

Magistrates Court, Bamenda

A short while ago, to celebrate the success of two youths in passing a stage of their Koranic studies, and to mark the end of a period of fasting, a Jahai was held at Sabka village, about forty miles away overlooking the Ndop plain. We had been told some months ago that in May the Fulani would be holding some sort of festival; and for several days before, we had noticed unusual signs among the Moslem community here: small groups of men sitting stilly in a circle, chanting into their cupped hands or listening to their leader as he recited from the book on his knee – a lovely sight: the dark young faces rapt, the mosaic figure of the Imam, white bearded, eyes closed, nodding back and forth – all set upon the grass, beneath the slender eucalyptus trees, like a random flock of birds.

It was a marvellous morning, clear after the night's rain, bright and wind-blown. We drove up into the hills where waterfalls fell that in the months of drought seemed not to have fallen before; horizons blue, and beyond the plain, the sweeping valleys of waving grass, distant mountains like crystal.

When we got to the village, people were already moving about who directed us up a little path away from the road. We were greeted by a distinguished-looking man with a goatee beard. He ushered us through the narrow gate into the council chamber of the Chief, a sturdily built circular house of mud, beautifully and intricately roofed with bamboo, and thatched almost to the ground on the outside. It was dark and cool within, and we enjoyed the warm milk that was brought to us in little china teapots. Through the open door, in the strong sunlight, we could see beside a blazing fire the flaying of two cows, their quartering and dispersal; small boys sprinting up and bearing carefully away their portion of the beast; women hurrying past holding calabashes filled with milk or bread; a busy air of festivity running through the place. Soon it was announced that everything was ready to begin, and we were led out through the little gate to a small thatched pavilion, from which we could see the whole expanse of the clearing where the ceremony was to take place.

The Jahai – accounts of which I remember reading in the 'The Wilder Shores of Love' – is an ancient form of homage practised over most of the Arab world. It is also an expression of valour, a performance, in which the most dashing displays of equestrian skill seek to rival each other in testifying to the rider's loyalty. We took our stations on a grassy bank oblique to where the Chief would be sitting, and we waited. Nothing much seemed to be happening: the horses making their way casually to the end of the clearing – about two hundred and fifty yards off – where a brilliant assemblage stirred, restive and immaculate. On either side of the muddy track young men and children were congregating, robed in saffron, peacock blue, their heads loosely turbaned or crowned with the little embroidered caps. Away on the right I could see two youths, moving across the fields towards us, bearing a couple of small drums which they playfully started tapping, clumsily as they walked, so that soon they got muddled, and laughing, stopped, hastening their step to where the chief drummer was standing, on the left among the women. Startled by a shadow falling suddenly nearby, I craned my eyes to see a great bird wheeling high above us, which, as though looking for something, diligently, with narrowed eyes, circled smoothly over our head, then – enough done for the present – with gross lifts of its wing, leisurely descended, alighting on a thorn tree, ten yards off, folding its wings, tall and

uncouth, raised its eyes that coldly seemed to stare into my own. Associations of thorns, the primitive barbecue in the compound we had left, foul recollections of a scene of carrion in Cyprus, let me feel no surprise when someone said: “Vultures!” – and indeed there must have been about twenty of them sitting silently on their branches, like an allegory of Fate.

The Chief took his seat in the pavilion, and the drummers began fitfully and nervously, as though for a charge in battle or an execution. The bright *melée* at the end of the ride shivered into line, appearing through sun-dazzled eyes as it prepared to move forward, quickly flickering into fresh arrangements, like the patterns of a kaleidoscope. As they come – one catches one's breath – how slowly, a slowly advancing wave, with the Chief's two sons in the van – tossing and bowing, and a further wave behind that, tricked out and gaudy with pagoda-like caparisons, tasselled, bell-hung, fringed with beads: mounted on saddles of richly quilted cloth, the Fulani chevaliers with spears aloft approach the dais of the Chief. They will trample us, they come so close: chuckling of bridles; earthy thud of hooves; intimate *chaleur* of breathing flanks; dear shaking of mane and sneezing – one would stretch forth one's hand did they not seem so alien: passionate and remote like their riders who, with a wild *huzza!* now brandish their javelins in obeisance.

