myself, this very minute!'

It suddenly occurred to me that my remark might draw me into the affair and that I had almost betrayed the two poor devils who had finally reached a realm of eternal peace. The professor had grasped the situation as well. For once, he remained silent, his eyes fixed on me with a meaningful stare.

'It is only a guess,' I said quickly. 'I knew they had died yesterday and that the doctor intended to perform the autopsy at nine o'clock. I simply put two and two together.'

The old man muttered something under his breath, and we made our way into the mortuary. This macabre place was a large, square, cold room containing twelve large stone slabs, arranged in three rows of four.

'Those are the slabs,' said the doctor, pointing towards them. 'Numbers 6 and 7. Empty. But,' he added, looking sharply around him, 'nothing else here has been disturbed. And when Manuel came in here half an hour ago, he found the door just as firmly locked as he had left it the previous evening, after the last of the eleven bodies had been brought inside. It is the only door, and Manuel has the only key, you must understand.'

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And there we all were, gathered together, standing around like fools and looking at the concrete walls and ceiling, the marble floor, the solid door, the high, untouched windows in the side walls and the two large, open windows at the rear.

'Could anyone possibly get through here?' asked the old man, scratching his head doubtfully. He looked towards the rear windows. Each one was

protected by a double row of thick iron bars. A slender acrobat might perhaps have been able to squeeze through, but not two stiffened corpses. And what about the men who would have been needed to carry them? What about them?

'And the mud!' exclaimed the director of the workers' settlement.

'No one can wade through this channel. An African once fell into it while carrying out repairs. As a precaution, he had tied himself to a rope. But it took half a dozen men to pull him out.'

The doors, windows and iron bars were examined by experts. The walls of the channel, the enormous grilles at its far end – everything was searched. Every building in the mine, every single hut in the settlement was searched. Not the slightest trace was discovered. It was as though the two bodies had evaporated into the stratosphere.

What troubled the mine management was not so much the disappearance of the two Africans. It was the gold. A gold bar no larger than a brick was worth $25,000 at the time. Just imagine what a fortune could disappear in the same mysterious way!

Naturally, suspicion fell upon the thirty-four Bakumu-Walengola who had remained at the mine. Who else could have had an interest in getting possession of the dead men? The poor fellows were interrogated throughout the long day. Individually, in groups, and all together. But no amount of shouting, threats or cunning could extract even the smallest scrap of information from them. They knew nothing, they said. They had slept all night and – much to my astonishment – they certainly looked well rested.

'It remains a mystery,' said the old man at the end of that busy day. Then, turning to me, he added, 'Are you sure there is nothing more you can add to what you said this morning?'

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'I am sorry,' I replied, 'not a word.' Of course, the thirty-four Walengola were lying. And they knew that I knew it too, judging by the way some of them looked at me. But although I could not prove it, I was firmly convinced that the disappearance of Bandakwe and Gorogoro had nothing to do with gold. Its cause was, I was certain, some kind of superstition. I would say nothing that

might unleash hell upon those poor people at the very moment when they were about to return to their distant villages after three years of backbreaking toil.

In any case, this affair was no concern of the mine, any more than it was mine. Nevertheless, I would gladly have gone to the Congo, and I would have given anything to discover more about the ‘tree’. There was far more to the whole story than met the eye. But a major expedition cannot be redirected at short notice. We had undertaken to carry out extensive research and collections throughout the Transvaal, Swaziland and Zululand, and everything had to be completed without delay.

There was nothing more I could do except make discreet enquiries at the University of the Witwatersrand before leaving Johannesburg. It was the only university in the world with an entire faculty devoted exclusively to the study of African medicine men.

Yet although one might have assumed that their records were complete, my friend, who held the chair of Indigenous Medicine, could find nothing that bore even the faintest resemblance to the mysterious ‘fefelo’ or ‘fifero’.

Nine years – nine whole years – went by without my managing to include a visit to the Aruwimi region in the programme and itinerary of any of my expeditions. I would probably have forgotten the whole story, fascinating though it was. But one day in Port Said I met an old African friend of my father's, a cavalry colonel who had been one of the Congo's earliest pioneers.

One evening, while we were talking over dinner, our conversation happened to turn to the secret societies which, in his day, had wielded terrible power throughout Central Africa and had slaughtered thousands of innocent victims every year in massacres comparable only to those of the ancient Aztecs in Mexico.

‘There were, however,’ he said, ‘some benevolent sects as well. The best of them was undoubtedly the N'kunda. Have you ever heard of it?’

I had to admit my ignorance.

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'That does not surprise me,' he continued. 'Judging by the official reports I still read, I must assume that it has completely died out. It was probably too good to be able to survive.'

In those long-distant years, of course, he had had more vital matters to attend to than trying to lift the veil of mystery surrounding a harmless sect. But this N'kunda, the secret society of the baboon people, had somehow fascinated him. In short, it was a kind of barbarian 'university', governed by a basic but extremely strict code of ethical principles and sacred traditions. It was made up of men who, from their earliest childhood, had devoted themselves to preserving and enriching the considerable medical, chemical and toxicological knowledge of their race.

'Of course,' said the colonel, 'I never had enough leisure to find out exactly which parts of it were hocus-pocus and which could be regarded as scientific truth. But those old eccentrics certainly could perform miracles. They cured several of my soldiers who had been so badly wounded that I had given them up for lost.

Once we had become friends, they produced some kind of herbal concoction that gave my carriers an almost unbelievable strength and endurance. They were brave men, too. Whenever they were about to fall into the hands of slave traders, they swallowed a poison they always carried with them, in order to avoid captivity, and died. At least,' he added, 'that is what I heard many times.

It was also generally said that their bodies were never found again. It was assumed that the poison dissolved their flesh and bones, or something of the sort. At least, that was how I understood it. Of course,' he added hastily, 'I cannot vouch for the truth of that story. But those baboon men really did possess power. They actually regulated every important, vital affair of their entire great tribe.'

The colonel's last remark had awakened some vague echo in my mind. One of the words he had used meant something special to me. Of course! The penny dropped just as he began speaking again.

'You must understand, these Mituki are a proud people. Suspicious, shy, but...'

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I interrupted him. “Don’t they belong to the great family of the Bakumu-Walengola?” “Certainly,” he replied, “but what is all the excitement about?”

“Didn’t they say that the baboon men would rather poison themselves than fall into Arab hands? And that their bodies were never found? Well, then, listen carefully.”

And I told him the whole story of the mystery at the Johannesburg hospital.

He did not laugh. Moreover, he had an extraordinarily good memory. And as soon as I mentioned the word “fefelo”, he corrected me.

“Fifero, not fefelo,” he said. “Now that you mention that damned business, I remember the word perfectly. The natives used to murmur it with reverence, as though it were something sacred. Look into it, my boy. But be careful. For if the N’kunda should still exist, that would do you no good, I can assure you.”

And with that, we had once again reached a dead end in the matter. But I knew that I would never forget it. Indeed, I was more convinced than ever that, if I could help bring it about, the day would come when I would get to the bottom of the mysterious case of the two bodies that had disappeared from the gold mine. There had to be a plausible, comprehensible explanation for the whole affair - and I was determined to find it.

What I could not foresee at the time was that, when the moment finally came, I would be reminded so powerfully both of Skaimunga’s words on the Congo River and of the magical, life-saving leaves his father had given me later.

24. Pretoria and the Ndebele

Just 65 kilometers north of Johannesburg, the “city built on gold”, and barely 320 kilometers west of the tourist and wildlife paradise of the Kruger National Park, stands another monument to Paul Kruger - but this one is made of stone and bronze. It is the imposing statue of this farmer and warrior president, standing in Church Square in Pretoria, on the very spot where, a little more than a century ago, the first settlers ever to venture so far into the Transvaal built a small, thatched-roof church in the middle of a quiet, verdant valley.

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Today, this little church and the two larger churches that later replaced it have disappeared. Yet Church Square is still the true heart around which the city was built and grew, and the central point where the main roads from the country's four most important directions meet. It is a large, simple, dignified, peaceful and beautiful square, which brings to mind the hundreds of occasions - solemn, sad, joyful or jubilant - when the citizens gathered at this very spot: first around the little thatched-roof church, whose construction began to take shape in 1857; then around a sturdier and larger "kerk"; and finally around the third and last place of worship to stand there, on precisely the same site, until it was demolished in 1905, when the government acquired the square to turn it into a civic center.

Before I turn, as I intend to do, to some of the present-day superstitious beliefs, magical powers and sorcery practiced among the most important tribes of South Africa, whose study was the purpose of my expedition, I nevertheless feel that it would be difficult to gain a proper perspective on the lives of these peoples - and of the white people who govern them - without at least taking a brief look at the history of this region, and particularly that of Church Square in Pretoria. For, in one way or another, it has been the focal point of many of the most significant events in the entire country.

Among other things, during the first half-century of its existence, Church Square was the scene of the annual Nagmaal (Holy Communion) gatherings, to which the pioneers and their families flocked from every part of the Transvaal and from Natal, which of course included Zululand. Their means of transport were ox-wagons of the same type as those used by the daring Voortrekkers on 18 December 1838 as an improvised fort, when 400 of them, under the command of Andries Pretorius, stood their ground against the many thousands of Zulu warriors led by Dingane. They protected Retief's Boers from the tyrant's massacre and decisively defeated him at the Battle of Blood River, as it was aptly named.

Following the exact pattern of that same historic "laager", 56 of these typical Trekker wagons have been arranged in a circle, just 3.5 kilometers from Church Square, around the imposing, massive grey-granite Voortrekker Monument, which so eloquently symbolizes, in many different ways, the era of the Great Trek.

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Four enormous stone statues at the corners represent three of the most important heroes - Piet Retief, Andries Pretorius and Hendrik Potgieter - as well as an anonymous Voortrekker, intended to symbolize the thousands who lost their lives on the long journey into the unknown wilderness.

In front of the main entrances stands a bronze statue of a fearless pioneer mother protecting her two children from the dangers of the wild veld. A long series of magnificent marble friezes vividly portrays many of the most outstanding episodes in that fearless saga. The architecture of the monument itself displays some of the characteristic features of Zimbabwe, the mysterious "City of Silence", and of various Bantu cultures. In this way, it symbolizes the bond between the ancient civilizations that had existed in the unexplored interior long before the arrival of the first white people, and the Western European civilization that the Voortrekkers brought northwards with them.

The latter is powerfully represented by a flickering flame in a red-marble niche, in a crypt deep beneath the monument. In the center of the Great Hall, a golden memorial bears the inscription: "Ons vir Jou, Suid-Afrika" ("We for you, South Africa"). A small aperture in the upper dome has been calculated so that every year, precisely at noon on 16 December, a ray of sunlight enters and illuminates the golden inscription, commemorating the anniversary of the Battle of Blood River.

It was there, too, on Church Square, that the Boer commandos gathered in silent prayer before setting out for one battle after another. And it was there that the survivors, on their return, remembered their fallen comrades, celebrated their victories with their families, or paid their final respects to a national figure as the body was slowly carried across the square to its last resting place.

It is this mixture of history, tradition and a jealously guarded devotion to the memories of the past that distinguishes Pretoria so sharply from nearby Johannesburg - that bustling, restless, wildly cosmopolitan metropolis of more than a million inhabitants, which sprang up from an empty stretch of land in the space of just seventy years.

Today, Pretoria is a quiet, friendly and graceful city of approximately 350,000 inhabitants (184,000 whites, 151,000 Bantus, 8,000 "Coloreds" and 7,000 Asians). It has been the capital of Transvaal for a hundred years. Since 1910, when the Union of South Africa was established, and again since 31

May 1962, when the Republic of South Africa was proclaimed, it has become the most important of the country's three capitals.

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Pretoria is the administrative capital: formerly the seat of the Governor-General and today the seat of the President and the Prime Minister. It is also the headquarters of every government department and all diplomatic missions. Only when Parliament is in session do all members of the government travel to Cape Town, the legislative capital, from mid-January until May or June. The third major city, the judicial capital, is Bloemfontein, the seat of the Supreme Court.

As everyone knows, October is Pretoria's most magnificent month. For then the city's 50,000 jacaranda trees are in full bloom, covering the avenues with a splendid canopy of blue and purple-red. It is a breathtaking spectacle that one must see in person to appreciate fully.

A short distance from these battalions of trees planted by human hands stands a solitary old giant of nature, whose lifespan encompasses virtually everything that history tells us about human life in the wilderness from which Transvaal was to emerge. The Wonderboom Nature and Bird Sanctuary lies beneath an old Boer fort, within sight of the Magaliesberg. One of its most impressive features is a wild fig tree, from whose central trunk thirteen additional trunks have sprung, growing over the years into enormous trees. One might even say over the centuries, for this giant is estimated to be 300 years old.

It had already begun to grow when the first Bantu people ventured timidly, in scattered groups, across the Vaal and Limpopo rivers, and small settlements began to appear in the region that is now Transvaal. The Great Tree had already lived half its present lifespan when, in 1817, the land was invaded and its small, defenseless population was quickly subdued by Mzilikazi, a subordinate chief of Shaka, the "Black Napoleon" and South Africa's most cruel tyrant.

Having quarreled with his Zulu monarch over the division of the herds of cattle captured during the raid, Mzilikazi thought it wise to put the Drakensberg Mountains between himself and the inevitable punishment which, he knew, would soon destroy him. He took his people with him, including regiments of well-armed warriors hardened by battle. He first settled

along the upper Apies River and then in the part of present-day Transvaal that was known at the time as Hurutseland.

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Not content with enslaving the sparse local indigenous population, he launched brutal raids deep into the neighboring territories of the Tswana and the Sotho. He seized their cattle and enslaved their men and women, with the exception of the youngest and healthiest, whom he incorporated into his army. His following continued to grow and was further strengthened by the constant arrival of large groups of other refugees fleeing from Shaka. Eventually, he became the greatest military power on his side of the Drakensberg Mountains. Even the population north of the Limpopo River, in the area that is now the Highveld of Southern Rhodesia, had to live in constant fear of his attacks.

Thus the Ndebele nation came into being, founded by Mzilikazi, who became its first Inkosi, or king. His first documented contact with white people took place in 1819, when he sent his 'Prime Minister' to Kuruman in Bechuanaland to invite a missionary, the Reverend Robert Moffat, to visit his royal kraal at Kungwini. This kraal contained 10,000 head of stolen cattle and housed a garrison of more than 1,000 warriors. Shortly afterwards, Dr Andrew Smith arrived on behalf of Sir Benjamin D'Urban (after whom the city of Durban would later be named). In recognition of Mzilikazi's dominant position in the region, Dr Smith presented him, on behalf of the British government, with a medal bearing the engraved date 1835, as well as 'two magnificent cloaks and two powerful field glasses'. Emboldened by this striking official recognition, the Inkosi considered the time ripe to send a delegation to the British authorities at the Cape and, through their mediation, open negotiations for a treaty with the British Crown.

This was precisely the time when the first groups of immigrant Boer farmers began crossing the Vaal River. A clash became inevitable. A year later, when the enormous wild fig tree was only about 177 years old and perhaps its seventh or eighth trunk had just emerged, just 107 of these Boers, together with 105 indigenous men under the command of Voortrekker Hendrik Potgieter, won a decisive victory over Mzilikazi in a bloody four-day battle at Zilikats Nek.

This historic site lies near the valley at the end of which modern-day Transvaal has now built the Hartebeestpoort Dam, a magnificent 17-square-

kilometre water reservoir and a popular destination for picnickers, sailors and anglers, easily accessible from both Johannesburg and Pretoria.

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The remnants of Mzilikazi's army were soon afterwards tracked down and attacked by Zulu regiments dispatched by Dingane, Shaka's successor. Although the heyday of the Ndebele army, then estimated at 80,000 men, was still far away in Rhodesia, where it was plundering, massacring and laying waste to the country, Mzilikazi managed to drive the Zulus back. However, fearing that Dingane might send reinforcements before he could get his own troops into position, and realizing the damage that larger Boer forces, already approaching, might inflict upon him, Mzilikazi cunningly decided to clear the battlefield for a clash between his two enemies. Meanwhile, he and all his people could peacefully cross the Limpopo River and join the rest of his forces, still intact in Rhodesia.

From there, he attacked in every direction, destroying or subjugating tribes, slaughtering people, mercilessly burning villages and settlements to the ground, and greedily seizing herds of cattle. He then surveyed the country until he found a place that suited him: near present-day Bulawayo. There he settled with his armies and his subjects throughout the surrounding area and set about rebuilding a new kingdom - naturally at the expense of all his neighbors: the Tonga, the Yao, the Lozi, the Shona, the Kalanga and the Pedi, whom I shall discuss shortly.

At that time, these peoples lived in small, scattered communities that were unprepared for war and therefore easily conquered. Thus the Ndebele kingdom expanded throughout this region and ruled the entire country between the Limpopo and the Zambezi for more than fifty years, until it was destroyed in 1893 by the forces of the British South Africa Company.

Meanwhile, the first Boers had occupied the Transvaal territories that Mzilikazi had appropriated, devastated and then hastily abandoned when he fled across the Limpopo. However, the tireless original groups of Voortrekkers soon moved eastwards in search of fresher grazing land and in the hope of establishing links with the outside world through Delagoa Bay. But the great migration was in full swing, and newly arrived Boers soon settled in areas that had not been occupied by their predecessors.

They appointed A.W.J. Pretorius as commander of the Boers on both banks of the Vaal. In 1849, he gave Transvaal its first constitution. When he died four years later, his son M.W. Pretorius succeeded him as commander. Shortly afterwards, the latter built that little thatched-roof church in a quiet, green valley, thereby founding Pretoria.

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The main reason why the adventures and misfortunes of Mzilikazi and his ruthless band of mercenaries are of such particular interest to visitors or observers of modern Transvaal is that Pretoria not only stands precisely on the very ground from which Mzilikazi exercised his cruel reign of terror for so long, but that a short distance north of the city there are still several picturesque, colorful villages. These are probably among the best-known and most photographed in the whole of Transvaal, if not in the entire Republic of South Africa.

They belong to the Southern Ndebele, who are also sometimes called the Mapoch or Mapocha, after the name Malaboch, one of their most important chiefs in more recent times. Both these people and the Northern Ndebele, whose villages are clustered closely together around Potgietersrust, are descendants of the Nguni, one of the three main groups of the Bantu peoples. Having been strengthened by a considerable admixture of Arab blood during their slow migration, they turned southwards from the Great Lakes region about 1,000 years ago and settled along the coast of the Indian Ocean. Later, these Ndebele were forced to move westwards by the relentless expansionist ambitions of their cousins, the all-conquering Zulus.

About three hundred years ago, at roughly the time when that enormous wild fig tree had only just begun to emerge from the earth, these early Ndebele settled in their present territories after four years of exploratory wandering. Despite the changes, invasions and counter-invasions of three centuries, they have remarkably succeeded in preserving their harmonious language, their peaceful traditional tribal customs, their superstitious beliefs and their ceremonies.

In other words, they have retained most of their beautiful culture, which finds particularly vivid expression in the dramatically striking style of their homes, their ornaments and the highly distinctive traditional dress of their women.

No one knows how this small miracle of adherence to ancient traditions managed to survive the wave of oppression and terror inflicted upon them by Mzilikazi's hordes. But survive it did, just as the name Ndebele itself has also endured, whereas the other, more recent kingdom founded by Mzilikazi in Transvaal, which later re-emerged beyond the Limpopo in Southern Rhodesia, is generally known by the name Matabele.

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The latter name derives from Matabele, a Sotho-Tswana word generally used to refer to the Nguni peoples. AmaNdebele is the plural form. The singular is iliNdebele, also shortened to iNdebele or umNdebele. Their language is called isiNdebele, which was Anglicized into Sindebele.

To avoid the confusion that all these prefixes (together with some twenty other existing forms) would create, the only practical solution seems to be to retain the name Ndebele for the singular, plural, language and everything else. There is just one additional point to note: the Transvaal Ndebele (or Mapochs, or Mapochas) explain that their name did not originally refer to their Nguni ancestry, but rather to the fact that they came into territories which they still regard as their 'nomadic or refugee lands'.

Be that as it may, the fact remains that the Matabele villages in Southern Rhodesia consist of little more than rather dreary, dirty huts with mud walls and thatched roofs, whereas the villages of the Transvaal Ndebele are truly beautiful and display a dynamic, if primitive, form of art. They demonstrate that these people are undoubtedly the greatest mural artists among the Bantu peoples and, in the opinion of many, are just as good as, or even better than, the famous Mangbetu of Uele in the Congo.