They stem off to the right, elate and cheerful, whilst Enugu, one of the Chief's sons, on his Arab white stallion, goes back to lead the second wave forward. They salute as before, pass by, and in a wide crescent join the company of the other horses. It's like a picture of a *darbar*. This is merely a prologue: when they all have gathered, one by one they canter off, skirting the spectators, to the end of the run where, brusquely collecting themselves, they turn round sharp, and lifting the reins, in pairs, singly, and in trios, hurl themselves forward in a sudden furious stampede, rushing without check to within five yards of the dais, where with an abrupt *Hup!* – dead in its tracks – each one rears giddily on its hind legs, like the ‘*Corsair*’, teeters aloft then drops, bounds away, wheeling off to the right. The assault repeats itself over and over, recklessness mounting in an urgent response to the growing excitement of the watchers. The drummers become frenzied, and each time the horsemen return a strange throaty whinneying goes up from the women where they stand and admire.

High up in the open sky, far above the hills, revolve as on a transparent loom the squadron of vultures, fixed and calm, one above the other.

Now they cavort, the stallions, like sea-horses prancing, delicate on their hind legs, tumultuously leaping as they pass and re-pass, sending up showers of mud so that we have to shield our cameras – some glorious, others bare-backed and meanly arrayed; one or two young boys older than Fiona; a sinister quartet of brothers, one wearing sun-goggles, unsmiling and proud like the rest: from these timeless minutes, in which the pandemonium of horses and drums and shouting is mingled strangely with the glare of sun, soft gusts of wind on our faces, and the indolent circling of the vultures far away, our excitement sinks, attention wanders to other things, and we realize that we have been on our feet for half the morning. We are rather exhausted when, at length, the last rider troops off and we turn aside and go back through the narrow gate for ‘*chop*’ – freshly slaughtered beef, bone hard and gristly, which must, nevertheless, be somehow digested as there is nowhere to throw it away and the chief is looking at us rather hard.

One of the most beautiful places we have visited here is Baforchu, the home of Godlove. I've been there only twice, but, in a strange way, perhaps due to its being locked amongst hills and difficult to get to, it has made a very strong impression on me. On the first occasion, I went alone with Godlove, and we arrived at dusk after a devious journey. "How many miles to Baforchu?" I wondered as we plunged down valleys, crossed streams, and mounted perilously the narrow twisting earthen roads: on one side, cool plantations of yams and occra, looking like groves of lilies and hollyhocks, hugging the face of the hill; and, on the other, the precipice tumbling down, clothed with spinneys of ancient trees - dark and welcoming - and beyond it, the slopes and valleys of Bali and Bamenda, still visible, though the clouds were low and might at any moment engulf us. It was almost as if we were crossing the Himalayas, the sensation of height and freedom was so strong. Godlove pointed out to me the woods in which he used to go hunting as a child, and the rocks where the baboons have their families.

We were climbing all the time, and then, quite suddenly, we reached the brow, and there below, cradled in a steeply enclosed basin, we saw Baforchu, a collection of little houses clinging to its sides, their zinc roofs gleaming in the pale sunlight. Away to the right, in fantastic shapes, arched and crested, the grey-green hills dwindled in the smoky evening air, strange tumuli and bunkers rippling away as far as the vague horizon. We made our way slowly down, and parked the car under the trees in the playground of the village school, a long, low building like a stable, whose plaster walls were painted with designs of russet and ochre, like the palaces of Knossos. Godlove's house was right the other side of the village, and to get there we had to walk some way, skirting the ravines and hollows over which it is scattered. Marvellous and unusual luxuriance: the ground carpeted with what seems like water-cress - almost Pre-Raphaelite; cold air like rose-water; and rising above our heads gigantic cottonwood-trees vaulting across at a hundred feet or more, hung with festoon of creeper and emblazoned with orchids.