Moreover, their art provides them with continuous pleasure and enjoyment. They do not attempt to preserve it for long periods by, for example, protecting it with roofs. On the contrary, they seem delighted when most of their work is washed away every year by the summer rains. This allows them to start all over again during the dry winter months, give free rein to their imagination, follow newly conceived ideas and patterns, and use different colors.

A certain degree of symmetry generally prevails - that is, until the artist grows tired of the subject. At that moment, the remaining part of his wall

'canvas' begins to reflect the change in his mood, and the patterns on one side of the doorway become entirely independent of those on the other.

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21. The monstrous Kanga, the curse of Atakufa Kesho and his family.



22. The graceful Venda girls, whose customs are said to have originated along the Nile. This tribe has preserved traces of ancient Egyptian culture.



23. The snake dance.

These patterns display an ever-changing variety, reflecting the artist's continual development. They include most of the conventional motifs of African art: traditional zigzag lines, rectangles or triangles within rectangles, stylized representations of animals, plants, flowers and so on.

This does not mean, however, that they ignore the letters of the alphabet or the numbers that the children of the household now learn at school. Nor do they omit the primitive but highly effective imitations of brick walls, balconies, occasionally even a dome, windows with colorful cornices and shutters, towers, bridges - practically anything that has stimulated the artist's imagination. The borrowing of new subjects from European civilization goes so far that even a sugar bowl, a teapot, a clock, a few pieces of furniture or even an aeroplane may serve as inspiration.

Yet the artist's innate sense of proportion and restraint, together with the skillful combination of white, black, grey, green and light blue with yellow, brown and red ochre, produces the most pleasing effects. This is particularly true in that crystal-clear air and against the background of a deep blue sky.

When one also sees three or four beautifully built, magnificently adorned young women sitting on the railings flanking the doorway, together with a few charming children who are completely naked apart from a few strings of beads here and there, it is difficult to imagine a more perfect or delightful picture of gentle, happy, primitive life.

The daughters and wives of the Transvaal Ndebele, in fact, wear increasingly heavy ornaments from their earliest childhood onwards, consisting of thick copper rings and, even more so, thick, round strings of beads. They have a particular preference for white beads, mixed with yellow, green, brown, dark blue and scarlet ones.

During childhood, they wear these attractive strings of beads only around their hips and ankles. As the years pass, more and more strings, and increasingly thicker ones, are added, also around the neck, arms and head. This continues to such an extent that a bride, in her full wedding attire, may wear as many as fifteen strings around each arm and each leg, with several more on her head, half a dozen around her neck and about seven around her waist, bringing the total to seventy or eighty.

Hanging from her waist is also a wide, fringed apron decorated with beads, the privilege of betrothed and married women.

This magnificent adornment is completed by a large neck ornament (which, like the apron, consists of white beads decorated with geometric designs in colored beads), by jewelry made of numerous shimmering coins hanging from the hair above her forehead and from the tuft of hair at the back of her neck, while the rest of her head is shaved, and by a beautifully striped blanket (made exclusively for the Ndebele market). She drapes herself gracefully in this blanket, now that the old-fashioned petticoats made of softened animal skins have gone out of fashion.

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25. Ancient rituals

From the point of view of their "social life", however, the Ndebele women adorned with strings of beads and their men (the latter are now only rarely seen wearing their traditional, less conspicuous attire), particularly the Northern Ndebele who live near Potgietersrust, are very strongly influenced by the pastoral Pedi people. Originally, the Pedi inhabited the eastern bank of the Oliphant River, although today the name Pedi is used for all those Transvaal Africans who speak the Sesuto language and have adopted the customs of the Sotho (or Suto), the abaNtu ba-s-oSutu, or "people of the dark-brown river", so called after the color of the water of a river situated in what is now Swaziland, where they settled centuries ago.

The Sotho tribe of the Pedi became famous by chance towards the end of the eighteenth century through a prophet-king (Thulare or Tulare), who first saw the light of day (or what little of it there was) in a cellar that had been made unsafe by porcupines, and into which his mother had crawled a few moments before his birth. This gave rise to his royal name, Sekhukhuni ("he who crawls"), which has been retained by the ruling family, just as the porcupine remains the tribe's totem animal. One of the most interesting and characteristic features of the Pedi or baPedi is their belief that the spiritual well-being of the tribe depends on the careful tending of the sacred fires, which burn perpetually (women are strictly forbidden access to them) in their palisade-enclosed kraals, consisting of circular clay huts with conical thatched roofs.

This continues until the moment when a chief takes a “tribal wife”, the woman who is to give him his heir. The old sacred fire is then extinguished and a new one is kindled by rapidly twirling the two ritual fire-sticks, one “male” and the other “female”, which are intended to symbolize marriage. The new fire is identified with the royal child that is to be born. All the male members of the tribe then light their own household fires from the sacred flame, which is reverently kept alive by specially appointed guardians for an entire generation, that is, until the wedding of the next “tribal wife”.

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A further and quite different kind of fire is required for the rain ceremonies, which are conducted by the chief, who is also the rainmaker of the tribe. This fire is kindled only when rain is needed. Green wood and damp leaves are used so that a great cloud of smoke rises from the fire towards the sky. In a special, secret rain hut, the chief also prepares his rain medicine, which is sprinkled over the cultivated fields in spring. In exceptionally persistent cases of drought, he may also call upon the assistance of Mujaji, the old Rain Queen of the Lobedu (“people of the ‘wild bear’”, who live in the lowveld of northern Transvaal), because she is the most famous rainmaker in the whole of South Africa.

She probably really is, as is claimed, that very granddaughter of the “Milk-White and Immortal” who inspired Sir Rider Haggard to create his “SHE” (and who certainly had at least a considerable amount of Portuguese blood in her veins). The matter, however, is highly uncertain, since the Lobedu firmly believe that a Mujaji from the end of the previous century had not only a dark-brown complexion but also four breasts, and was therefore called Mabeleruawe, “Queen with the Four Breasts”. She was also famous as the Queen of the Locusts and was able to set this dreaded plague in motion towards the crops of her enemies or of the tribes she wished to punish.

In any case, the present Mujaji is said to be darker-skinned than all the others. Very few people, however, have actually seen her. For she lives in seclusion in her royal residence near Duivelskloof, and whenever she has to produce rain, she withdraws into even greater seclusion in a sacred grove of rare cycads, among which stands her “rain temple”. There she officiates as a true “Divine Person”, possessing power over the forces of nature - in accordance with the age-old cult of “Divine Kings”, which the Lobedu inherited, together with their ancient Hamitic culture, from the Egypt of the Pharaohs.

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Mujaji's fee for bringing rain amounts to several oxen each time. This is not excessive when one considers that, in order to obtain such a valuable gift from the gods, she must first remain shut up in the temple for endless days together with her male witch doctor, where she consults the oracles, sacrifices a black ox, brews the Mofuko, her infallible rain medicine, pours it from a special vessel, the Khirutwane, onto the graves of her ancestors, and so forth. In any case, her fee is fully justified by the results she achieves. For, strange and incredible as it may seem to us, she rarely - if ever - fails. In every single instance, her rituals are crowned with success. And shortly after they have been completed, the life-giving rain usually begins to fall. Moreover, it falls precisely where it is so urgently needed.

Without losing myself in too many details of the still highly complicated customs surrounding a modern Ndebele wedding, I would nevertheless like to report on a few interesting facts that deserve mentioning.

First comes what we would call an engagement. This takes place officially when the girl's father has accepted a gift or payment from his future son-in-law, known as Igangaziwe, which, depending on the dialect, may be translated approximately as “entry into your homestead” or “thanks to your parents”. After this formality, the young people begin addressing each other's parents as Umamazala (mother-in-law) and Ubabazala (father-in-law), while the older people reciprocate by calling the future young wife Umalokazana and her bridegroom Umkwenyana, that is, daughter-in-law and son-in-law. The same applies to the various other members of both families, with each newly established family relationship being represented by a list of different names long enough to fill an arm's length.

Meanwhile, of course, agreement has been reached on the question of Lobola, since, as among most Bantu peoples, a marriage is not considered a true marriage until the bridegroom has made a payment for his bride, which might be described as a “dowry in reverse”. For a Bantu regards such a payment - usually a gift of cattle - as rightful compensation for the fact that, through the marriage, the man's kraal gains a new member, while the bride's kraal loses one.

Far from being merely a clever device for enriching a Bantu with many daughters, this custom also serves, in a sense, as a tangible guarantee that

husband and wife will behave properly towards one another. If he should treat her badly, she could return to her father's kraal, and he would thereby forfeit the Lobola he had paid. If, on the other hand, she were to misbehave or leave her husband, he would have the right to “send her back” and recover all the cattle paid as Lobola. In other words, contrary to the opinion of many uninformed white people, Lobola has a strongly stabilizing influence on the social life of the Bantu.

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Among the Ndebele, this institution goes one step further, since it is also linked to the successful bearing of children - a matter that is just as vital to the Ndebele as their cattle.

The actual wedding ceremony has now lost most of its traditional customs and rituals. The only thing that still takes place today is that the bride is escorted by a number of her relatives to the homestead of her husband's parents, where she will henceforth live, and that the husband slaughters a cow, the “animal of agreement” (Inkomo yokogcola), for a festive meal in honor of the bride's retinue. The entrails of this cow are sent to the mother of the bride's father, who, approximately a year later, reciprocates this gift (Isikupo) with a calabash of beer.

When the newlyweds have established their own kraal and one or two children have been born to them, the bride's father begins the Umkuwabiza amalobolo, that is, he begins to demand the Lobola, the cattle that the bridegroom or his family promised in exchange for the young woman's fertility. If payment is delayed for an unreasonably long time, her father has the right to demand that either one or both of the children be sent to him and live with him until the promised cattle have actually been handed over. Apart from this possibility, the young woman's relatives have always been deeply interested in her children, and most children spend part of their early years visiting their mother's family.

Should it turn out that the wife of a Ndebele man is infertile, he nevertheless has at least a potential claim to her younger sister, his sister-in-law (umlamu), or the right to Ukubiza umlamu, meaning “to call for the sister-in-law” as his second wife, even if his first wife has remained faithful to him. This custom is, however, now being abandoned, since contemporary Ndebele men claim that two sisters usually quarrel much more than two unrelated wives, or, worse still, that they join forces and form a united front against him.

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In any case, the Ndebele population (approximately 215,000 throughout South Africa, of whom 210,000 live in the Transvaal alone) has grown steadily since the end of the horrors of invasions and wars. Indeed, these figures represent a population increase over the past fifty years of between 11.0 and 31.5%, compared with the average population growth of South African Bantu peoples throughout the country, which ranged from 8.5 to 18.1%.

The impressive wild fig tree had reached approximately one-third of its present size when, 200 years ago, another dark-skinned people began to filter into the northern part of what is now Transvaal. These people were the Bavenda, or “people of the world”, as they called themselves. Their chief was “Makkedo, the Lion of the North”, who, together with his son Mphefu, was to remain a painful thorn in the side of the Boers of Transvaal until the end of the previous century. Indeed, the Bavenda were the very last tribe in South Africa to accept white rule. Even today, they remain one of the least-known tribes, although they are probably among the most fascinating.

The Venda, who are said to have originated from the Nile, have preserved much of ancient Egyptian culture: its gods and taboos, language, magical beliefs and ceremonies, clothing, music, dances, and even the strange ornaments with which they decorate the clay walls and cement-like floors of their huts.

Vendaland is one of the few regions where genuine Egyptian millet is still cultivated. Perhaps most bewildering of all is the fact that the pure air of this mountainous region is constantly filled with the rumbling of drums, the sound of reed flutes and the many-voiced melodies of the Mbila, the xylophone which the early explorers of the country borrowed from Venda musicians in order to introduce it first into Europe and subsequently into America.

The gliding and stamping dances of the Venda are extraordinarily impressive, particularly when watched on a moonlit night. Almost naked, Venda boys and girls sway their slender, graceful and supple bodies to intricate rhythms, dancing in wonderful harmony with the music of seven flutes, each played by a different man and each producing only a single note; with the sound of the marimba; with the small drums held between the legs of other musicians, each of which can produce twelve different tones; with the booming of the various Ngoma, large drums skillfully made from a hollowed-

out softwood log and covered with tightly stretched oxhide, secured by dozens of small wooden pegs; and with the sweet, twittering notes of the Mbila, consisting of tuned hardwood bars mounted above calabash resonators, upon which soft-headed drumsticks beat away incessantly and excitedly.

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The Python Dance of the Domba, or “School of Imitation”, is an especially remarkable feature of these festivities. During it, the young unmarried women are instructed in the duties of marriage and motherhood, and in humility, in addition to undergoing various ceremonial tests of courage. Since the python is a symbol of wisdom and fertility, dozens of young girls, wearing nothing but a few bracelets and anklets and a cache-sexe no larger than a postage stamp, sway and glide in the Python Dance. They move in an intricate, interwoven pattern that vividly imitates the slow undulating movement of a gigantic snake, circling groups of girls who play the marimba and the ngoma. The tall flames leaping from the ceremonial fire cast ever-changing light upon the dancers’ shimmering, supple figures.

It is probably the most breathtaking, beautiful, graceful and captivating spectacle ever to have taken place in the Transvaal during the three-hundred-year life of the old wild fig tree. Judging by the number of centuries during which a large part of the Bavenda have faithfully clung to their ancient traditions, despite the often overly rapid advance of civilization, this dance seems destined to be performed again and again, year after year, until the time when the old wild fig tree has withered, fallen into decay and passed into oblivion.

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26. Traditional African jurisprudence

In recent times, the world’s attention has often been drawn to the lamentable lack of education and the enormous number of illiterate people among the African masses. Nowadays, newspapers and magazines are full of articles repeatedly reporting the absence or perversion of justice in many of the new African states - for example, in the Republic of the Congo (Leopoldville), from which the numerous Belgian judges of every rank - all but one, I believe - have either been expelled or have fled to save their lives.

Personally, I am by no means convinced that every legal case can be properly dealt with only by professionally trained white judges or by the exceedingly few black Africans who can boast of having successfully passed a law degree at university. On the contrary, after my years of experience in Africa, I have come to the conclusion that certain cases, particularly when they are genuinely complicated and involve a number of different crimes, apparently unrelated to one another but essentially tribal in character, can never be uncovered so quickly, solved with such unfailing instinct, or settled so justly as by a good, conscientious and clear-headed chief, who may never have learned to read or write and may not even have a law book at his disposal.

For, despite these handicaps, he possesses a wealth of unique advantages. Apart, perhaps, from a few personal matters which would only spur him on to deliver a verdict that is just towards everyone, himself included, he has no other concerns to distract him from his principal task of administering justice. He generally has a complete understanding of the psychology, mentality and innermost character of practically every one of his subjects. This unrivalled knowledge, and the skill with which he applies it to the fair resolution of a tangled case, have been refined to an almost hypersensitive acuity over the long years of his leadership and administration of justice - or, if he is still young, through the instinctive wisdom he seems to have inherited from a succession of predecessors. Above all, however, he can also count on the assistance he is certain to receive from the “magic” of one or another revered object.

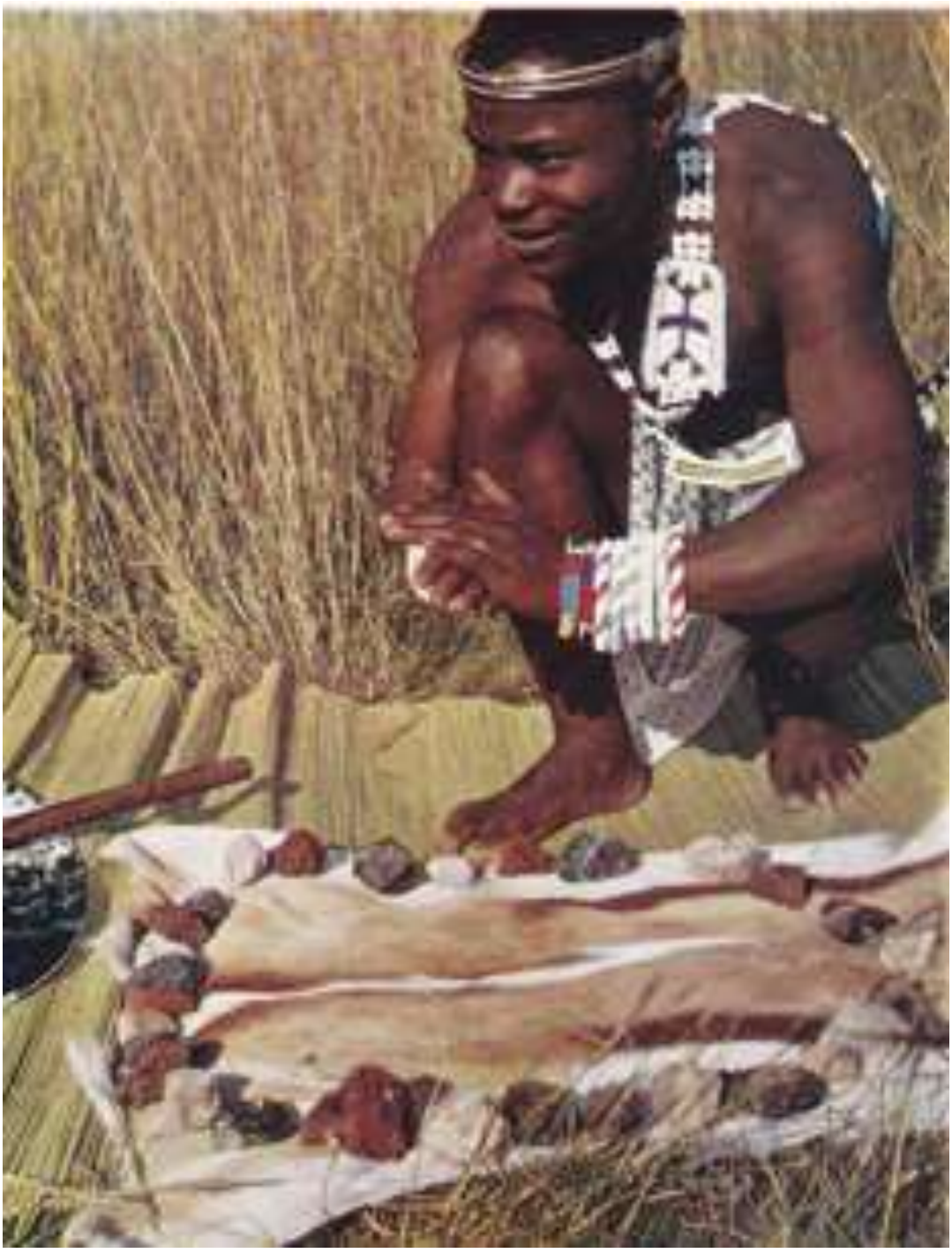
Even that one did not remain for long. Later, the United Nations sent a few judges there, all of them foreigners. In May 1962, there were 47 in all - a mere handful for a troubled country with 17 million inhabitants, eighty times the size of Belgium, and experiencing conditions of chaotic anarchy throughout all its vast eighteen provinces.

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The most striking example I have ever encountered in this field was a case that fascinated me so deeply that I tried to follow it from beginning to end. I can therefore describe every important detail of it accurately.

The case took place in the village of Kingongo, in the still untamed and exceedingly primitive region on the outskirts of the Bakgatla Reserve in vast Bechuanaland - strangely enough, only a short distance from the densely

populated, ultra-modern city of Johannesburg (which, in South Africa, is what passes for a short distance).



24. Chief Kuanakali seeks a solution to his problems.

The hero and deus ex machina of this astonishing and unforgettable case, as far as I was concerned, was Kuanakali. He was - and, as far as I know, still is - the hereditary chief of the little-known Biemba-Kabando clan, who appear

to be descended from the Transvaal Ndebele. Their “royal kraal”, modest though it may be, still stands in Kingongo in accordance with ancient tradition. Unfortunately, the huts of the Biemba-Kabando have none of the cheerful, festive appearance of the Ndebele villages near Pretoria. Nevertheless, both the language spoken in Kingongo and the clothing and adornments of the Kingongo women bear witness to the close kinship that once existed between the two tribes.