After we had left our things at his house - built of mud bricks and shuttered with wood, warm and dry inside - Godlove led me outside again, and we climbed further up the hillside to the Chief's compound, a walled enclosure set back from a clearing, in the middle of which stood a great tree like an oak. From here he could survey all his lands before him. We went through the doorway into the courtyard, and the first wife, the Queen, came forward. She wore a beautiful necklace of gold, and though poorly dressed otherwise, a coronet of blue beads denoted her rank. We were shown into the reception room, a separate building, and before long the Chief himself appeared through another door and took his seat briskly on his throne. Long silence. Then Godlove gets up from where we are sitting, and assuming an uncharacteristic and ludicrously servile manner approaches the Chief, eyes lowered, shoulders hunched, his two hands cupped together as an intermediary vessel for his unworthy speech. Having finished his devoirs, he backs away like a communicant, abashed and self-conscious: one would almost expect the bow-string to be hovering in the background!

The Chief was not by any means an old man - though it is still very hard for us to tell an African's age: sometimes a harridan looking like seventy will turn out to be only thirty-five. He had rather a weak, round face, with, one would imagine, the same

glandular trouble as the Bourbons, for his eyes had an unhealthy star about them, and there didn't seem to be much brow. But he had a good voice, and his practical, unceremonial behaviour contrasted well with all the pantomime that was going on around him. He was dressed in the traditional robes: dark blue, embroidered with orange, red and yellow; and he had on his head the usual woollen tam o'shanter, flat on the back.

Godlove introduced me and bottles were produced, but this didn't make the atmosphere any more cordial. In the ensuing silences I had time to examine the room. The only light came from the open door round which a lot of children had gathered. There was a great fire in the centre, banked round a broad stone pillar supporting the roof, and cast about in its ashes blocks of wood and fossilized-looking antlers that served, we heard later, as seats of shame for those who came to be tried before the Chief. A juju hung on the central pier, sprigs of dead leaves wrapped round a dry nugget of wax. In between each pause we would spring to our feet in turn and deliver fulsome speeches at each other, elaborate and over-extravagant. Dale Carnegie ('How to win friends and influence people') never quite got round to explaining just *how* one replies to the 'God sent you to us' kind of gambit; and later on, at the dance, when I was exhibited like a slave-girl to the whole village, I rather wished he had. But as there were no other Europeans present, fortunately, I was able to receive their welcome on its own terms, and far from being embarrassed I was actually very moved. By that time I was quite high: every variety of drink had been offered to me, not severally, but in intriguing combinations. I was on the point of relishing a splendid glass of 'White Horse', when an unseen hand stretched forth a bottle of Grenadine and spilt into it an equal portion of the glutinous scarlet liquid.

After chop at Godlove's house we made our way by lantern light once more through the lofty spinneys. Wet leaves brushed against our faces in the dark, and the whole earth breathed an unimaginable freshness, impregnated by the soft rain that fell from the tracery above. Our festive voices echoed down the ravines; cascades of trumpet-flowers greenly glimmered, like Venetian chandeliers, fitfully illumined by the swinging lamps as we passed.

The dance itself was most enjoyable, but like a lot of things in Africa went on for rather too long. The band - which was composed of two guitars, a small draum, square like a book bound in vellum, and an *excruciating* bottle - was situated in the centre of the floor, and the dancers progressed with Edwardian decorum round about them. It is odd that where one would expect restraint to be abandoned instead one sees, performing the most implicitly sexual dances, couples behaving with the utmost unconcern, aloof from each other, intent on expending as much vigour, independently, as possible. For although the 'Highlife' here is a somewhat limited affair, consisting as it does of a perpetual shuffle and swaying, interspersed with more adventurous interludes, it is the most exhausting dance I've ever known. Furthermore, deprived of a support - one girl was volubly outraged when I tried to put my arms about her - it too much smacks of the 'Running on the Spot Exercise - GO!!' sort of thing to be considered as dance at all. But what was terrific was the 'African Jive', an amazing exhibition of whip-lash control over cut-throat agility, conducted *con fuoco* over a slow pulse: india-rubber men, thick and round-bottomed like Epstein's Adam, bounding and dancing, flexed and quivering - enough to make pale the most 'primitive' Ballet Nègre'.

Towards the end of the evening I began to feel rather ill, and it was only when the band had been silenced with a wave of the Chief's hand, and he had embarked on a final valediction – like all great orators he preferred to hold his fire until the end – that I became aware that the grenadine, adulterated beyond endurance by subsequent liquors, had commenced at last to posset and curd, rendering me incapable of murmuring more than the merest conventionalities in reply before rushing with a handkerchief to my mouth the startled ranks of the Chief's subjects into the fresh air and obscurity outside.