After this introduction, I shall let the diary of that expedition speak for itself, just as I wrote my entries at the time, when my observations and impressions were still freshest. And if I jotted them down quickly and, despite the gravity of some of the crimes described in them, in a somewhat light-hearted manner, it was solely because of the immense pleasure I derived from observing the methods of what has always seemed to me like a little masterpiece of the veld’s primitive justice.

Never before had there been so much trouble, discord and confusion in the village of Kingongo - even the oldest induna (wise man) of the Biemba-Kabando could remember nothing of the kind. Nor had Chief Kuanakali ever felt his strong shoulders bending under so heavy a burden during the roughly ten years since his aged father had died and left him as heir to the countless obligations of the chieftainship, a limited number of cattle, no fewer than six “wives of honor” (his father’s widows, who now, by custom, belonged to him), and a basketful of “wise stones”. The magical power of these stones had helped generations of earlier chiefs to resolve the most difficult cases they had been called upon to handle.

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Slender and wiry, with a youthful appearance, Kuanakali could not state his exact age. His own mother had died long ago, and nobody else seemed to care in the slightest whether he was 38 years old, as some of his “wives of honor” claimed, or 40, or perhaps a few years older, as some of the indunas maintained.

What he knew for certain - and there was absolutely no doubt about it - was that his entire family circle, including his three own wives, who were neither particularly young nor particularly old, the whole village of Kingongo, and the entire Biemba-Kabando tribe were in a state of seething excitement.

As it happened, the imposing name of the tribe was somewhat misleading. At the last census, the total number of its members had amounted to only 276, including elderly women, infants still carried in their mothers' arms, and Sambimbo, the new wife recently acquired by a tribal member named Didiomba from a neighboring tribe with which they were on friendly terms.

Two hundred and seventy-six - unless a horde of savages, the cannibalistic Oma-Lungui, whom a one-eyed Fortuna had bestowed upon them as neighbors, had made a few fresh deductions from the population figures for the benefit of their own culinary department. That would hardly have been surprising, for time out of mind the Oma-Lungui had made a practice of catching unwary Biemba-Kabandos in the dense bush with wire snares. And they had continued to do so despite the presence of a few white authorities, stationed far away, and with a persistence that testified both to the consistency of their tastes and to the particular flavor of the Biemba-Kabandos. The latter, however, did not seem to appreciate this distinction very much, having long since grown accustomed to being accorded such an honor.

This time, though, Chief Kuanakali felt no bitterness towards his cannibal neighbors. If his subjects, numbering only 276, already caused him so much work and worry, what might they not have got up to had their numbers been ten times greater? For, as he calculated, that would more or less have been the normal strength of his tribe if all the women and girls whom the Oma-Lungui had eaten during his lifetime had remained alive and had children, and their children after them, and then their children's children.

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One thing was certain: something had to be done, and soon, Kuanakali thought, as he angrily scratched the little tubercle that Mother Nature had planted in the middle of his face in place of a nose. For some time now, life had become absolutely unbearable. Crimes of every kind had suddenly descended upon his village like a hailstorm: arson, brawling, the slaughter of livestock - one crime more mysterious than the next.

The little groups of friends and relatives, relatives of friends and friends of relatives, which had immediately formed to support each victim, had divided what was usually a peaceful land into so many factions that even he, the chief, no longer knew how many there were.

And every one of them was angry, full of reproaches and ready either to attack one another or to unite against him. Whenever they came to tell him about the wrongs they had suffered, they shouted so loudly and talked for so long that they gave him terrible headaches. Even the three copper wires that he usually wound tightly around his head when the pain became unbearable could no longer relieve his severe suffering.

And what was far worse, his own wives had thrown themselves wholeheartedly into this infernal uproar. The six eldest, the “wives of honor” inherited from his father, who had lived together in perfect harmony for so many years, now quarreled with one another from morning till night, each defending a different faction. They even tried to revive flirtations long since buried in the depths of time, hoping to persuade him to make a decision in favor of the particular group to which each of these accursed women had now transferred her belated enthusiasm.

As for his three young wives, his own proper wives, for whose purchase he had spent so much cattle, only yesterday he had been forced to give them a stern warning, to prevent them from quarrelling among themselves in a manner unworthy of ladies of distinguished Biemba-Kabando lineage.

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After careful consideration, he came to the conclusion that there must be nine main factions, since each of his wives, of one kind or another, had taken up the banner of a different party.

Yes, nine had to be the number.

He carefully counted on his fingers. Was it really possible that there were so many? Was the pressure being exerted on him confusing his thoughts? If that was the case, then the situation was serious; for never before had he needed all his wisdom so desperately as he did now, in order to untangle this complicated web.

He had summoned the Council of Elders for the following day. The indunas would probably all be present, he reflected almost in passing; for they were so old, nothing but skin and bones, that the Oma-Lungui held no terrors for them. But he could not hope for any guidance from them, since they too had been swept up in the general turmoil.

Nine, however, struck him as a greatly exaggerated number, and that was the first point he had to clarify while he still had the rare opportunity to reach a secluded spot and enjoy some peace for a while. He thought this would be possible for some time, since the shrill screams and cries reaching him from the enclosure of his kraal told him that all his wives had gathered to discuss this matter informally, a matter that was of such burning interest to them and had so thoroughly awakened their civic conscience.

Almost instinctively, and certainly without being aware of it, he had grabbed the basket of "wise stones" before slipping out of his hut. Now he squatted down in a bare spot surrounded by tall yellow grass, unrolled the mat and goatskin he had brought along for his own comfort, and, glad to have the basket faithfully at his side, poured out the stones so that he could still reach them easily.

"That is Didiomba's party," he said to himself. And, so as not to forget, he placed a yellow stone, which he had taken from the pile, on the goatskin.

"She is in an uproar because five of Didiomba's fattest cows have been found dead in his yard, having perished from loss of blood. And he is demanding justice. Who committed this crime?" He placed a reddish stone opposite the yellow one.

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"This is Bunyambio's party," he said, placing a second yellow stone beside the first.

"Who is his enemy? Who? Who creeps up on him in the darkness, attacks him and beats him so cruelly that he would have died had the medicine man not saved him by covering his wounds with the greatest of all medicines: ox dung, mixed with the blood of a rat killed at the full moon, and sprinkled with dried monkey liver?"

"This one," he said, and with that a second reddish stone was placed opposite the second yellow one.

And so the stones continued to find their places on the mat in accordance with the chief's murmured words: the yellow ones in one row, representing the victims of serious misdeeds; the reddish ones in another row, embodying the mysterious perpetrators who had committed the crimes.

“This is Okimperi. And this is the man who, although Okimperi knew of no one who harbored any enmity towards him, set fire to Okimperi’s hut just as the wind was blowing strongly, so that all his possessions were destroyed. And this is Pekopeko, the father of Sambimbo, Didiomba’s third wife.

And Didiomba wishes to return Sambimbo to her father Pekopeko because, in the few days since she became his wife, she has already been unfaithful to him. He does not know who her lover is, but there is no doubt that she has one. For when, to put her to the test, he sprinkled some powder made from dried bats and ash from pigs’ feet into her food, Sambimbo became ill.

But Pekopeko comes to me, although he belongs to the Mantiba tribe, to demand justice, and refuses to return the twenty cows that Didiomba paid him in order to take his daughter as a wife. For he says that his daughter already had that lover before she married, and that if Didiomba took her as a wife with a lover, then he must keep her with that lover.’

This argument, however, did not persuade the chief. What would become of the traditions of honor upheld by his tribe if Pekopeko’s ideas were accepted?

And with a gesture of disgust, he placed two reddish stones opposite Pekopeko’s yellow stone: one for Sambimbo and one for the unknown violator of marital fidelity.

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A vigorous tickling sensation in his nose led Kuanakali to conclude that there were no more disputing parties, and with the help of his fingers he carefully counted the small stones, satisfying himself that there were four yellow ones and five reddish ones.

Nine in all. So the number of parties and the number of his wives (legitimate and “honorary” ones) did indeed correspond. Both as an act of protest against them and because the empty space in one of the rows offended his sense of symmetry, he filled it with another yellow stone.

“This one,” he said, “is me, Chief Kuanakali, who must also be given justice for all the trouble that has been caused him and for all the peace that his wives have taken away from him.”

27. Dispensing justice with divining stones

A smile flitted across Kuanakali’s cunning face, but it was a pleasant smile, with nothing disagreeable or offensive about it. For Kuanakali, simple as he was, was a very wise man, full of decency and principles. In this case, the principle (and the reason for his smile) was as follows: since there were now ten parties and only nine wives, and none of them had taken his side, the only solution was to find a tenth wife who would take his interests to heart. And if he was going to take another wife anyway, she might as well be a much younger one.

As it happened, a certain young maiden named Karamuka, quite pretty and attractive in both face and figure, had recently missed no opportunity to let him know that she was by no means averse to the idea. Apparently, she was even prepared to overlook the fact that he was short of cattle, marry him and thereby become the youngest and most favored wife of the highest authority in Kingongo.

Not only that. Her father, Lane, had even agreed, in view of the great honor being bestowed upon him, to let her go for a mere ten cows, although the wise Kuanakali suspected that the real reason for the low price was that Karamuka was no longer in the first bloom of youth and might soon prove to be a poor investment for her father.

“Ten cows,” the chief murmured, “ten wives, ten parties.” He gave a deep sigh of satisfaction. Ten, ten, ten. The same number repeated three times. What clearer indication could the spirits of his ancestors have given him that this number held the key to resolving the entire complicated, tangled affair, the most complicated matter he had ever encountered in his whole life?

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His work, however, was by no means finished. The solution had to be found in the number ten. Yes – but he still had to find it.

For several hours he sat brooding over the stones, in which, ultimately – although he was not aware of it – lay their greatest magical power. That was

what those “wise stones” had been used for throughout so many generations of tribal chiefs. They were meant to focus and fix a judge’s attention on the essential, though seemingly unrelated, points of a difficult case. They were meant to help him concentrate on a number of known elements and forget all distracting outside influences, to examine the facts from every angle, to put them together and take them apart again, until the stones finally formed a pattern from which the correct solution could be read.

By now, of course, every “wise stone” represented an individual in the case to the chief – either a victim or a culprit, although in a few instances some of them were still anonymous. So he set to work, moving the ten stones back and forth into all sorts of different combinations, as though they were pieces of a difficult jigsaw puzzle. Patiently, attentively and persistently. Until, after a long succession of successive manipulations, it seemed to him that the riddle had been solved and the whole situation was being revealed to him with perfect clarity. The pattern that provided the answer, the last of many, was a circle in which stones of different colours alternated: a reddish one, a yellow one, a reddish one, a yellow one.

Before gathering up the stones with his hand, he picked up the little stone that represented himself, since it would now be dangerous to leave it behind. To make quite sure that no evil-minded person could cast a wicked spell upon this stone, Chief Kuanakali considered where he might hide it so that nobody would ever find it.

And just at that moment, a figure appeared silently beside him. Kuanakali was delighted to see that it was the smiling Karamuka. He stood up and, taking advantage of her large, wide-open mouth, popped the yellow stone into it. This solved the problem in the most splendid fashion and, what is more, made the girl extraordinarily happy; for, believe it or not, although she had some difficulty swallowing, she managed to gulp the stone down. And with the greatest enthusiasm, too.

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For never before had Kuanakali, as she believed, made her such an unmistakable declaration of love, let alone one so full of open insinuations – perhaps a little too open, even. She would certainly have blushed as she ran to her father to tell him the good news, had the color of her skin not made such an expression of pleasantly shocked maidenly modesty impossible.

Three mornings later, all the Biemba-Kabando gathered once again in and around the palaver hut to enjoy the third and probably final day of the trial. Most of them were present as defendants, plaintiffs or witnesses; the few others – the oldest and the youngest – were there as spectators.

During the two preceding days, Chief Kuanakali had, true to tradition, allowed everyone to have their say. The wild torrents of eloquence that had swept over him had left him completely unmoved. His subjects could accuse or defend one another as much as they pleased. But he, their chief, knew how to read between the lines. And no one would be able to confuse his thoughts again. For the circle of stones had fixed them firmly and unmistakably in his mind.

Today was the day of the verdict, which would once again show the Biemba-Kabando that no one surpassed Chief Kuanakali in the art of dispensing justice and punishing or rewarding every person involved in such a way that everyone was satisfied. Before evening, peace would surely have returned to the people of Kingongo – and to his own household and family life as well.

“This is the truth, and may the spirits of my ancestors punish me if I do not speak the truth.”

Thus began the chief’s memorable speech, which was greeted with deep and respectful silence as he rose to address his people.

“Didiomba has proved that Sambimbo, his third wife, has been unfaithful to him. He may return her to Pekopeko, her father.

And Pekopeko shall return ten of the twenty cows he received as payment for his daughter.”

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“Bunyambio was beaten by Didiomba, who took him for his wife’s lover. Didiomba shall give him ten cows as compensation.”

A murmur of approval swept through the assembly, but immediately died away as the chief continued his speech.



25. In one of the cheerfully painted villages of the Ndebele in Transvaal.



26. Venda girls at the pounding mill.



27. Chief Kuanakali discusses matters with his lawful wives and his 'honorary wives'.

“Okimperi is poor today because of the fire that reduced his huts to ashes. But a fire does not start of its own accord. The fire was started by Bunyambio, who, out of fear of Okimperi, did not dare tell the truth to Didiomba, Sambimbo’s husband. As compensation for the burnt huts, Bunyambio shall pay Okimperi ten cows.

“But Okimperi, Sambimbo’s lover, blinded by his anger, believed that Didiomba had set fire to his kraal. And to avenge himself, he slaughtered Didiomba’s five finest cows. Therefore Okimperi shall give him ten cows: five to replace the slaughtered animals and five as compensation.

“Pekopeko now has one more daughter and ten fewer cows, because of the ones he must return to Didiomba. Okimperi shall give him twenty cows and take the woman he desires - and probably took when she was still another man’s wife - as his own lawful wife. And he shall pay twice the amount for which she was returned, because today she is worth just as much to him as she was yesterday, when she was worth twenty cows. And since he does not own enough cows himself, he shall pay ten, while the remaining ten shall be supplied by Lane, his father, because he failed to give his young son wise counsel.”

This earned the chief a tremendous ovation - or, to be more precise, a mighty stamping of feet accompanied by peals of laughter, the way approval is expressed in Kingongo.

Two men, however, took part in the general rejoicing in entirely different ways. One was Pekopeko, who seemed almost beside himself with delight. To him, the verdict meant that he was rid of his guilty daughter and could thus avoid all the difficulties he had feared. On top of that, he received an extra ten cows as a bonus. The other was Lane, who, by contrast, was nearly beside himself with indignation at the thought of losing so many cows through his son’s fault.

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The chief’s sparkling eyes rested for a moment on the two men, both absorbed in such opposite states of mind. Then he called for silence and began to speak again.

“But where would justice be if, because of the flesh of his own flesh, one man were to gain cattle while another lost them?”

At these words, some kind of magic seemed to have exchanged the expressions on Pekopeko's and Lane's faces. The one who had been so happy now became utterly despairing, while the other experienced the opposite transformation.

"And where would justice be if I, your beloved chief, were to spend all my days toiling and communing with the spirits without receiving any compensation for it? Pekopeko shall therefore pay me the ten cows he receives over and above those he himself is required to pay. And I shall pay these cows to Lane as the bride price for his daughter Karamuka, whom he wishes to give me as a wife.

"In this way," the chief concluded triumphantly, "what a son's guilt has taken away from his father is made good again through a daughter's merit."

However complicated this verdict might appear, in reality it was quite simple.

For apart from the fact that two women changed huts - and from the point of view of property this counts for very little, since the Biemba-Kabando are so accustomed to their women disappearing because of the previously mentioned prejudice of the cannibalistic Oma-Lungui - only ten cows changed enclosures permanently. These were the cows that Okimperi, the lover, paid to Didiomba, the husband, as compensation for the animals he had slaughtered, a kind of "balm for the heart".

Yet all the guilty parties had been punished, all the victims rewarded, and even the "court costs" had been paid, without anyone having to pay anything, with the sole exception of Okimperi, the actual culprit.

If anyone would like to know how the verdict was carried out, or finds it difficult to understand the verdict itself and the events that led to it, I can explain. I followed everything attentively and remember very well that final circle of alternating yellow and reddish stones. To make absolutely certain that I understood all the details correctly, I even persuaded the chief to repeat for me, on a mat in his own hut, the various arrangements of the ten stones. I photographed them as he explained.

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My conclusion was therefore confirmed: the only ones who had suffered were the ten innocent cows. It had been an exhausting day for them, beginning the moment they left the enclosure of their owner, Pekopeko, and were driven to Didiomba's pen as partial repayment of the original price paid for Sambimbo.

Didiomba immediately sent the cows on to Bunyambio, whom he had beaten unjustly. Bunyambio promptly passed them on to Okimperi, the real lover, whose huts he had set on fire. Okimperi sent them back to Pekopeko as a fifty-per-cent down payment on the price of Sambimbo, who was now to become his wife.

But the poor animals had scarcely had a moment's rest before shouts and cries drove them forward once more, this time in the form of "court costs", and into the chief's enclosure. Although he was heavily occupied with preparations for his forthcoming wedding, he lost no time in sending them on to Lane as the bride price for Karamuka; after all, he was very anxious to take possession of her as soon as possible.

And one may be sure that the unfortunate cows heaved a deep sigh when Lane drove them back to Pekopeko, with a sigh no less heartfelt of his own - though of quite the opposite kind - as settlement of the price his son was required by the verdict to pay for Sambimbo.

28. Swaziland: healers and traditions

My earlier journeys to Zululand had provided me with so many exciting adventures and such a rich harvest of interesting observations that I - more fascinated than ever by everything connected with magic and sorcery, ever since Bapuka and I had taken possession of one another - decided to set out once again and pay another visit to the python priestess Twadekili. Readers of my books may remember that I had every reason to preserve many indelible memories of this exceptionally wise and powerful woman.

1 In den Urwäldern des Kongo (Orell Füsli, 1947) und Tom Tom (Orell Füssli, 1952)

Although I had previously established that she was still alive and had - if such a thing were possible at all - drawn even closer to the highest peak of her powers, it occurred to me that she must by now be getting on in years, and that I must not miss the opportunity to see her again. As it turned out, my visit to her was extraordinarily fortunate, for it was the last time I found her alive. Only a few months after I had left her Many, she died - and, of course, so did her enormous python - long before the time when, a few years ago, I was once again offered an opportunity, probably my very last, to return to Zululand and work there.*

On our way to Twadekili's Enyati Mountains, however, I decided to spend some time first in Swaziland, a tiny country about which I knew practically nothing, except that I thought I had understood that it was still deeply steeped in superstition and witchcraft, perhaps even more so than Zululand. In other words, at that time I knew less about Swaziland than today's newspaper reader, whose eyes skim the latest news about this ancient miniature kingdom. From the standpoint of the atom bomb and the Cold War between East and West, these reports are certainly of no importance to the fate of our world. But they interest the average reader because they tell of a distant African monarch who, right now, in this year 1963, is facing family problems whose solution will require considerably more than the Wise Stones of Kuanakali.

The central figure in this storm in a teacup is the sixty-four-year-old Sobhuza II. The British stubbornly insist on calling him "Paramount Chief", whereas he claims the right to be officially recognized as King of Swaziland, just as his subjects have recognized and addressed him for forty years. The cause of all this commotion is that conferences have recently been held in London with a view to transforming even this tiny remnant of British protectorate territory into a country with a regular, modern constitution. This is intended as a preparation for full independence, enabling it to join the many new nations that have sprung up over the past few years. The difficulty is that, despite the many deaths among them, Sobhuza still has more than seventy wives.

** Sangoma (Orell Füssli, 1960).*

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For one reason, to maintain peace among them, and for another, to avoid becoming too heavy a burden on their master's ageing shoulders, most of these

women are scattered throughout the kingdom. This explains why virtually the whole of Swaziland is naturally in a state of tremendous excitement.

The questions being hotly debated in every market town are these: if Sobhuza II is officially recognized as a proper king by other countries, the United Nations, and so on, what will happen to all these women? Will they all become queens? Or will some of them be queens and the others princesses? Which of them will accompany the king on state visits to the distant shores of other nations? And what is to become of the hordes of children Sobhuza II has fathered during his forty-one years of reign by these roughly seventy surviving wives, not to mention the children of all his numerous deceased or repudiated wives? Will this phalanx of sons and daughters of every age be recognized as princes and princesses? And what about the crowds of close relatives belonging to this endless succession of living, deceased and repudiated wives - their parents, sisters, brothers, and so on? And what about the king's own numerous relatives, his brothers, sisters, brothers-in-law, and so forth? What will their official status, rank and position be at the new court of the new nation? And who, among the few remaining members of a population of approximately 260,000 souls, is going to pay for the uniforms, ceremonial robes and all the other trappings required by such an enormous royal family?

In every village, every hamlet and every kraal, discussion of these problems grows increasingly heated, although a good-natured joke or a little teasing often helps to take the edge off. The whole affair, however, is hardly a laughing matter. For when Sobhuza II was recently questioned about this multiplicity of members of his soon-to-be-established royal court, he gave a diplomat the cautious reply: “I have not yet had time to make a decision on these questions.”

Meanwhile, magic, understood in its broader sense, plays a role in present-day Swaziland that is anything but negligible. Despite the seven hospitals and twenty pharmacies maintained by the government, with assistance from the missions, most Swazis prefer not to entrust themselves to Western medicine, except in cases where their own “doctors” have repeatedly failed to bring about a cure.

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The typical Swazi Inyanga Yemitsi (plural: Tinyanga) may concern themselves with ‘diseases’ that might seem very strange to us, and use remedies that we may find even stranger. These professional herbalists,

however, are anything but charlatans, despite their inherited ‘medicine bags’ (the contents of which are usually unknown). Each of these herbal practitioners specializes in one, two or at most three types of illness and treats them according to ancient secret recipes that have been passed down through countless generations, from father to favorite son, younger brother or another close relative. Regardless of the family ties connecting them to their predecessor and teacher, these Tinyanga must always first undergo a lengthy period of instruction and training. They do not begin practicing their profession until their teacher has died and left them his ‘medicine bags’.

An interesting point here is that, in addition to receiving the proper training and possessing the necessary qualifications, an Inyanga must also have precisely the right personality to inspire confidence in his future patients. Above all, he must demonstrate that he knows what he is talking about, and must not display in himself any of the illnesses that he claims to be able to cure in others. If, for example, an Inyanga specializes in colds and similar ailments, he would never want people to hear him coughing or sneezing himself. Another, who specializes in fertility, must be able to demonstrate that he has fathered a considerable number of children himself. A third, whose principal task is to ensure good harvests in the fields, would not get very far if his own fields failed to produce particularly good yields. And the one who uses lion fat to strengthen a patient's courage must be able to prove his own bravery. All of this sounds perfectly reasonable – and is considerably more than is demanded of our own doctors and other professionals.

The elite group among these highly trained medicine men consists of the Tinyanga whose special task is to combat the Umtsakatsi (plural: Batsakatsi), that is, the witches and sorcerers who are believed to be capable of making themselves invisible and flying through the air, entering a hut without being seen and plunging its occupants into a deep sleep. In addition, they are believed to cause a number of serious illnesses and injuries or even to ‘cast death upon people from afar’.

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Far higher in status, much more powerful, more highly respected and better paid than these ‘doctors’ are the Isanusi (singular: Isangoma), that is, the magicians, ritual specialists and diviners – in other words, those through whose mouths the spirits of the ancestors of the nation still speak.

Naturally, becoming an Isangoma requires an even longer period of instruction and training. In most cases, these immensely powerful ancestral spirits must have entered the body of the Isangoma through inheritance from his father, grandfather, and so on. This is said to give them the extraordinary wisdom with which they discover the causes of misfortune and death, interpret dreams, foretell the future, drive away hail and lightning, and even prevent birds from attacking the crops.

There is a special ritual for every particular situation, usually a rather elaborate one, which must be observed. Sometimes an Isangoma cannot practice his profession without first entering a trance or becoming completely 'possessed' by the ancestral spirits, who then speak through his mouth and see through his closed eyes. This occurs, for example, during the complicated séances held to discover the perpetrators of wrongdoing.

When performing his duties, an Isangoma wears highly impressive clothing, symbolic ornaments and a striking headdress. Skins, tails, feathers from rare birds, snake skins and vertebrae, and horns of various sizes and shapes containing magical ingredients – all these contribute to giving the diviners an extremely imposing appearance. This is usually made even more impressive by their evident intelligence, their penetrating, steady gaze and the mature wisdom reflected in their dark, expressive eyes.

On matters of great importance, several Isanusi gather together, consult one another and work in cooperation, sometimes employing rituals that are strictly forbidden by the white authorities. In such cases, they usually arrange to meet in the deserted region of Namahasha, where the borders of Swaziland, the Transvaal and Portuguese East Africa meet. This means that, should police intervention from any one of these territories threaten them, the Isanusi can quickly cross the border and find refuge in the territory of another country.

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Since, ultimately, every rite is essentially intended for the preservation and well-being of the nation, the king, as the father of the nation, supervises all rituals practiced by his subjects, whatever their rank or occupation. Here again, in his capacity as the Ingwenyama, 'the Lion of the Swazi', and together with the Queen Mother, as the Indlovukati, 'the Lady Elephant', he enjoys the exclusive privilege of performing the most vital of the national rites, namely

rainmaking, which is so essential to the fertility and prosperity of the land and the livestock.

It is said that only three other individuals in the entire nation possess full knowledge of this particular rite, enabling them to pass on the secret to another king and another Queen Mother should the reigning royal couple suddenly die at the same time. Possession of this knowledge is such a tremendous burden that even the names of these three individuals are never mentioned. Indeed, it seems possible that their identities are known only to the reigning royal couple themselves.

The king and the Queen Mother perform these ceremonies in strictly guarded seclusion, gradually increasing the potency of the ritual by sacrificing certain carefully selected animals until the desired results are achieved. Only in exceptionally persistent cases of drought do they resort to the rain stones, which they inherited from the very first kings of the nation. If, despite everything, the rain continues stubbornly to withhold itself, other very powerful 'medicines' may also be employed. These were stolen in the distant past by the ancestors of the royal family from conquered peoples, who themselves had stolen them from other peoples centuries earlier.

29. The spirits of the ancestors

After our stay in Swaziland had come to an end, we travelled to Zululand. Before continuing on to Twadekili's kraal, we stopped for a few days to carry out what we called our 'spring cleaning'. This meant checking, oiling and greasing our vehicles, putting our various pieces of equipment in order, replacing the tent ropes, repairing holes in the tent canvas, thoroughly cleaning all our film and photographic cameras, and so on.

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Once again, it was siesta time, and once again I ignored, just as I had long ago aboard the 'Kigoma', all the rules that had been laid down and skipped my afternoon nap. Instead, I sat at my desk, stubbornly trying to put a few accounts in order. They seemed to be teasing me, because their figures simply refused to add up. My companions (and presumably our Africans as well) were all asleep. Our lovely camp – a row of tents and lorries arranged in a neat circle around a tall, slender tree standing in the middle of a patch of hard ground – was enveloped in a warm, drowsy silence.



28. A Tinyanga (sorcerer) from present-day Swaziland.

Suddenly, a calm voice said, 'Mpashi', as though someone were speaking to himself. 'Mpashi.'

Wondering who could be talking about 'spirits' at that particular hour, I stepped out of my tent to find out. Standing upright and statue-like, despite

his advanced age and medium-sized build, was a Zulu, just a few paces away from me. His body, covered with strands of medicine horns and animal tails, was held in a strangely rigid posture. His head, beneath an elaborate headdress made of skins, was thrown back. His eyes, which shone with a magnetic light in his ascetic, intelligent face, were clearly fixed on the crown of that solitary, slender tree.

As I approached, he raised his right hand without moving his eyes and pointed at the tree with his throwing club, repeating 'Mpashi', this time apparently to inform me.

Vitrozzi, one of our photographers, emerged sleepily from his tent. On seeing the striking old Zulu, he began photographing him from various angles, muttering: 'A fine specimen' ... click, click ... 'but he is overdoing it. Seeing spirits even in a little tree ...'

Without allowing himself to be distracted, the witch doctor continued staring upwards. He had neither greeted us nor been disturbed in the slightest by our movements or the sound of our voices.

After a while, Vitrozzi grew tired of taking photographs. He stopped and silently watched the old man, who had not changed his statue-like posture and was now murmuring some kind of incantation.

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Our camp had been pitched in a valley in the Enyati Mountains, and once again not a sound disturbed its tranquility, except for the gentle murmur of a small spring, which kindly provided us with a refreshing natural pool for our use before winding its way eastwards like a meandering ribbon lying across the yellowish grass.

Only in that peaceful region could one still encounter the relatively few Zulus who, living far away from the centers of white settlement, had preserved the purity of their physique and the picturesque simplicity of their traditional dress. These must have been characteristic of the subjects of 'the old lion Shaka' more than a hundred years ago.

I knew that here again we had entered a world in which every event, however trivial, was regarded as the work of occult forces. But to believe that

even the leaves of a small tree could tremble in the wind as a result of the power of spirits was asking rather too much of an open-minded person.

The scene we presented must have been quite absurd: the witch doctor, his gaze fixed firmly on the treetop; the two of us white men staring at him; and our boys, who had begun gathering at a short distance, staring at our little group in turn.

I gained the impression that the old man was thoroughly enjoying himself at the expense of all of us – white and black alike.

Fortunately, Karroo, a fox terrier I had acquired not long before, came along to save the situation. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end, and he gave a threatening growl. Following his gaze, I looked properly at the end of the trunk for the first time. Emerging from behind the leaves was a long, greyish mamba, preparing to slide down in rapid coils.

I could hardly believe my eyes. Never before had I seen a snake at such an hour and in such a place. Why on earth had it climbed that slender tree? There was nothing in its crown that could have attracted it, and there it was fully exposed to the hot rays of the sun, which mambas, like most snakes, dislike intensely.

Knowing my dog's courage, and realizing that as soon as the mamba came within his reach he would leap at it without the slightest regard for the possibility of receiving a fatal bite, I ordered him to return to my tent. He obeyed reluctantly, emitting a low, rumbling growl with every step.

Meanwhile, the snake, which was about 2.50 to 3 meters long, had reached the ground. It hesitated, then crawled around the trunk, hesitated again and repeated the manoeuvre several times, until finally it came to a halt.

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But I had no more control over my dog than the witch doctor had over that reptile, which he kept constantly under the spell of his gaze. And now, at a gesture from him, the snake began to glide away and seemed to follow the direction of the throwing club that the old man held in his outstretched hand. He followed it at a slow pace for about sixty metres, then stopped, turned around after a moment, and came back to us.

His demeanor had now changed completely; he was natural, unassuming and relaxed. He greeted me warmly, raising his hand vertically to his forehead.

Khalani, my personal boy, had just told me that he had found that very same mamba on a woolen blanket in his tent a few hours earlier. Naturally, he informed me, it had never even occurred to him to kill it or even drive it away, because he had immediately understood that it was the spirit of his dead mother. Instead, he had sent another boy to fetch the witch doctor, who alone possessed the power to speak to the spirit in the form of a snake, to discover why it had come and was visiting its offspring, and to persuade it to depart again in peace, in the proper manner and without giving offence.

When I questioned him about it, the witch doctor confirmed my boy's account. "Great things lie ahead for Khalani," he said, "and his mother's spirit has come to announce them to him."

He looked up into the treetop once more and let his gaze travel in the direction from which the wind was blowing. He remained silent for several minutes, his expression intent, as though he were trying to bring various complicated matters into alignment. Then he turned to my boy: "Where the sun sets lies the Great Water, and the Tonga live along its shores. And higher in rank than anyone else is the paramount chief, whose blood is also your blood. May the fourth moon, when it appears in the sky, find you ready."

"So be it, Father," Khalani replied simply, and shook the old man's hand three times.

And that was all, for the time being.

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That day the wind was blowing from the east. Therefore, I reasoned, as I tried to interpret the witch doctor's words in a rational manner, he must have been pointing westwards, where, as he knew perfectly well, the Tonga lived. The fact that the Great Snake had climbed right up into the treetop, undoubtedly the highest point in the camp, might have been a way of indicating, by means of an association of ideas, that the paramount chief of the Tonga, who held the highest position in the tribe, was involved in the matter. And the witch doctor must certainly have known that my boy was related to the paramount chief of the Tonga, as Khalani later led me to understand, adding that he was the son of the present chief's brother.

This royal connection, incidentally, explained the respect with which the other boys treated Khalani. In my self-centeredness, I had attributed it to his position as my personal boy. But although the chief was his uncle, I could not see why Khalani might hope to become his successor - for that was what I had read into the witch doctor's veiled allusion. The boy told me that the position of chief was inherited in a direct line, from father to son.

Thus the events that the witch doctor had foretold for the future, and which had led him to declare that within three months more or less "great things" would befall my boy, remained a mystery to me. And I am sure that Khalani, too, had failed to grasp what the witch doctor had meant.

I was fully aware how futile it would be to put more than the most casual questions on this subject to the witch doctor himself. I did, in fact, try to sound him out when I happened to meet him again, but, in the most exquisitely polite language, he told me absolutely nothing.

Week after week went by as we moved from one point in the mountains to another. It was an enjoyable occupation. Often at night I would reflect that we had achieved everything that could possibly be achieved in this region. One more day, and we would be nearing Twadekili's kraal. And then I would relax in my "Raja" camping chair, smoke another cigar, and lazily gaze at Bapuka, who naturally presided over my tent from the most prominent position.

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Almost every time this happened, a new idea was slowly born in my mind. It grew, gradually taking shape and form. I began studying maps, old notes and the few reliable reference books available to me. Before long, I had made up my mind. Yes, we would move on the following day. But only to that other valley. I was sure the professor would think the plan splendid too - or would use words to that effect. And, strangely enough, each new inspiration - let us call it that - proved extraordinarily interesting and valuable in its results, even though it kept postponing our arrival at Twadekili's.

At the time, these delays made me feel a little uneasy, since returning to the kraal of the Python Priestess had originally been the most important and urgent objective of my journey. Was I becoming a slave to idleness? It seemed to me that I was simply using Bapuka as a pretext to give myself more time,

inventing ever new reasons for prolonging our wanderings through that enchanting part of old, truly unspoilt Zululand.

Only afterwards did I gain some insight into the matter. Eventually I came to realize that Bapuka's influence - or my own instinct, or sheer chance, or whatever it may have been - had driven me to linger so long. For if I had reached Twadekili according to plan and had therefore left her months earlier than I eventually did, I would have missed one of the strangest dramas of the veld and, in my opinion, one of the most astonishing deeds of the Python Priestess.

Be that as it may, for a while I had not exactly forgotten the Mpashi episode, but neither had I given it much thought. I was gradually coming to regard Khalani as a permanent and almost indispensable part of my everyday life when, one day, a group of warriors approached our camp noisily.

From the first words they addressed to Khalani, I learned that they had come to inform him that, by right of blood and by resolution of the Tonga Council of Elders, he had been proclaimed the new paramount chief. Although Khalani tried to conceal his confusion behind the impassive bearing of a proud warrior, I could see that he was almost as surprised as I was.

I had not noticed the witch doctor's arrival, but suddenly I found him standing beside me. Cheerful, like a man arriving punctually for an appointment made long ago, he joined in receiving his share of the chorus of congratulations and cheers with which the messengers, my other boys and all the local people who were beginning to stream into the camp greeted the new chief.

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And when Khalani, after many warm farewells from my companions and me, and after promising several cows as a gift to the witch doctor, had departed at the head of a noisy procession, the old man approached me once more.

During the previous two weeks we had become good friends, and I was glad to see him now, for he intended to pay me a visit lasting several days.

“The spirits of the dead never make mistakes,” he had told me solemnly. Assuming that now, with his prediction fulfilled, he might be more inclined to

talk, I told him how I had tried to interpret his words, and admitted that I had never been able to understand what had indicated to him the length of time that would pass before these events came to pass.

He listened to me with a smile and almost fatherly affection, but a mischievous gleam shone in his little eyes.

“Did you not see for yourself,” he asked when I had finished, “that the mamba went three times around the tree and then stopped just as the fourth round was beginning?”

Since I had a vague and decidedly unpleasant suspicion that, beneath his composed and courteous words, he was making fun of me, I abandoned my attempt to follow his train of thought and contented myself with checking a single fact.

“I understood from Khalani,” I said to him, “that when the paramount chief dies, his own son succeeds him.”

“Yes, baaba,” the old man replied. “When the spirits came to take away the paramount chief of the Tonga, they took his only son on the very same day. Did I not tell you,” he gently reminded me, “that the spirits never make mistakes?”

30. Twadekili, the python priest, sees it.

Often, when I follow the flight of a bird and observe the beautiful freedom with which it glides through the air, admiring its skill in flying lightly and directly wherever it wishes to go, I find myself wondering what a slow, awkward creature man is, and how he is held back and hindered by restrictions of every kind.

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I could express my feeling no other way than by comparing it to the sensation I experienced when confronted with the extraordinary ability of a native wise woman to send her mind flying through time and space at will, to see whatever she wished to see and, whenever it pleased her, to look into the present, the past and the future.

I say look - not remember the past or imagine the future, as any one of us with a good memory and a certain amount of imagination can do. Nor am I referring to the ability to foresee individual future events in a more or less vague fashion, as I had observed the witch doctor doing in Khalani's case.

I mean literally seeing, in every detail, events taking place beyond the range of her physical eyesight, either at the very moment they are happening, after they have happened, or before they are going to happen. And seeing them with the same ease and accuracy with which we can watch something taking place at that very moment, here before our own eyes, or far away on a television screen, or follow on a cinema screen events that have occurred in some other part of the world.

This is undoubtedly one of the most marvelous things I have ever witnessed in Africa. And, as I have already mentioned, it was when we finally reached my old friend, the Python Priestess Twadekili - on my memorable visit to her, which came at precisely the right moment but was, sadly, also my last - that we had the privilege of following, step by step, the astonishing manifestation of her extraordinary gifts and powers.

The whole affair unfolded in such a way that my companions and I were either able to witness every detail for ourselves, or had the points we did not personally observe confirmed by the statements of reliable witnesses.

It began one morning when Professor Arnou, Vittozzi and I were talking with the Python Priestess, hoping that our casual conversation might reveal something that would shed light on the various "miracles" I had seen her perform in earlier days.

At a certain point, in the middle of a sentence, she suddenly broke off - as though someone had appeared before her without warning.

"A great chief is coming to consult me," she told us a few moments later by way of explanation. "It is a serious matter, even more serious than he realizes."

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After looking around to make sure that no one was in sight, Vitrozzi said to her, "How do you know that?"

“I can see him,” she replied, continuing to stare straight ahead. “I can see him. He is now at the spring down in the valley.”

Professor Arnou, whose skepticism surpassed even Vitrozzi’s, whispered to me, “She must have heard it through a tom-tom or some other signal.” He had a habit of finding a simple, quick, “logical” explanation for everything he saw.

The Python Priestess naturally did not understand his French words, but she either read his thoughts or guessed them from the tone of his voice, for she immediately replied:

“No, I can see him with my own eyes. He is now cutting a branch from the great Mobanga tree, which is reflected in the spring. He is making a new shaft for his shield out of it.”

“He is coming alone,” she continued after a moment. “Denner is in great distress. The fire has destroyed a large part of his maize crop. And he has found thirty-two of his cows dead, having perished from a mysterious disease!”

“What kind of disease?” I asked.

“The malice of a jealous brother.”

Having given this answer, she suddenly withdrew into her hut.

“A disease that has not yet been classified in any veterinary textbook,” the professor remarked with a laugh.

From daily experience, we knew that the distance from the spring to the Python Priestess’s kraal required a four-hour walk for us and a three-hour walk for a native. And exactly three hours later, Vittozzi, who had volunteered to stand guard, called out to us.

The chief arrived without his usual bodyguard. He wore none of the insignia of his rank and had an expression of worry and despair on his face.

In his right hand he held three assegais and a shield covered with spotted oxhide, reinforced by a vertical wooden shaft. Without any ceremony, Professor Arnou took the shield from his hand, examined it in silence and then passed it to us.

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29. Sambimbo, the new wife whom Didiomba brought from a friendly tribe.



30. Pekopeko, Sambimbo's father.



31. The sorcerer with the ascetic face and magnetic eyes, who interpreted Mamba's behavior.

The shaft was made of fresh green wood, which had only just been stripped of its bark and undoubtedly came from the great Mobanga tree near the spring, the only tree of its kind in the entire surrounding area, as far as we knew.

"Where did you get that?" the professor asked, pointing to the shaft as he handed the shield back to the chief.

"From the spring down there," the latter replied, somewhat surprised. "Just now, when I crossed it."

I saw Twadekili's head appear in the low, oval opening of her hut, and the faintest hint of a smile briefly illuminated the seriousness of her face.

The chief quickly approached the hut, obviously unable to wait to begin his consultation with the Python Priestess. After the customary exchange of greetings, she sat down in front of the entrance, nodded to him to sit beside her, and cast a glance at us which I interpreted as an invitation to take our places beside her as well.

He immediately began telling her about his troubles. Only that very morning, one of his herds had been struck by a strange disease. Thirty-two fine cows, a considerable portion of his wealth, had gone to the watering place as usual and shortly afterwards had died in an imperceptible manner. Moreover, a granary had caught fire for some unknown reason. All his possessions seemed suddenly to have been struck by a curse.

"O Python Priestess, save me," were his imploring final words. "Only you, you alone, who see everything."

"And where is your brother Nguo?" the Python Priestess suddenly asked, as though awakening from a dream.

The chief did not know. He had not seen Nguo since the previous evening.

"I see Nguo," said Twadekili.

"I see him yesterday, when you punished him because he had once again disobeyed you. I see him this morning, before the sun rises, going to the spring. He is holding a tall wooden gourd that Sindela gave him. It is full of poison, which he throws into the water. Then he runs away… I see your cows

arriving, driven by your youngest son, and I see them drinking the water; for they do not know that death is lurking in it."

The chief's face had turned an ashen grey, and he hung on every word of the Python Priestess, while his brows drew together with the effort of mentally picturing the people and events at all those places so familiar to him, which Twadekili described one after another, exactly as she saw them.

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"A woman set fire to the granary while you were bending over your sick cows. Joyful thoughts fill her heart at the prospect of your ruin. And thoughts of love for Nguo, whom she knows to be safely hidden in the kraal of her father, Sindela."

"Rumati?" the chief exclaimed, incredulous and horrified. "Rumati, my favourite wife?"

"Rumati," came the calm reply. "And I see you returning to your kraal, your soul filled with thoughts of revenge. But you search for her in vain. You gather your finest warriors around you and march with them to Sindela's kraal."

The Python Priestess saw it - she saw the entire scene - and described it in every detail. I was reminded of a sports commentator whose voice reaches us from afar over the radio as he describes every phase of a football match unfolding before his eyes.

The chief and his warriors surround the kraal of their treacherous father-in-law in the darkness just before dawn. With the first light of the new day, they advance. A premonition of danger comes over the chief as he approaches the third hut. He is right, for inside Nguo lies in wait, his assegai in his hand, waiting to spring out and attack his brother. Nguo leaps out, but the chief has been forewarned and receives only a slight wound. Now the two engage in a fierce struggle. But the chief's warriors rush to his rescue and pull him away just as he is about to be overcome by the mad strength of his wicked brother. Nguo is captured and brought before the council of the Indunas.

The chief now searches every hut in Sindela's kraal, but he can find neither Nguo nor his daughter Rumati...

The commentator sat there before us, gazing through time and space, observing and describing every movement of the deadly game that was to be played tomorrow!

“But Rumati - where is she?” The chief took advantage of a pause in the Python Priestess’s speech to ask this anxious question about the woman whose welfare seemed to matter more to him than the fate of his brother, the saving of his own life, or even the loss of his cattle.

Twadekili opened her mouth to answer him. But no sound emerged. She sat frozen, staring at something that was unfolding before her eyes.

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For several seconds she remained silent, and those seconds must have seemed endless to the poor man who was waiting for her announcement.

“Where Rumati is,” she finally said, “Umkulum-Kulu, the greatest god, will let you know at the appointed time. But for your own safety, wear this necklace day and night.”

Reaching backwards into her hut, she brought out a necklace made of dried seeds. I do not know whether she had prepared it for this particular occasion or whether she kept one in reserve for such a possible eventuality.

Without the slightest sign of inner emotion on her impassive face, she slipped the necklace over the chief’s head.

“Inzimbiti!” he exclaimed. And we were all astonished by the expression of profound horror trembling in his voice.

The man who rose to his feet and gave us a brief, absent-minded greeting was no longer the same man who had come to the Python Priestess’s kraal a short while earlier. Then his face had worn an expression of worry and sorrow. But now it was deeply furrowed with grief, and his eyes held an indescribable horror.

“Inzimbiti! Inzimbiti!” we heard him murmur as he slowly walked away. His shoulders were hunched, as though those last few moments had laid the burden of many years upon them.

31. The Curse of the Inzimbiti

The Python Priestess followed the chief with her eyes until he had disappeared. Then she began speaking again, in a soft voice, really more to herself than to us.

“Rumati! I see you, Rumati, two days ago, when you mixed into the maize you were cooking for the chief the magic powder you had received from your father. So that your husband would not discover that Nguo had become your lover. But you do not know that, in preparing that powder, your father did not crush the seeds of the Muzanga, which cause blindness, but the seeds of the Inzimbiti.”

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Inzimbiti is the name given by the Zulus to the ironwood tree, which is extremely valuable to them because they make their beautiful throwing clubs from its wood. At least, that much was known to us. The long pods, which hang from the tree for more than a year before shrinking and releasing their contents, the seeds, had ourselves collected more than once as curiosities for our collections. We had heard that rodents and birds eat the dried seeds without suffering any harm, but that the seeds, while still green, are extremely poisonous to human beings.

If Rumati had indeed attempted to poison her husband, whether intentionally or not, I could not understand why he had been so deeply agitated and horrified when he learned this news two days later. Unless the poison contained in these seeds takes effect only gradually, after some delay? I asked the Python Priestess whether this was the case.

Despite her perfectly normal appearance, she must have been in some kind of trance, for she seemed not to hear me.

“But what you do not know, Rumati,” she continued in that soft, solemn, sepulchral voice of hers, which was so strangely impressive, “is that it was not your husband but Nguo, the man you love, who ate the entire maize cake while you had gone to the spring to fetch water. And now a fire is burning in Nguo’s stomach, in his throat, in his heart, while he lies hidden in Sindela’s kraal. And tomorrow - oh! - I see you, Rumati, weeping because of your crime, weeping and crying out for help. But there is no one near you. No one except someone who cannot hear you. And the day after... Oh!”

Something terrible must have appeared before Twadekili's eyes, for with a little cry she slipped into her hut as swiftly as an eel and leaned the wicker shield covered with hide, which served as her door, against the entrance.

I do not believe that any of us was surprised when, on the following day, events unfolded point by point exactly as Twadekili had foretold. When we heard the verdict of the Indunas, the wise old men of the tribe, all we could do was marvel at the fact that Twadekili had "heard" them pronounce it several hours beforehand!

All the cattle belonging to Nguo were to be confiscated by order of the Indunas, and the guilty man himself was to be taken immediately, under the escort of ten members of the chief's bodyguard, to the distant authorities of the white men, so that he could be tried by the police magistrate in Eshowe.

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When we returned that evening to our camp near Twadekili's kraal, where we naturally discussed the day's events at great length, Vitrozzi's calm conviction took me completely by surprise. I had just turned the conversation to Nguo's utter ignorance concerning the mysterious disappearance of Sindela and his daughter when Vitrozzi assured me: "The Python Priestess knows exactly where they are."

When I turned to Professor Arnou, expecting to encounter his customary cynical smile, I found him in a serious and thoughtful mood.

"There was something in Nguo's eyes," he said to us, "that I did not like. I cannot say exactly how to describe it, but it sent a shiver through me."

I must confess that neither Vitrozzi nor I had noticed anything of the kind. On the contrary, we had been surprised by Nguo's calm behavior throughout the entire trial, and by the unexpected meekness with which he had allowed the warriors to bind him and lead him away.

"Hmm," the professor nodded. "Yes, I know. I noticed it too. And yet his eyes reminded me of those of a hungry leopard lying in wait, watching for the moment to spring upon its defenseless prey."

This vivid addition to his usually sober, precise manner of expression was so striking that Vitrozzi and I exchanged glances, while a vague feeling of uneasiness came over me.

When we reached the camp, we tried in vain to see Twadekili. As was her habit whenever she had some serious problem to solve, she had shut herself away in her hut-a period of seclusion which we had made it a rule never to disturb.

The following morning, however, we saw her emerge from her hut and immediately went over to visit her. We found her quite ready to talk.

“It is Nguo who killed Sindela,” she told us in answer to our questions. We were so astonished that the Python Priestess should accuse Nguo of the crime that we completely overlooked the fate of the old man. We had believed him to be already well on his way to Eshowe, bound and escorted by ten warriors of the royal bodyguard.

“Yes,” Twadekili declared with great firmness, “it was Nguo. He killed Sindela yesterday, before he was captured. But I saw him again when he was about to kill Rumati, and this morning I sent the chief a warning.”

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She broke off, and after a pause addressed us again.

“I see the chief now, setting out alone to rescue Rumati, but he arrives too late; for his injured foot will not allow him to run as fast as he would like. And I also see Magugu, who saves the chief at the very moment when Nguo is about to strike him down.”

We had had quite enough of these crimes by now, but for the professor it was simply too much.

“The finest Grand Guignol show I have ever seen,” he said. But the look Twadekili gave him seemed enough to freeze the smile on his lips.

“You do not know, O Father,” she said to him, “that anyone who swallows the seeds of the Inzimbiti will become a man-eater.

And only the necklace of Inzimbiti seeds he wears can protect a person from being eaten by such a man."

"Now I understand the expression in those eyes," said the professor calmly. His scientific curiosity had been thoroughly aroused. "I do not believe for a moment that the seeds possess any such power. But if all the natives round here believe in it so fanatically, that probably has the same effect on the poor devil who has eaten the seeds."

The Python Priestess smiled as though she understood every word he said, and continued: "From my hut I saw Nguo wrench himself free of the guards and vanish before their very eyes. I have seen the terrible crimes he will commit. And I have seen Magugu running for a long, long time, saving the chief at the very moment when he sees the horror coming upon him: that he is about to be eaten by his own brother."

"And Nguo?" I asked. "What will happen to him?"

"The heart of Nguo will be pierced by the point of his own assegai."

In her usual abrupt, constrained manner, she rose and prepared to hurry away from us.

"How can Magugu find him," Vitrozzi called after her, "if he does not know where Nguo has gone?"

Twadekili stopped. A note of impatience sharpened her voice.

"I have seen him there," she said imperiously. "Therefore, he will be there."

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Now, that very morning we had seen Magugu, a witch-doctor who lived in a kraal nearby. And when we recalled our conversation with him, we were all strongly impressed by the fact that at the time he had known nothing of these most intimate events.

At that point, it seemed as though a dense, impenetrable curtain had descended all around us.

The Python Priestess remained secluded in her hut for a long time, and during the week we still had available to spend in her vicinity, we did not see her again. In the end, we had to leave without catching even a fleeting glimpse of her. (Had I known that I would never see her alive again, I would certainly have stayed until she reappeared. But who could have foreseen such a thing? Perhaps she could. And perhaps she never emerged from her hut again in order to avoid a final farewell.)

Our attempts to see Magugu and the chief were no more successful. Nor could we learn anything about them from their families or from the other natives.

Indeed, all the natives had suddenly become reserved and secretive. Their attitude made it clear that they felt no anxiety about the absence of their chief and Magugu. Despite their friendly denials, they almost certainly knew exactly where the two had gone.

Although they maintained a similar silence concerning Sindela, his daughter and Nguo, their reaction to our questions about these three people was quite different. It was not difficult for us to infer from their nervousness that the unfortunate trio had disappeared not only from the country, but from the world of the living as well.

All we were able to discover was that Nguo had indeed managed to escape from his guards, and that he had done so on the very evening of the day he was taken away by the court of the Indunas.

On the day before our planned departure, a hint from my personal boy finally explained the natives' changed attitude towards us. They feared that the white authorities might conduct an investigation. And since we knew so much and were so eager to learn more, they undoubtedly feared that we might, knowingly or unknowingly, get them into trouble with the distant white authorities. So they withdrew into their shells like oysters.

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They were particularly anxious because of the rumor of cannibalism that was hanging in the air; for this practice fills the Zulus of today with shame and horror. As far as I know, there has been only one other such case among them in Zululand during the past thirty years. As in the example I am describing, it was an isolated incident, and the crime was committed by two

individuals who had likewise been transformed into savage beasts by eating Inzimbiti seeds.

32. The death of Nguo was foretold.

When we reached the charming little town of Eshowe, the capital of Zululand and at the same time its chief centre for the exchange of Zulu news, it did not take us long to discover further facts about the affair. What we did not learn from the magistrate and the court clerk - a wise old Black sergeant and a brisk young white police officer, both of whom had been my friends for years - we were able to piece together ourselves from what we had learned from Twadekili, and what they did not know.

In brief, the following is what happened:

After a long search, the bodies of Sindela, Rumati and Nguo were found. It was officially “established” that the three had been attacked and killed by leopards or other wild animals while they had been carelessly hiding in the bush in order to escape the punishment they deserved.

That was the official version - which we, like most of our friends in Eshowe, personally accepted with some reservations.

Eventually, as our own reconstruction of events took shape, we learned that things had happened quite differently. On the day Twadekili had given us her final prediction, Magugu had gone to the chief’s kraal in the hope of learning something new. When he arrived, however, he found the ten dejected warriors of Nguo’s escort. From them he learned that the chief had set out alone a few hours earlier, heading towards the bush where Nguo had disappeared after escaping from his guards. Deeply loyal to his chief and a brave man himself, Magugu decided to follow him, perhaps with a premonition that his chief would need him.

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“Inzimbiti,” the warriors had murmured, full of horror and awe, when he had told them of his intentions. That was the real reason why they had not dared to pursue Nguo. But Magugu felt no fear, for around his neck hung a necklace of seeds which the Python Priestess had given him two days earlier. And so he had undertaken the perilous task from which ten brave warriors had shrunk.

From that point onwards, my impression of the remaining episodes of the tragedy was so vivid that it was as though I had witnessed them myself. One day, after much persuasion, Magugu agreed to reconstruct for me the things he had done and seen at the time, at a spot just outside Eshowe that closely resembled the original setting. He had been summoned there by the court. The native gift for pantomime is so remarkable that, for example, a man cannot describe the killing of an antelope without vividly acting out every movement and emotion of both hunter and animal. It is therefore easy to imagine how dramatically Magugu recreated those ill-fated events for us.

We had to walk a long way that day before Magugu found a place which, as he put it, was “a twin of the other”. It was a stretch of woodland filling a small valley between two steep hills. As soon as we reached the first trees, Magugu immediately began his performance. He gazed intently at the ground, as though searching for tracks. Then, through pantomime, occasionally emphasized by a word or two, he showed us how he had come upon a patch of trampled grass sprinkled with drops of blood, and how, after a thorough search, he had found a long, stout thorn lying in the grass, stained with blood. It was the thorn that had pierced the chief’s foot so deeply that he had been forced to sit down to pull it out. It had been his left foot, for along the left-hand footprints of the trail Magugu had followed, he had repeatedly noticed traces of blood.

Magugu then described in the greatest detail the hour-long march that had taken him along the path on that fateful evening. Nor did he fail to demonstrate how cautiously he had moved forward, and how he had started at every flap of wings, every faint rustle of leaves or grass.

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At last he stopped and peered intently, bending forward, through a small gap between the ends of the tall grass and the low branches of the trees. Then he sprang forward towards a small clearing in front of him, swinging his spears in one hand and his throwing club in the other. He made a gesture as though delivering a terrible blow with his club to an invisible enemy. In reality, it had been Nguo who had received that blow, just as he was about to kill the chief, who was lying stretched out on the ground, helpless and desperately trying to prevent his brother, at all costs, from tearing the Inzimbiti necklace from his neck.

The Python priestess, I reflected as Magugu paused, had therefore seen everything that had actually happened: she had witnessed it with her own eyes. But two days earlier, when the events were taking place thirty-five kilometers away from her.

And what she had been able to see thanks to this extraordinary gift, she had witnessed as a spectator rather than as a participant who might perhaps have been able, even if only indirectly, to alter the course of events in some way. In other words, if she foresaw a disaster and arranged for the person concerned to be warned, and that person subsequently changed their tactics, then all of this was already incorporated into Twadekili's vision. When she penetrated the mystery of the future, the vision did not show her what would have happened without her warning, but rather, in the minutest detail, what was actually destined to happen - including the warning, the altered tactics it would bring about, and the consequences that were bound to follow. But Magugu interrupted my musings and resumed his story.

As soon as Nguo had fallen to the ground, the chief had risen and, picking up an assegai - one of those Nguo had happened to hide there before his arrest - had parted the tall grass, as though he did not dare touch it with his hands.

To his horror, Magugu had discovered Sindela's lifeless body there, still tied to a tree, where it had remained since the morning of the trial, when Nguo had tied him there and beaten him to death.

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It must have been the person who, according to the Python priestess's words, had been near Rumati, „but could not hear her cries for help”.

For beneath another tree lay Rumati's body. The ropes still wrapped around the trunk indicated that she had once been tied there.

But what constituted the very height of Magugu's horror was the fact that Rumati's body was not complete. The pool of fresh blood surrounding her and the fire nearby, which was still smoldering and giving off a dreadful smell of burning flesh, made it all too clear to the chief and the witch doctor what the seeds of the Inzimbiti had prompted anyone who had eaten them to do.

„Rumati, Rumati”, the chief murmured as he stood there, staring at the pitiful sight before them. And that silent evidence of the outrage committed against his unfaithful, yet still beloved wife seemed to drive him mad.

Then a scream, resembling that of a wild animal, rang out across the clearing.

Nguo had regained consciousness. Seizing his knife, he sprang to his feet and, with that inhuman scream, hurled himself at his brother. But the chief was still holding the spear he had picked up a few minutes earlier. Turning round, he drove it deep into Nguo's heart.

The tragedy that had weighed so heavily upon the good mountain Zulus for several days had reached its hideous conclusion.

As Magugu wiped the sweat from his forehead and his final words faded in my ears, I remembered once again the words of the Python priestess:

„Nguo's heart shall be pierced by his own assegai.”

33. Ancient wisdom

To what extent the Python, who shared Twadekili's hut, was truly „involved” in her healings and in the formulation of her astonishing pronouncements and prophecies is something neither I nor anyone else I know could say. How and why he died at the very same moment as Twadekili is another matter that I shall not even attempt to explain.

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It seems, however, easier to understand the reason behind the ancient tradition which requires that a deceased Python priestess and the Python who accompanied and inspired her throughout her entire „professional life” should be buried beneath the floor of her successor's strictly private hut.

Their invisible presence down there is proof of the spiritual and moral support that the new sorceress continues to draw from the unforgettable memory of her predecessor, that extraordinary woman to whom she owes everything she knows.

It means that yet another link has been added to the long, unbroken chain of Python priestesses, who have conscientiously passed down their inherited knowledge, secrets and abilities through the centuries - no one can imagine how many centuries - with each new generation enriching this knowledge with a few additional nuggets of gold: the experience and discoveries made by each individual Python priestess during the years she devoted to serving her people.

At the same time, it also represents an endless continuation of the age-old, unshakable belief in the powers of wisdom, renewal and regeneration which so many different peoples and civilisations have attributed to the serpent since time immemorial.

Some prosaic souls claim that this belief, thousands of years old, can be explained by the frequent shedding of a snake's skin. To me, however, this explanation is by no means convincing, and certainly not sufficient. I feel that there is much more to it, even if we cannot see it.

Be that as it may, the fact remains that even today the coiled serpent of the mythological Asclepius, the god of medicine, is the emblem of the American Medical Association; that the two serpents entwined around the winged staff of the god Mercury are used by the medical corps of the American army; and that serpents, in one form or another, are almost everywhere in the world the most common emblem of doctors and pharmacists.

As for the word „Python priestess", one cannot overlook its origin in the Greek word Pytho, the ancient name of Delphi. As far as we know, it was there that the first Python priestesses, the priestesses of the god Apollo, delivered oracular answers, prophesied future events and performed miraculous healings.

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Could there perhaps be a close relationship between the glorious achievements of ancient Hellas and the barbarism of more modern Zululand? An endless succession of women endowed with the gift of second sight - a connection that has endured for so many centuries and might have extended from the blue waters of the northern Mediterranean to the yellowish-green mountains of distant Zululand, at the southern tip of Africa?

More than once I have put this question to myself and sought an answer from an informed authority - but I have found one nowhere.

On the other hand, we must once again remind ourselves how many things we, who live in the second half of the twentieth century, still do not understand, or whose veil we are only just beginning to lift.

For instance, I read in the latest and most advanced research reports that a brilliantly shining cluster of stars, whose radiance astronomers can observe and measure, is moving away from the Earth at one-sixth of the speed of light, that is, at 300,000 kilometers per second, and must therefore be two billion light-years away from us.

Another galaxy, they tell us, must be 3.6 billion light-years away, since it is moving away from the Earth at one-third of the speed of light. Yet, they add, in order to be visible with such brilliance, it must emit a hundred times more light than the entire Milky Way, with its hundred billion stars.

And they estimate that some of these star clusters emit clouds of radiant energy equivalent to the amount that would be released if all the matter contained in 2,500,000 suns were completely converted into energy. Or that a few such star clusters radiate, every second, more than a hundred billion times as much heat and light energy as the Sun.

Perhaps others can grasp, or even imagine, what all these disturbing statements mean, or what it implies when other astronomers assure us that if a gigantic star in the Milky Way were to explode at this very moment, the inhabitants of Earth would remain unaware of it for another 30,000 years.

Personally, these statements mean very little to me. I must be a disgracefully ignorant person, since I have no idea what to make of them. As far as I am concerned, I can only say that, although I cannot understand these things, I do not refuse to believe them. They are simply beyond my comprehension; they lie outside my horizon. That is all.

Just as so many of the abilities of Python priestesses and other sorcerers, or the extraordinarily acute powers of perception of indigenous people, may seem exaggerated or improbable to someone who has had no lengthy personal experience of them.

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Furthermore, I derive a certain, almost comforting sense of proportion from the fantastic-seeming figures, images and visions of astronomers.

I look at pictures of radio telescopes weighing hundreds of tons, at radar-pulse receivers measuring dozens of meters across, and at the gigantic, apocalyptic radar screens that have been built or are being built at a cost of billions of dollars, in order to provide the first glimpses into the bewildering mysteries of which I have just briefly outlined a few.

Then my mind turns back to a mystery or a marvelous occurrence that I encountered during my life in Africa and about which I now intend to write. How infinitely small and simple, I would almost say insignificant, they suddenly seem by comparison! How extraordinarily easy they must surely be to solve, explain and prove - and if not by me, then by someone else; and if not today or in recent years, then perhaps in the near future - provided that competent research teams tackle them with the appropriate resources and the correct methods.

To the above-mentioned „provided that" there is a second condition. And this is the worst of all: namely, that some fabulously wealthy government, foundation or corporation should ever take sufficient interest to provide the necessary resources for solving such comparatively insignificant problems.

For such solutions might prove vital to our own health, well-being and progress - and vital now, not in several hundred billion light-years' time, or even in a mere 30,000 years from the present day.

This is precisely what has happened, and continues to happen, in another field within the same domain: that of the secrets forming part of the ancestral heritage of „primitive" sorcerers, Python priestesses and witch doctors.

This is because these secrets are less difficult and complicated to investigate. And because every tangible, positive discovery will find an enormous audience ready and waiting for it, and can therefore quickly be turned into a substantial, sometimes even enormous, financial profit.

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There are numerous precedents, of course, and they are by no means confined to Africa. Their history goes back quite some time. Nearly two hundred years ago, William Withering, while investigating a folk remedy used

in Shropshire to strengthen failing hearts, discovered that its active ingredient came from the common foxglove. In this way he brought digitalis to light, which is still one of the most effective medicines today.

In 1885, ephedrine was isolated as the active ingredient of ma huang, the herbal remedy the Chinese had been using for some five thousand years. It is still used in the treatment of asthma. The ancient snake-root remedies employed in India for certain mental disorders and high blood pressure inspired the extraction of reserpine - a preparation that grew into a flourishing multimillion-dollar business.

In India, too, several remote tribes have known for centuries how to brew an herbal tea that lowers blood sugar: the natural oral treatment our own diabetics had to wait for until seven years ago. There are also proven and well-documented cases in Nicaragua in which skin cancer was successfully treated by an indigenous medicine man using a poultice made from a kind of crushed-leaf paste. This is now being investigated by specialists. And recently, Mexican yam roots, which had been brought to attention by witch doctors, were reportedly to become an important source of raw material for steroid hormones of the cortisone family. Chemists from major pharmaceutical companies have also carefully analyzed a red nut used in Haiti by voodoo practitioners to calm mentally disturbed patients. In Africa, they have obtained a promising concoction from a medicine man who calls it Mafuta Bhabesi - lion fat.

Perhaps some readers thought I was “pulling their leg” when I described in SANGOMA how Zitwezonke Mtetwa, the medicine man of Suakes, quite matter-of-factly managed to make an untouched young girl produce so much milk within a few hours that she was able to nurse abundantly an infant whose mother had died the night before.

Naturally, I reported the unvarnished truth. But after that experience, my interest was all the greater when I read in a scientific journal about the ixbut of the Indians of Guatemala.

Orell Füssli, 1961

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The young Manuel Serrano had been fascinated, on his father's plantation, by stories that an herbal tea prepared from ixbut according to an ancient Indian formula could increase a mother's flow of milk, or even induce lactation

in very old women. After studying in Germany and obtaining his doctorates in chemistry and natural sciences, he returned to his country to teach at the University of San Carlos in Guatemala City. But he continued to devote his leisure time to the study of ixbut and, with the help of several Guatemalan doctors, carried out large-scale experiments involving some 1,800 mothers who were having difficulty breastfeeding.

Eventually, it was found that 50 per cent of them were unable to nurse at all without ixbut, but could do so successfully with it. Another 35 per cent, who had produced only small quantities of milk, showed a noticeable improvement. The remaining 15 per cent, in whose condition little changed, were mostly nervous types.

Yet Serrano found the same small percentage of failures in his parallel experiments with goats that were demonstrably not nervous. Dairy specialists, on the other hand, reported that the milk yield of their cows doubled exactly when ixbut (Euphorbia lancifolia) was administered. Dr Serrano really tried almost everything on his own wife, including the milk-producing hormone prolactin. Nothing enabled her to breastfeed her four children. But after she drank six cups of ixbut tea every day, prepared by steeping five leaves or five pieces of stem, she was perfectly able to do so.

Another centuries-old secret, shared by the Indians of South America and the Bantu peoples of Central and East Africa, was to wrap their usually tough, freshly killed meat in the leaves of the papaya tree. (Its juicy fruits formed the main part of our breakfast almost every day on all our expeditions.) Neither the Indians nor the Bantu had the slightest idea why this custom was so faithfully observed. Nor did our various camp cooks know. All they knew was that these leaves made the meat tender and kept it juicy.

As scientists discovered, the reason was that both papaya leaves and the juice of the fruit contain an enzyme that softens protein tissue in much the same way as the digestive juices in the stomach. Two former American professional soldiers had enough imagination to turn this discovery to commercial advantage. After devising a method of mixing papaya extract with ordinary table salt and adequately promoting their meat tenderizer, they were rewarded, three years later, with annual sales of $3,000,000.

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32. The python priestess Twadekili.



33. The evil Ngno, the chief's brother.



34. The eldest of the Indunas pronounces the verdict against Ngno.



35. The warriors attending the trial make threatening gestures towards Ngno, who is being led away by the guards.

34. Faith or superstition?

I could fill page after page with accounts of similar examples. Instead, I should like to quote a few figures. Consider that in the United States alone, in a single year (1961), $6,500,000 was spent on officially recognised research into rheumatism and arthritis, while the public spent $250,000,000 on useless, and sometimes even harmful, treatments. And that in the same year the United States spent 890 million dollars on medical research in all fields, while the American public spent a full billion dollars on quackery, useless rubbish and exaggerated diet cures.

When one considers that this billion dollars was squandered in a single year on sheer quackery and charlatans by American citizens who are generally regarded as highly civilised and sophisticated, is it any wonder that all over the world, and especially in the African wilderness, literally thousands of representatives of chemical and pharmaceutical companies are searching for new or rare plants and herbs with genuinely valuable medicinal properties?

Most of these men sent out on such missions try out old native remedies, chiefly by tracking down and questioning the witch doctors and medicine men who possess the greater part of these secrets. And these botanists, chemists and doctors, not to mention the great organizations behind them, have been more than justified in their extensive efforts. For the discovery and proper chemical production of a useful new product can - as dozens of earlier cases have shown - bring both fame and millions in profits. (Just as perhaps one day someone with greater business acumen than I will discover the secret of the Fifero, or of certain ointment-like leaves, such as those that Skaimunga's father gave me.)

Conversely, African medicine and magical power are so closely intertwined that it is hardly surprising that the African, steeped as he is in superstition, continues to place his blind faith in these same sorcerers - not only in matters of health, but also in all other matters of importance to him. Nor should it come as a surprise that he is more than willing to pay them with valuable goats and cattle for their treatments, advice and prophecies, and prefers them to taking advantage of the free treatment offered to him by all kinds of hospitals, missions and other institutions run by white people.

For the African is undoubtedly deeply superstitious, and will remain so for a long time to come. For countless generations, superstitious beliefs have been an essential element in the entire existence of his race, his tribe and his family.

How could such beliefs be completely eradicated, even among the relatively few who have received a thorough European or American education and assimilated a substantial dose of the Western way of life?

I know fairly well an ambassador to the United Nations from a newly established African republic. In America he lives with his one and only wife - for his people have been converted Christians for two generations now - and his children in a beautiful suite of rooms in one of New York's finest and most expensive hotels. His young, lively and attractive wife buys her clothes at Bonwit Teller. He wears nothing but suits made by a famous tailor in Savile Row; his shoes and shirts are made to measure in Italy. He writes his own speeches in flawless English and, more significantly, carries them around himself in a pigskin briefcase made by Mark Cross. (Not like his colleague, about whom so much has been written, who has his briefcase carried by a porter - though not actually on his head, as his wives were still accustomed to carrying his luggage and food on their heads only three years ago when they followed him in a respectful procession along a jungle path.)

On his left wrist, my friend wears on a gold bracelet the latest model of a gold Swiss watch, electrically powered, shockproof and waterproof, with a calendar. But one day, when he poured me a whisky from the strong King Ransom brand, his right wrist became visible, and beneath the immaculate cuff appeared a rather ghastly African amulet.

When he saw that my eyes had noticed it and betrayed a trace of involuntary surprise, he explained, a little sheepishly: “But of course, I still wear it. This one and another one as well.” With that, he loosened his twenty-five-dollar Countess Mara tie, opened his collar and unbuttoned the top buttons of his silk shirt. He then showed me another talisman, hanging around his neck on a very faded cord.

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“A famous witch doctor gave it to me after studying my future, when I was a little boy. My father paid him two fat cows for it. And what a bargain it was! The old wise man said that, as long as I wore these two amulets, nothing but success, power and good health would be in store for me. And - just look at

me. Look what has become of me, a man who came from his family's filthy hut in a miserable little village!"

"Do you really believe that all this is due to those amulets?"

"Of course. Just listen. When I was at university, my necklace once broke just as I was about to sit an examination that was important in every respect. I was in a hurry, and rather than risk losing my amulet, I left it in a locked box in my room. To the dismay of everyone, including all my teachers, I failed the examination - the only time in my life. And I don't believe I have ever been so sure of myself; I had studied so hard. But no! Wait. There is more to tell."

He stood up and beckoned me to follow him into the luxurious, ultramodern bathroom.

"Just look at this shower. Have you ever seen a better, more foolproof one? Well, eighteen months ago, after I had soaped myself, this bracelet slipped off my right wrist. All right. The amulet had been lying on the floor for less than two minutes when I slipped and fell, breaking my left arm in three places - fortunately my left arm - and badly injuring my knee as well..."

"Couldn't that have been an accident? Or even autosuggestion?"

"Certainly not, my dear fellow. The only two accidents in nearly forty years - and you call that coincidence? It was simply what the old man had foretold. While I was lying in hospital, two decisions of great importance to my country were put to a vote - and I was not there. So you see, I must wear these things at all times, day and night. Not only for my own sake, no, but for the sake of my country too!"

I was pondering an appropriate reply when I saw his light chocolate-coloured face turn an ashen grey as he hastily crossed himself.

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"In God's name, if you tell anyone about this, please do not mention either my name or my country! Some political enemy might snatch the talisman from my right wrist in the crush of the underground railway or in some other crowd. And then, what would become of us?" And for the second time he made the sign of the cross, which seemed to me highly inappropriate in the course of

this verbal exchange. The ambassador was quick to understand and grasped my feelings in a flash.

He smiled sheepishly. “What's wrong with having two life insurance policies instead of just one?”

I remember that, after leaving the hotel, I found myself thinking of another, more important and much more sophisticated African politician: Dr Kwame Nkrumah, President of Ghana and Osagyefo, the Saviour, the Infallible One, the Ever-Giving Leader, the Giant of Ghana, the Lion and the Eagle, the Defender, the Man Who Always Does Everything Right, and so on. He has such a high opinion of himself that he dreams of ruling the whole of black Africa. Yet this man, a Doctor of Theology, when faced with the choice of a wife, never dreamed of taking such an important step without first holding lengthy and serious consultations with a witch doctor.*

Small wonder, then, that his newspapers print photographs of his political enemies upside down, thereby seeking to bring misfortune upon them; that his supporters burn pictures of those enemies in coffins; that his followers come from various parts of Ghana to drive away the evil spirits tormenting Osagyefo (and inciting men to attempt to assassinate him), by offering him concoctions made from yam roots and eggs and sprinkling his exalted feet with sheep's blood; or that no authority dared intervene when, some time ago, a dead whale was washed ashore on the beach of the capital and left lying there for days, its stench polluting the air around Accra. It was regarded as a favourable omen that would bring the fishermen a rich catch. Fetish priests and priestesses performed solemn rites beside the palm-frond hut that housed the enormous carcass, while drummers beat funeral rhythms and oxen were slaughtered as sacrificial animals.

See The New Africa (Orell Füssli, 1959).

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Small wonder, too, that one of his admirers, when Dr Nkrumah was once about to attend a Commonwealth Conference in London, where he was to lunch with the Queen and the other prime ministers and heads of state and be photographed with them, hastily beheaded one of his own children and buried the head on the beach, facing out to sea, as an ancient superstition requires if the leader's safe return is to be ensured.

Or – to move from the gruesome to the grotesque – that the Parker Company, which dominates the West African ink market, recently saw its sales soar like a rocket and was astonished by the sudden demand from retailers for ink in five-litre bottles. It was subsequently discovered that all this was literally attributable to an enormous thirst for knowledge: pregnant mothers were drinking quite substantial quantities of ink every day because they firmly believed that their children would then be able to write from the moment they were born.

The foregoing, however, has not been written from any condescending sense of superiority. For there is one point that must be taken into consideration: belief in good and evil, in countless different shades and to a greater or lesser degree, governs the whole of humanity. In Africa, it could essentially be characterised by the expressions 'good and evil spirits', whose living interpreters on earth are the various kinds of witch doctors. But this is not very different from what we call good luck or bad luck, even if our 'interpreters on earth' are of endless variety and, in the case of religious people, are supervised and inspired by higher powers in heaven.

For – whether religious or not – are we white people really free from all superstition? My dictionary defines the term, among other things, as 'belief in or veneration of things which are not proper objects of worship; a belief or article of faith based on ignorance or on unworthy ideas concerning the Deity; a practice or act of reverence founded upon such a belief; belief in the supernatural; belief in the direct intervention of higher powers in certain matters, such as belief in magical powers or sorcery, or in supernatural phenomena such as apparitions, omens, etc.'

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Well, what about a black cat crossing our path? Or walking underneath a stepladder? Why do some people have something against Friday, while others object to the number thirteen? Or why are we afraid of the consequences when a mirror breaks, even if it is worth only a few pennies, whereas we think nothing of it when we break a valuable piece of glassware? Why do we knock on iron or wood (or, as a sign that we think ourselves foolish, on our own heads)? Do we never cross our fingers or make some other equivalent gesture to ward off bad luck? Why can some people not bear to have a hat thrown onto a bed, or two knives laid crosswise on the dining table? And so on and so forth.

Could not the word ‘superstition’ also be applied to the following account, published in The New Yorker on 1 December 1961, concerning something that happened to our good friend Colonel Z. T. Beach? Indeed, it worked. The report reads:

The exorcism of evil spirits, should the subject arise, is no longer anything unfamiliar to Park Avenue.

‘When my superior, Mr William Ichabod Nichols, moved into an apartment in the building at 417 Park Avenue a few years ago,’ Mr Stewart Taft Beach, deputy editor of This Week, told us recently, ‘he and his wife were plagued by pigeons on their balcony. The pigeons cooed and fluttered about at all sorts of hours, and so on. One evening, Mr and Mrs Nichols mentioned this nuisance to the Roy Howards while dining at their home. Mrs Howard, whose bedroom overlooks a garden, told them how she had solved a similar problem by means of a little trick her husband had learned in China.

“I had one of the pigeon eggs boiled and ate it, and that drove them away,” she said.

A word to the wise is sufficient. Mrs Nichols went home, fetched a pigeon egg, boiled it hard and ate it. Hardly had this been done, her husband told me, when the pigeons flew off in the direction of the Racquet Club, and they have not been seen since.’

Personally, I had considered myself – with one single serious exception – fairly free from superstition, until just now, when I came across the definition quoted above in the dictionary! Only then did I become aware of how many counts I had to plead guilty to.

The guiltiest of all – and I gladly confess this – is my absolute devotion and faith in Bapuka (just as my wife was equally devoted). This has been true of both of us ever since the very day we met her: first I did, and later Ellen.

I truly could not honestly claim that our trust has ever been, even for a single minute, any less profound or devoted than that of my friend, the African ambassador to the United Nations, in the two amulets given to him by an old sorcerer.

And although this feeling of ours was already deep from the very beginning, a number of compelling reasons subsequently arose which strengthened this faith still further.

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35. Bapuka? An unwavering faith!

I had already begun to describe some of these reasons when I wrote the first draft of my autobiography last year. But then, quite by chance, I discussed the matter with my wife. And Ellen, whose sound advice, though rarely given, I have always found absolutely reliable, immediately recommended that I leave out every specific reference to Bapuka and reserve it instead for the present book, which she had originally suggested to me herself and for which we had been collecting material together for years.

This was why, in complete agreement with her advice, I omitted from the final manuscript, which was sent to my various publishers, every reference to the important role that, according to our firm conviction, Bapuka had played in both our lives, beginning with the entirely reciprocal discovery of each other's existence and the merging of our two lives.

I must begin by going back to March 1931, when I was discharged from the Italian King Umberto Hospital in Cairo, a mere shadow of my former self. Having narrowly escaped death during my first severe attack of blackwater fever, I was as weak and exhausted as a wet rag. I was so thin that my clothes hung loosely about me.

But emptier still was my wallet. That accursed illness had brought the expedition on which I had set out to such a financially disastrous end that I could practically have weighed my wallet and my bank account without feeling their presence: both were so completely empty.

In other words, even a modest sum of money would have seemed to me at that moment like a gift from heaven. With it, I could immediately have cleared away the various difficulties against which I was struggling so feebly and unsuccessfully. It would also have restored the peace of mind I so desperately needed in order to regain at least some measure of health and strength.

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One day, however, I was visited by a British baronet whom I had met through a friend. He came to see me at the modest place where I was spending my convalescence. When he caught sight of the statuette of Bapuka, which kept me company from atop a tall chest of drawers, and immediately began talking about his world-famous collection of idols, I began to stiffen.

He was, however, so polite as to ask whether he might have a closer look at it, and I could hardly refuse him this request. Moreover, he handled it so gently, almost reverently, that I gradually relaxed again. I was unconsciously pleased to see how this highly cultivated man, with his extensive experience, appreciated the texture of the old wood, the perfection of the carving and the entire unique beauty of my goddess.

But when Sir Edward held a kind of magnifying glass, such as watchmakers use, to his right eye and asked me how much I would want for the statuette, I nearly exploded.

“Put it back in its place,” I said, although I am not accustomed to speaking in such a harsh tone. “Exactly where it was. And kindly leave it alone!”

I suppose all true collectors are alike, and he was certainly one of the most fanatical of them. He offered me a substantial sum, then a higher one, and finally a still higher one. Money was no obstacle to him, and he evidently wanted that statuette at all costs.

At that time, money was anything but an insignificant matter to me, but it never occurred to me, not even for a moment, to part with Bapuka. And thank God I did not. Even then, however, the incident affected me so deeply that, when I read through my notes from that period today, I can still hear our voices from 32 years ago, almost word for word.

I briefly told Sir Edward the story of Bapuka. I concluded with these words:

“You see, up to now she has always stood by me. Perhaps in a simple, passive sort of way – simply because she has always been with me, wherever I happened to be. But she has literally helped me through a dozen situations, each more difficult than the last, and most recently through this blackwater fever, when the doctors had already given up all hope of pulling me through. That is why I shall keep her by my side under all circumstances.”

The baronet was offended. I suppose he considered me a very superstitious person.

“Come, man, be reasonable,” he now stammered almost incoherently. “You have just finished your story by telling me that the Negro who gave you the statuette said you could give it away whenever you wished ...”

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“Don’t be absurd,” I interrupted him. “He was not a ‘nigger’. His skin color has nothing to do with the matter. He was one of the kindest, most understanding, most intelligent men I have ever met. He was very wise and possessed an astonishing wealth of knowledge. And as for giving away this statuette, which was so sacred to him, do not forget how he put it. He said that I might part with Bapuka only in such a way as would allow me to keep her. This seems to me, unless I am mistaken, to point quite clearly to the fact that I must give the statuette to a girl - which you most certainly are not; that I must marry that girl - a trap into which I have not the slightest intention of falling; and that I must share Bapuka - just as I share my life and my happiness - with that girl. A scheme into which you, my dear Sir Edward, do not appear to fit...”

At which the offended baronet turned his stout back, encased in his tweed suit, upon me, afforded me the privilege of contemplating his brick-red neck, and went away, grumbling like a small volcano on the verge of eruption.

In my extraordinary weakness, the interview had exhausted me. I had no desire to read, much less to get up and go to the telephone to ask the room waiter to send me something to eat. Instead, I remained sitting for hours in my deep armchair, gazing wistfully at the sphinxlike smile of my revered little goddess, while a kaleidoscope of images and thoughts, of clear memories and indistinct plans, revolved in my head.

One moment I was back in a clean, insect-free hut, listening to the solemn words of Skaimunga’s father; the next I was worrying about how I was to pay for the hospital, the doctor, the hotel, and my journey from Cairo to... yes, where, exactly?

One after another, all the terrible crises from which Bapuka had helped me emerged in my mind: that mysterious swamp fever; cobras on the floor of the cave of mortal terrors; reddish water churning all around me, whipped

into a frenzy by crocodiles driven mad by the smell of the flood tide. Mammoth elephants, hundreds of maddened buffaloes threatening to trample me to pulp. The largest of the giant gorillas, which had raised its enormous fist high above my head, and the even larger Mulahu, who watched every movement I made from between its legs, remaining concealed in the impenetrably dense vegetation of the jungle...

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What was it that had protected me in those terrible situations, and in so many others, when every last shred of hope seemed to have vanished? Was it Providence or Fate - or was it Bapuka?

“Bapuka!” Without the slightest trace of doubt or hesitation, I listened to the voice. “When you are in danger, Bapuka will save your life... When chains bind you, Bapuka will set you free...” Was it the voice of Skaimunga’s father - or my own, repeating those incantatory words? Or was I dreaming in broad daylight - or was I asleep and dreaming?

I cannot say when I fell asleep. But I did sleep, and for a very long time. For when I opened my eyes, the night was already over, and the first rays of a red sun were caressing Bapuka’s face, giving it an almost human, gentle blush.

Much as I had found that great armchair comfortable, and much as the night had been warm, I was convinced that I ought to feel battered and bruised, and that my bones and muscles must be aching terribly. I could scarcely believe it, but the opposite was true. I felt fresh and rested, better than I had felt in a very, very long time.

I got up quickly and telephoned for a hearty breakfast - yesterday, the very thought of it would have made me feel sick. While I waited for it, I shaved and showered with a pleasure I had not experienced for a long time.

For the first time, my mind was no longer crystal clear. As I ate fried eggs and crisp, fresh rolls, buttered toast and marmalade, and afterwards drank a large pot of strong black tea, I experienced an entirely new sense of well-being. And all the while, thoughts began to take shape in my mind.

My financial difficulties, which the day before had loomed before me like a mountain, suddenly shrank to reveal the simplest possible solution, one that

had been staring me in the face all along, concealed only by the fog of my confusion.

And suddenly I knew what I wanted to do. And why. And when.

I wanted to go to America and organize a new expedition. At once - that is, as soon as I could book passage on a ship from Alexandria to Marseilles, and from there on another to New York.

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The sun was hot, but its warmth did me good, and it no longer dazzled me. When I went out - for the first time without a walking stick - I walked from the legation to the bank, the consulate and the travel agency without feeling the slightest fatigue. I ended up at Groppi's for an aperitif. And a few tables away I spotted Sir Edward.

With a broad smile, I waved cheerfully to him. It took him several seconds, however, before he waved back. His eyes were almost crossed with disbelief. He had probably heard that one might see a man one day and his ghost the next, but not vice versa. And there was no doubt that I felt like that very vice versa.

And so, following Bapuka's instructions (or those of Fate, or Providence), I arrived in New York for the first time on 13 April 1931.

I experienced a few ups and downs there. But, looking back, they were utterly insignificant. What mattered, what marked the greatest and happiest turning point in my life, was that I met Ellen on 27 May. As I have already told you, although I had sworn never again to let myself be caught in the trap of marriage, I practically leapt straight into it that very same evening.

In agreement with Ellen, I did nothing so banal on that enchanting evening as to propose to her. So she never had the opportunity to 'accept' my proposal. We simply decided at once to get married and begin a life together, one that would be spent largely in Africa, and to do a hundred other things - quite a number of which seemed even more improbable and impossible than the rest.

But we did those things, even if it took us years and years to bring some of them to fruition.

There was one thing, however, that took me only a few hours: packing Bapuka and taking her with me to Ellen when we met for dinner the following day. It never even occurred to me that I had never been able to part with the statuette. She seemed to pack herself and nestle into my arm as I went out - entirely of her own accord.

In the same way, on that second evening of our wonderful new life, Bapuka passed into Ellen's delicate, so graceful hands. And while probably every other girl in America would have shown at least a little disappointment at not receiving an engagement ring, Bapuka brought a few tears of joy to her wonderfully expressive, sweet brown eyes - before I had even told her the story (God alone knows how) of this statuette, which was now our goddess.

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And we were never parted from her, just as we had never been parted from one another - except for a few hours, and on two occasions for a few days.

In grand hotel apartments in America or Europe, as well as in simple, sometimes utterly primitive inns in Africa; in aeroplanes, in railway compartments on three continents, in the cabins of passenger ships and freighters, and in rowing boats on tropical rivers; in Glenbrook House, which for quite some time was our 'paradise' in the state of Vermont, and in Tzamboho, our 'palace' of mud, tree trunks and grass in the heart of the equatorial jungle; in huts, tents and caravans, as well as aboard our splendid jungle yachts: wherever we happened to be - 'two soldiers in one trench', as we used to say - our goddess was there too. Always in the place of honour, and always bestowing upon us her enigmatic smile and her blessing, which for a long time seemed inexhaustible.

Then we moved into our latest 'trench' - probably one of the prettiest and most comfortable apartments in agreeable Lugano.

It turned out that we had to design most of the furniture for our large studio ourselves, so that we could properly accommodate our enormous collections of books and objects, films, photographs and color slides. Naturally, our first thought was to find a suitable place for Bapuka.

Ellen suggested a niche in the middle of the four long bookshelves we had had made. They were intended to hold all the translations and different

editions of the books we had written since that 27th of May 1931, while leaving a little room for a few more books to come.

On the top shelf we placed nine rare, old, delightful little statuettes of musicians that we had brought back from Dahomey. Their small, irregular bases made them a little unsteady. Up there, we reasoned, they would stand securely and be safe from damage.

But where were we to put Bapuka, with her uneven, hand-carved feet, which had so often made us tremble for her safety and forced us to place her in a particularly well-padded box whenever our 'trench' was on the move?

What could possibly happen to her now if our good, very diligent, but rather clumsy maid happened to dust her while our backs were turned?

We solved that problem too, by fastening the statuette securely but invisibly to a heavy block of African wood - a detail I mention here for a reason that is important to me.

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And there Bapuka still stands today, in her niche directly opposite my place at the desk. I could not even begin to say how many, many times, while writing this book, my eyes have turned towards her and I have gazed at her again and again. Especially during these last painful, heartbreaking months, ever since she last 'spoke' to me.

36. Bapuka and the Secret Society

First, however, I must tell of another miraculous intervention, which Ellen and I could attribute only to Bapuka's mysterious power. Whether it was a supernatural miracle or, as others might regard it, nothing more than yet another extraordinary coincidence, it is somehow connected with the continuation of another story that began a very long time ago - the story of the N'Kunda.

Over the years, Ellen and I often talked about the Secret Society of the Baboon Men and the wonderful secrets its members were said to guard, particularly the Fifero. Whatever it might have been, whatever extraordinary effects the genuine McCoy might have produced, whenever I became

exhausted from working too hard in the blazing sun, I would often joke: “What about a good dose of Fifero right now?”

Depending on the time of day, Ellen would immediately prepare a delicious Negroni, an ultra-dry Martini, or perhaps a generously poured Sidecar. We would share it companionably while talking about this and that.

More often than I can remember, during such conversations one or the other of us would ask whether we would ever manage to reach the territory of the Bakumu Walengola. For we both wanted to discover whether the N’Kunda still existed, or whether it had already disappeared, as that cavalry colonel, my father’s friend, had feared so many years earlier in Port Said.

But for one compelling reason or another - and I must say it once again here, even at the risk of repeating myself - our expeditions always took us elsewhere: to South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika - even to the Congo, but to other, distant regions of that vast colony.

It was an enormous undertaking, carried out in close cooperation with, and under the protection of, the Belgian and Congolese governments, as well as a number of major semi-governmental companies that controlled all the colony’s important transport routes, by air, by water - sea and rivers - and by land.

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We stopped in Belgium in 1938, where the final contracts for the two major films we were to make on behalf of the Belgian government had to be signed. We also had a dozen meetings awaiting us there at the very last minute when we were caught by the false alarm of a Second World War.

The country was mobilised. The roads were clogged with countless troop transports, and there was such chaos that my father, who had come from Milan to say goodbye to us, had to make a dreadful detour, change trains a dozen times and spend a terrible fifty hours travelling by train, instead of the usual comfortable overnight journey in a sleeping car.

Naturally, we were worried about the danger of war and everything associated with it. But even more immediately desperate were we about our own predicament. We had spent a newly acquired fortune on purchasing a fantastic quantity of equipment and, above all, on designing and building our

more than fairy-tale-like jungle yachts – yachts such as had never existed before and have never been built since.

Every last dollar of cash we had at our disposal had been spent on transporting all the equipment by sea, directly from New York to Matadi and then by rail to Leopoldville; on the airfares to that same city for our entire team of American technicians; and on advance salary payments to all of them.

While they were now enjoying themselves at our expense in the finest hotel in Leopoldville, with their salaries naturally continuing to be paid, we were stranded in Brussels, twiddling our thumbs – practically broke and without the slightest idea what would become of us, our newly acquired equipment and our staff.

Then the worst of our worries disappeared as suddenly as they had arisen. The Munich Agreement had not yet been signed. The terrible tension was palpable everywhere. And there was absolutely no prospect of my contract being signed or of my receiving the cheque we had been counting on. I could not even get to see any of the various ministers, department heads or company presidents with whom I was supposed to hold these extremely important meetings.

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I have rarely, if ever, seen a human being as calm and consistently courageous as Ellen. But even these worries became too much for her.

All I have to do is close my eyes to see that room in the Atlanta Hotel before me once again. Bapuka dominated the room from the middle of the large dressing table, with its mirror that covered an entire wall. We sat on either side of it in two deep armchairs, discussing the little there was to discuss about our situation, while sipping, without much enthusiasm, at an ice-cold Fifero Martini.

We had to face the facts. If that contract with the government failed to materialise, we would very soon lose not only everything we owned, but I would also be left with enormous debts: the substantial advances I had received for almost a dozen smaller films and for numerous photographic features and major series of articles in some of the biggest American magazines.

All that money had gone into organising the expedition. If it could not go ahead and be brought to a successful conclusion, those contracts would remain unfulfilled.

That would mean that two years of hard work, together with all our worldly possessions, would have been thrown away, leaving us with several hundred thousand dollars in debts we had no reason to have incurred, and which would take us years to repay!

In that atmosphere of general dismay, anxiety and confusion, I was unable to obtain even a one-minute conversation with the gentlemen in charge. I could not get through to their most important assistants. I could not even see their secretaries, let alone the secretaries of their secretaries. Every day I wasted many hours calling the same telephone numbers over and over again, hearing little more than the engaged signal.

'Well, then,' I can still hear myself saying, putting on my best fatalistic expression, 'sometime over the next few weeks we shall learn our sentence. Whatever it may be.'

'No,' said Ellen.

I can still see her putting her glass down on a little table and folding her graceful hands in a gesture as though she were imploring our goddess. I can still hear her sweet voice murmuring:

'Oh, Bapuka! Surely you cannot abandon us in such a terrible way!'

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Others might perhaps find it amusing. But I did not find it amusing – even though I smiled tenderly and assured Ellen: 'Of course she won't!' Yet, if I am to be honest, I said those words with scarcely half the faith and conviction that my wife had invested in hers.

Bapuka continued to gaze at us with her delicate, inscrutable, gentle smile.

And then? Was it pure coincidence or yet another miracle? Who can tell? The fact is – and this almost unbelievable fact was something my ears initially refused to believe – that I received a telephone call early the following morning.

I had just glanced at the newspaper and seen from its deeply alarming headlines how dangerously high international tensions still were when that call came. For a few seconds it left me completely speechless.

I was to report to the Ministry of Colonies in two hours. To sign the contract. To collect the large cheque that would be issued at that very moment.

And it was no illusion. Impossible as it seemed, it was absolutely and undeniably true. The expedition had been saved. And so had we.

From then on, everything went like clockwork. An express train to Antwerp. State cabins aboard the SS Albertville bound for Matadi. A special carriage on the Train Blanc. And then we were in Leopoldville.

We still needed several weeks of frantic work to negotiate with the local authorities, select, recruit and outfit approximately eighteen drivers, cooks, mess boys, time boys and camera boys. Then the jungle yachts, which had caused such an enthusiastic sensation in America, together with the other vehicles and the rest of our fairly formidable equipment, were loaded aboard an 800-ton river steamer, along with our African staff.

When our party and our team of collaborators went aboard the old Kigoma a few days later, which reminded us so much of Skaimunga, Ellen's first act was to take Bapuka out of her box and place her in the place of honour in the 'salon' of the apartment that the Unatra company had provided for us. The apartment consisted of two magnificent rooms and two bathrooms.

We steamed past Luko-Lela and the familiar, endless chain of other small government stations and native villages. We stopped at small towns and took on fresh fuel whenever necessary.

When we reached Stanleyville, half a dozen trained elephants were waiting for us. They helped us unload all our equipment from the ship that had just arrived.

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By the second day we were already on our way. Since I always have an enormous amount to do at the very beginning of a major expedition, it so

happened this time that, as we plunged into the evergreen rainforest of the Equator, I did not give a single thought to the N'Kunda or to Fifeio.

Following the only narrow, deeply rutted clay road that cuts through that primitive, chaotic world of damp darkness and oppressive silence, we reached a clearing about 160 kilometres from Stanley Falls. It lay just beyond the Aruwimi River, in the very heart of the territories of the Bakumu-Walengola.

At last, at long last, we had arrived there!

We stopped and began the difficult task of establishing a permanent base camp.

Officially, our sole objective was to study, photograph and capture further specimens of the Kongo-Bongo, the rarest, most elusive and least-known of all the inhabitants of the jungle.

This meant work for several hundred hunters, trackers, porters and so on. But recruiting them was not easy. The local people lived in small villages scattered throughout the jungle and showed little inclination to leave them and come to work for us, even at the good wages I was offering.

The local chief initially gave us a new promise every day. But although he was an important Sultani, nothing ever came of it.

One day I was giving him a piece of my mind when I suddenly had to turn my head, because my eyes had involuntarily been drawn to the figure of a tall, slender man standing quietly near me.

His serious, thoughtful features were made even more striking by a long-haired wig of black-and-white colobus monkey hair.

I looked at him, and he looked back at me, steadily. It was by no means an insolent stare. But it was an appraising gaze, as though he were trying to see right through me and discover what was really hidden beneath my outward appearance.

Then he greeted me with a polite bow: 'Senene, Mandele,' and approached.

The most astonishing change came over the Sultani.

As soon as the slender man began speaking to him, he seemed to shrink into himself.

'Lokuta te,' he nodded solemnly. 'Lokuta te, Efumu.'

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Well, 'Lokuta te' is the most respectful form of agreement. And, according to my friend, the chief, 'Efumu' meant one of the highest ranks within the N'Kunda, the Secret Society of the Baboon Men.

That meant that the sect really did still exist. As for its power – well, it was enough to listen to that man as he calmly told the chief that, from the following morning onwards, and every day thereafter, I was to have all the men and supplies I needed, without fail.

He had scarcely finished speaking when action was already under way. Dignitaries were summoned by the suddenly perspiring chief, orders were issued to his policemen, and messages were dispatched to village elders living in distant places. Even the village dogs began barking and seemed to have awakened from their customary lethargy.

I was very pleased, but at the same time something was troubling me. For the voice of the Efumu had a tone that somehow sounded familiar. Where and when had I heard it before?

After thanking him, I told him that I believed we had met before and asked him his name.

'I am Ivele,' he replied simply. 'And you have never seen this fur before,' he added, touching his wig.

Perhaps this was a symbolic, negative answer, or yet another polite way of evading a question.

From that moment onwards, everything went like clockwork, as far as the Bongo was concerned. We had men and supplies available in sufficient quantities. Our work progressed rapidly. And Ivele had appointed himself my guardian angel.

On the march, he walked ahead of me. Whenever we stopped so that our scouts could pick up a fresh Bongo trail, or find again one they had lost, Ivele would usually sit near me and talk.

About the Bongo, the vegetation, the traditions and customs of the Walengola. About everything – with the exception of the N'Kunda or the Fifero.

Whenever I mentioned either of these subjects, any hunters who happened to be nearby would make themselves scarce. And Ivele's face would invariably become completely expressionless.

He would shake his head and his expression would change.

'My lips are sealed,' he would say.

And immediately some kind of distraction would occur. A hunter would come running up with a few urgent pieces of news. Often the timing was so precise that I knew it had always been arranged beforehand.

And then the march would resume, and with it the silence.

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37. De boom van leven en dood

Another six weeks went by. We had still not caught a Bongo, but his intimate life held no more secrets for me. My folders were filling up with photographs, my diary with notes. A fair number of scenes and sequences for our two great films had been successfully shot. In other words, everything was progressing splendidly. But all I knew about the N'Kunda was that they were as powerful and secretive as ever. And although I had spent almost every day with one of their highest dignitaries, and had tracked down a few others on account of the extraordinary reverence shown to them by the natives, everything I had gathered about the Fifero amounted to no more than a simple conjecture.

Ivele lived alone in a remote clearing, at the center of which stood his large, round hut. Instead of being built around a central post, it had been constructed around a tall, leafless tree that looked lifeless and yet was covered with strange red flowers. Still more remarkable was the fact that I had never

seen a tree of this kind anywhere else - with the exception of the two trees that served as central posts for the huts of the other two Efumu.

When one entered any of those three clearings, one became aware of a strong, sour smell and felt greatly relieved, for no insect bothered one and not a single anthill could be found. And yet, immediately outside these clearings, there was not a square inch of ground that did not teem with billions of ants and beetles.

It did not take much imagination to picture that, if the Fifero tree really existed, it must be that strange tree around which the Efumu built their huts. In this way they could remain in constant contact with it and, shielded from prying eyes, work on it and, at the appropriate moment, gather its roots or bark, or whatever else they might use in their medicine. And what else but the presence of a tree that exuded some extraordinarily potent substance could account for the unique absence of every kind of pest that plagued the jungle?

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Not even the closely guarded Ivele could deny these facts when I laid them before him. After I had pressed him considerably, he was forced to admit that I was right. But at first he told me that the Fifero was used only for dyeing the loincloths of the Efumu, so rich was its wood in bright purple coloring matter. After a while, he admitted that the pulp contained in the fruit, when placed on an ailing stomach, brought immediate relief. Then he 'remembered' that the bark, when thoroughly leached, yielded a drug capable of making a previously sterile woman fertile.

And, I pressed on relentlessly, was there not also a poison? The question immediately brought that strange, searching look back into his eyes. 'Yes,' he said slowly. 'In the roots of the Fifero.

They contain the poison that the Walengola smear on the tips of their spears and arrows. Today, as in the past, to kill game. In former days, also to kill their enemies.'

Despite all my efforts, I would probably never have learned anything more than that. But the goddess of fortune, Fortuna - although, to tell the truth, Ellen and I would have sworn that it was the blessed influence of Bapuka making itself felt once again - came unexpectedly to my aid, and in the shape of a Bongo, no less.

And what an everyday accident it was! The sudden attack of an enraged bull while Ivele and I were waiting for our scouts to return. A shot from the rifle I fortunately happened to be holding. A huge, reddish antelope dropping to its knees, but still being carried forward by the force of its momentum; the resounding crash as it struck Ivele when he leapt aside. Ivele's fall, the blood flowing from a wound in his chest which, terrible though it was, did not kill him, since the animal had died before it could pierce him with its enormous, sharp horns.

The hunters returned at once. They grasped the situation immediately. Without delay, they formed a tight circle around Ivele, as though to prevent me from approaching him. One of them bent down to bandage Ivele's chest. Another took a calabash hanging from his belt and held it to Ivele's mouth. Then he sent all the men away and asked me, respectfully but firmly, not to touch Ivele or speak to him for a while.

Less than three minutes later, Ivele opened his eyes, calmly raised a hand to his mouth and touched the rough bandage across his chest. Then he stood up. Not with any effort, nor with the slightest sign of pain. He simply stood up, as though after a good, restful sleep. The ground was still soaked with his blood. But he walked lightly towards the spot where I stood, staring in astonishment, and shook my limp hand vigorously three times.

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It was as though I could hear Skaimunga's words again, almost word for word. 'I thank you,' said Ivele. 'The life you have saved is now yours.'

Then he called the men back. In his usual calm voice, he ordered them to skin the Bongo, remove its horns, and bring them, together with all the meat, to my camp.

And then we set off back again, with a few scouts leading the way, as though nothing at all had happened.

Incredible? That was exactly what I thought myself during that long march. But it did not alter the fact that the elderly, frail-looking man who had just been so badly wounded, who had lost so much blood and was still calmly losing more as it seeped through his inadequate bandage, was walking ahead of me.

And he did so with an energy and lightness of step that I, although uninjured and at least twenty years younger, could only envy.

Of course, at that moment I could know nothing of the greatest wonder of the Fifero - the tubers that grow on its roots. Unlike the cassava root, which is poisonous when freshly dug up but becomes a wholesome food once dried and ground into powder, these tubers are deadly when dry, but are a marvelous stimulant when freshly taken from the earth. And when boiled with carefully measured quantities of Fifero bark, seeds and fruit pulp, they produce an elixir of life capable of increasing a person's vitality, strength and endurance a hundredfold. This was the medicine that had made Ivele's almost instantaneous recovery possible.

But all this, and more besides, I learned only several days later, directly from the Great Chief of the N'Kunda himself - and under circumstances that fully justified my unquestioning belief in everything he told me.

It hardly needs saying that I owed most of what I learned to the fact that I had - to use Ivele's own words - saved his life. He was the most important member of the sect, ranking immediately below the Great Chief, and had been his most loyal friend for many years.

Immediately after the accident with the Bongo, therefore, all the invisible barriers that had hitherto held me back collapsed. The very next day, a Baboon Man brought me the Great Chief's thanks and his invitation to attend a secret gathering a few days later, at which he intended to initiate one of the members into the rank of an Efumu.

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The ceremony took place in a small clearing enclosed by a ring of palms, whose delicate, shimmering green leaves stood out almost theatrically against the solid black wall of the jungle. In the centre stood a Fifero with red blossoms, rising above the perfectly supported roof of the hut belonging to the future Efumu.

From inside the hut came the muffled sounds of vigorously beaten tom-toms. The members of the sect formed two rows - a kind of corridor of human figures in barbaric splendor, stretching from the path at the edge of the jungle to the door of the hut.

These men, who carried themselves with natural dignity and composure, and who had devoted their lives to the study and practice of mysteries as old as mankind itself, commanded respect.

Eleven Efumu, the three I knew and eight others, emerged from the dark green tunnel of the jungle path - grotesque yet impressive figures. Their bodies were covered in garments made of bark; their arms seemed twice as long because of the flat, woven shields they carried; and their faces were concealed behind strange wooden masks in vivid, varied colors. These costumes were intended to represent the fur, the long arms and the bearded, grumbling face of the Great Baboon, who, according to tradition, had once bestowed the properties of the Fifero upon the founder of the race.

Later, Ivele yielded to our persistent, though courteous, questioning and repeated for us the very ancient legend of the origin of the N'Kunda. In brief, it runs as follows:

Of all the diviners - already called Efumu in those distant times - known in that age, Abarambu was the most famous. The Great Chief of the Walengola would never have begun a war against any of the neighboring tribes without first consulting Abarambu, who invariably predicted with the greatest accuracy the plans of the enemy tribes and the chances of success of an expedition against one or another of them.

One day Abarambu disappeared. He had lost his way in the forest, and groups of men searched for him in vain for many days. On the tenth day the search was abandoned, and a message was sent to his sister, who was married to Likundu, informing her that her brother was dead. She immediately set out for Abarambu's village with her husband, her son Agwabu and her relative Lubamba, in order to 'mourn' her brother.

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Before the little group reached the village, the diviner suddenly reappeared. He told his brothers that, while he had been lost in the forest and had nearly died of hunger, he had seen an Abula of enormous size. Instead of attacking him, the baboon had dug up the roots of a Fifero tree and given them to him. He had told him that, if he wished to regain his strength and find his way back to his village, all he had to do was peel some Fifero roots, boil them in a particular way with other leaves, and then drink the resulting decoction.

The Abula had also told Abarambu about another tree, a brother of the Fifero, called Isangi, ‘around which the diviner was to build a new house’.

Wonderfully invigorated by the Fifero, Abarambu quickly returned to his village carrying an enormous trunk of Isangi. He summoned all his brothers, together with the group led by his sister. Not only had he built a hut around the straight trunk with its white bark, but he had also shared with his relatives all the secrets he had learned from Abula. Thus he founded the ‘House’, the Secret Society of the N'Kunda.

Following Abula’s further instructions, Abarambu removed the hide stretched across the opening of a tom-tom and, with his knife, cut from it a kind of mask. It had holes roughly representing the eyes, nose and tusk-filled mouth of the Abula. The resemblance was enhanced by painting the mask with white kaolin and red ochre.

He called this mask Sembu and pulled it over his face. Then he began to dance the ‘Dance of the Sembu’, in which he played the part of an Abula, alternately wrestling playfully with his females and fiercely and skillfully defending them and their young - represented by his relatives - against an imaginary enemy.

‘Thus,’ concluded the old medicine man, not without solemnity, ‘the greatest of all the Great Abula of the forest was appeased and delighted. Thus was the N'Kunda born, whose members still know many secrets and can travel swiftly through the jungle without tiring, being wounded or ever losing their way. For a distance that would take an ordinary man a whole day to cover, they accomplish in one effortless, fabulous leap.’

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He smiled at Ellen’s astonished expression. “This should not surprise you so much, Memsaab (white lady). For you know how the natives think and speak. The Walengola even more imaginatively than others. But it is true that in half a day, without becoming tired, I can cover twice the distance that a man half my age would need a full, hard day’s march to accomplish.”

When we were back at the small, silent clearing that day, the other Effumu, at a nod from Ivele, marched towards the hut to fetch their owner and escort him to the Great Chief, who was now arriving. Like a ghost, he emerged from

the primeval forest, shrouded in clouds of feathers from the ground to far above his head.

In his hands he held a new mask, which he personally tied over the face of the man being initiated. Then he murmured into the man's ear for a long time, while the other masked figures arranged themselves in a circle around them, symbolizing the wall of mystery that surrounded the final secrets of the sect, which the Great Chief was now revealing to the new Effumu.

The tom-toms in the hut, which had increased their tempo and volume to prevent the words from being overheard by unauthorized ears, returned to their previous rhythm as soon as the conference ended. And while all the Effumu leapt into the "Dance of the Baboons" – a dramatic, highly acrobatic portrayal of the adventures of the sect's founder – the Great Chief approached us.

With a courteous gesture, he offered us two chairs carved from ebony. He too sat down on one of these chairs. Then he spoke, and an excitement that I could not control took hold of me.

"More than once," he said to me, "you have proved yourself a friend of the Walengola. And more than once I shall answer your questions."

I had a hundred such questions. But now that I had his promise, I could save them for later. All of them – except one.

"What happened," I asked, "to the two Walengola who died before my eyes many years ago in a distant city of white men?"

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"They did not die," he replied solemnly, "because you were wise at the time and spoke no words that would have killed them."

He explained that they had eaten a powder made from Fifero bark mixed with the charred remains of a moss that grows on it. It was the same ancient medicine that, in the distant past, had saved many, many Walengola from captivity and torture. For it gave them the appearance of the dead. But only for a short time. After a few hours, they would come back to life, drink the Fifero brew and regain their tremendous strength.

By being left behind as dead men, they could easily escape. “For the tree of life and death,” he concluded, “bestows life generously. But cleverly enough, it merely pretends to bring death.”

Catalepsy, I thought. Nothing more complicated than a perfectly convincing, carefully calculated state of apparent death. But…

“Ivele brought Fifero to those two men,” said the Great Chief, answering my question before I could put it into words. “Through the iron bars on the windows. He alone. Then he left with them. Through the mud. He returned to his hut unseen. They hid until darkness fell again, and then set out on the long, long journey back to the Aruwini.”

Now I knew when I had first heard Ivele’s voice: while the 34 Walengola were being interrogated. The passing years – and especially his wig – must have changed his appearance beyond recognition. But Gorogoro and Bandakwe? However invigorating the Fifero brew might have been, could they really have travelled 8,000 kilometers?

Once again, before I could speak, the Great Chief made a gesture. As though they had been waiting for it, two Effumu approached us. In the one walking in front, I immediately recognised the eyes: those dark-brown eyes that I had first encountered in the Johannesburg hospital and had felt I would never forget.

“Gorogoro!” I cried.

Then, as the other slowly removed his mask, I recognised him too.

“And Bandakwe!” I cried.

“Lokuta ye, Mundele,” the tortoise replied calmly.

I trembled as I returned the greeting. And why not? With my own eyes, I had witnessed the final proof of something I do not hesitate to call a miracle: the miracle of the tree of life and death.

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38. Ellen en Bapuka: hun laatste adem

Admirably courageous, as she had always been, Ellen had expressed two heartfelt wishes more than once. First, she did not want to outlive me, because she was convinced that she could not go on living if I were no longer there. And secondly, when her time came, she wished not to suffer for long, so as to spare me the agony of having to watch her endure it.

That both these wishes were granted was the only, tiny measure of comfort left to me when, after 31 indescribably happy years, I found myself alone at the now-deserted place that had once been 'our trench'.

At the beginning of September 24, 1962, five minutes past midnight, Ellen's uninterrupted thirty-six-hour coma came to an end. As her final breath escaped her lips like a gentle sigh, I bent down to kiss her serene forehead – and barely heard the dull thud in our adjoining studio.

When I then tried to regain control of my voice in order to telephone the doctor, I rubbed my eyes and instinctively glanced upwards to see whether one of the unsteady Dahomey statuettes might have fallen over. It had not.

But Bapuka had fallen over.

Even now, I cannot explain how it could have happened, since her feet had been so securely fastened to the heavy wooden block.

And yet she had fallen over. At that very moment.

How? Why? Was that her way of speaking? Her final word to me?

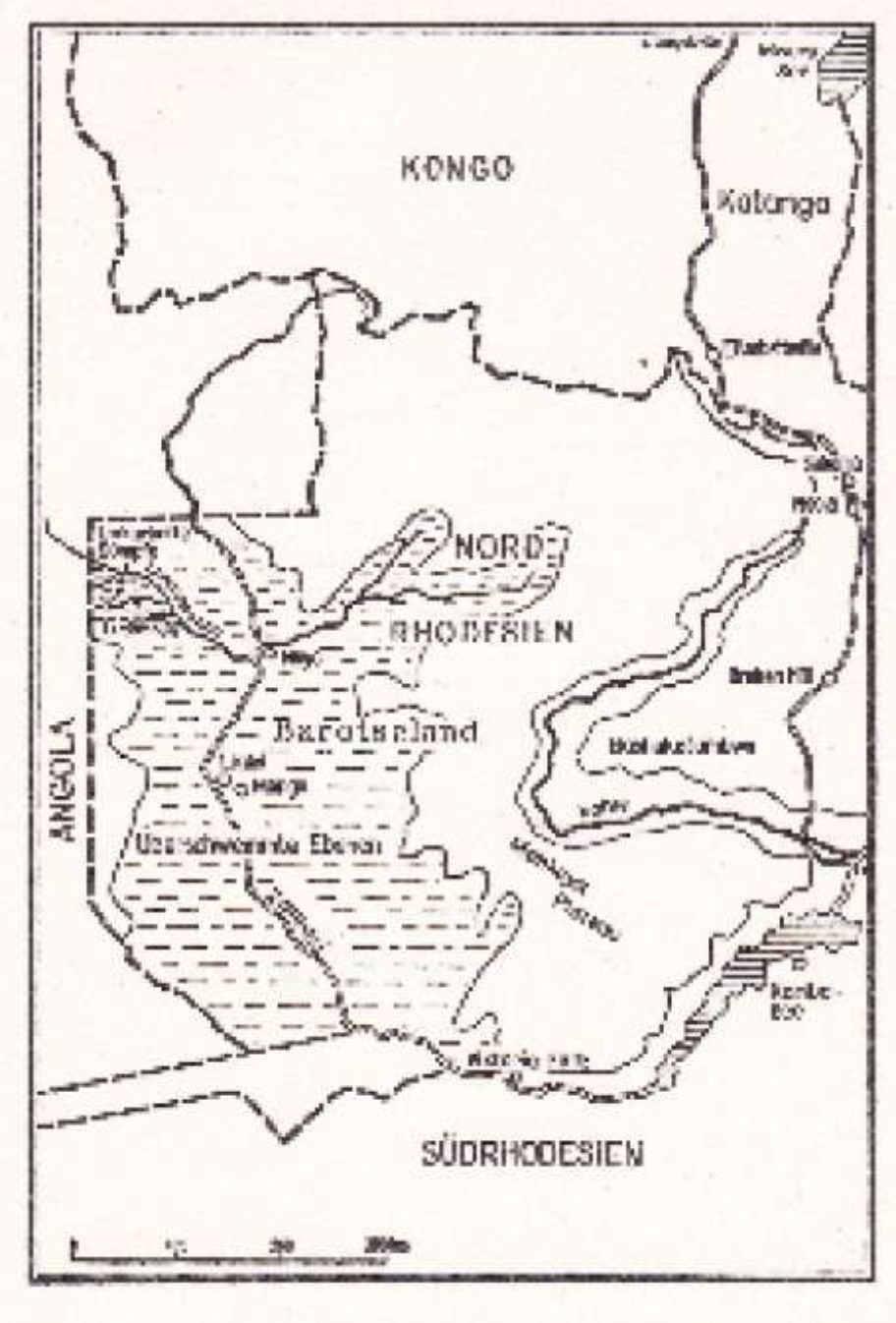
I do not know. I do not know.

I look at her imploringly, hoping she will tell me.

Of course, she does not.

But I can no longer see her narrow mouth smiling either.

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Afterword by the webmaster

Gatti recounts that, during his many travels through Africa, he found himself in numerous life-threatening situations, from which he managed to escape each time in remarkable fashion. Later, he moved to New York, where he met Ellen in 1931. They married, and from that moment on, she accompanied him on all his African expeditions.

[1]

Later, when they went to live together in Lugano, Switzerland-on the shores of the lake of the same name-the small wooden figure of Bapuka (which graces the title page of this text) was given a place of honor in their living room. It stood in a special niche, in the middle of a bookcase that housed all the books about their travels, as well as the translations of those works. To ensure the figure would not tip over, Gatti had fitted it with a heavy base made of solid African wood.

The years passed. According to Gatti, their marriage was exceptionally happy. About thirty years later, Ellen became seriously ill. In her later years, she had expressed two wishes on more than one occasion. First, she did not want to outlive Gatti, as she was convinced that a life without him would be unbearably empty. Furthermore, she hoped that when her time came, her suffering would not be prolonged-thereby sparing him the torment of having to watch, helplessly, as she slowly declined.

In early September 1962, five minutes past midnight, Ellen's coma-which had lasted thirty-six hours-came to an end. Gatti writes: "As the final breath, like a soft sigh, escaped her lips, I leaned forward and gave her one last kiss on the forehead."

At that very moment, he heard a heavy thud, caused by an object falling. Turning around, he saw that the statuette of Bapuka had toppled over and lay

on the ground in pieces. Gatti never found an explanation for this curious 'coincidence.' He concludes his book by asking whether this might have been a final message from Bapuka to them both.

Anyone who, even today, possesses a profound understanding of this peculiar dimension of reality would certainly not view this event as a mere coincidence. Those with a special mantic gift argue that the pagan nature spirit Bapuka channeled all her vital energy into fulfilling her protective role-not only toward the tribe that reveres her, but also toward Gatti and Ellen.

It is worth remembering that non-Trinitarian religions are characterized by a rather treacherous 'harmony of opposites.' The followers of such religions themselves experience just how unreliable their gods can be. These beings may bless their worshippers, yet just as easily inflict suffering upon them, depending on their whims. For instance, in Greek mythology, the supreme god Zeus is said to impose laws upon the Greeks, while simultaneously deceiving his wife, Hera, with mortal women-and even raping Leda, the wife of the Spartan king.

According to authoritative seers, benevolent nature spirits like Bapuka occupy a higher ethical standing than the often treacherous beings of the 'extra-natural' realm. In her protective role, Bapuka exhausts her life force entirely. Once depleted of this power, she falls prey to cynical, malevolent demons. From a biblical perspective, beings such as Bapuka are secure only within the protection of the Holy Trinity; outside this protective framework, they inevitably exhaust their life force. In the story of Bapuka, this manifests in the physical realm as well: her wooden figurine falls to pieces.

It is worth recalling that Christianity divides reality into three distinct domains: 'nature,' the 'extra-natural,' and the 'supernatural.' 'Nature' primarily encompasses the material, sensory-perceptible reality. The 'extra-natural' realm pertains to the paranormal, subtle-energy world-a domain inhabited by a multitude of diverse beings that serve as conduits for subtle energies. Gatti's account of Bapuka provides a concrete illustration of this. The 'supernatural,' by contrast, is reserved for those subtle beings and energies associated with the biblical God.

While non-biblical religions may employ energies of a sexual nature within their magical practices and healing rituals, Christianity draws upon Trinitarian energies. It is difficult to fault pagan religions-those that have not yet encountered Christianity-for utilizing the subtle energies at their disposal

to cope with the challenges of life. According to experts, such religions represent a legitimate phase in the evolution of religious experience.

A dynamically conceived Christianity will therefore seek to embrace these religions, purify them, and elevate them to a Trinitarian level. Missionary work that aims to raze pagan religions-such as that of the Bapuka-to the ground before proclaiming the love of the Biblical God, commits an unforgivable error.

That, at least, is the view of the rare few who are familiar with this subtle dimension of reality.