Godlove came to supper last night, and my last words from the Grasslands are of one or two of the superstitions he recounted to us. Although far from being what is called a Bushman, both he and Gabriel, a young friend of Pete's, utterly believed in what he was saying. No African will whistle in the dark, nor will he look into a mirror after sunset, for fear of calling the devil. The owl is a figure of dread to him, for he believes his enemy will assume such a shape in order to undo him, and Godlove declared that, should he hear the call of the owl while walking in the night, he would suffer a 'change in the blood'. The African also believes that a man may wish thunder on his enemy.

He told us more full of some of the jujus we had seen here. Each one is connected with a sort of club or cabale: in order to be introduced into one, a man must make certain sacrifices – kill a goat, a couple of hens or so, provide enough mimbo for the club, varying according to the importance of the juju – and then he can be initiated. At the head of each club is the juju man, who is the guardian of the charm on which it is founded. In Bansa there are two of these which are important, the Maboh, who are the messengers of the Fon – and it was these we had seen in the market-place: the fore-runners masked with sacking, like Morris dancers buffeting the cowering populace; followed by the loping juju man (who never speaks), darting from side to side of the road. This band heralds the arrival of the Chief. Far greater – according to Godlove, the most powerful juju in the whole of the Grasslands – is Nkoh. On certain days and feasts, the juju man will don his headdress, which is made of ropes and sacking so that, with the mask, his body is quite dwarfed by its superstructure. Then, having been harnessed securely with two ropes attached to his waist, a cloth or mantle is thrown over him. The effect of this covering is to send him literally out of his wits: his strength becomes unearthly; 'He could knock down this wall', said Godlove, 'with a single blow of his arm'. But for this harnessing he would kill a man and tear him to pieces or else do himself to death. As it is, he will drag those who try to check him, and it is only when he has been brought back to the juju house and has been washed and anointed with certain ointments and rubbed with leaves and herbs, that he will cool down and they will be able to take the shirt from off him.

The most fascinating story we heard concerns trans-migration, and it was clear that Godlove – who is representative – believes that not only could his enemy assume a different shape to harm him, but also that he could become an owl if he wanted to. He has had proof, he says.

In the forest a snake who has gorged himself on a big meal will go to the pool, and coiling himself under the waterfall will lift up his throat, open his jaws wide, and let the water flow into his stomach. (I have seen this myself, one day out walking). After he has done this for a while, his food will start to 'decompose' and he can rest.

A young man went hunting one day with his dog. They came to a clearing and the dog ran on ahead and was not away many minutes before he returned, eager that the young man should follow. They went on and presently came to a pool, and there, under the waterfall, saw a beautiful green snake, its head erect, drinking unawares and at peace. The young man lifted his spear and threw it, catching the snake on the head.

The same afternoon, a man was walking in the market with his friends. They were just leaving, when he suddenly gave a cry, clutched his hand to his temple, and said: 'Somebody has hit me with a stone'. His friends were puzzled, because they had seen nobody who could have thrown a stone, nor had anything fallen from the trees above. But the man seemed to be suffering, and moaned as they led him back to his home.

In the forest the snake was struck down, but not before the young hunter had flung the last of his six spears. He gathered it up and took it in pride to the Chief of his village. Now the Chief had suspected for some time that there was some witchcraft in the forest. Men had seen a big snake lie in wait by the goat tracks, fold itself into a loop circling the path, and at the moment when its victim passed, draw itself smoothly tight, embracing the wretch in its ugly know. Thus, when it was found that after several days and in spite of its numerous wounds it was still alive and its heart beating, the Chief concluded that this was the enchanted beast that had been such a scourge and decided to put an end to it.

When the man had returned home from the market, he laid down in pain, holding his sides and groaning. He never rose from his bed again. His friends could do nothing for him: there was no mark. He slowly sank, and at the moment when the Chief sliced the heart from the body of the snake and before his people had cut it in two, his life stopped and he died.

But it was later told by one of his friends that before he lost consciousness the man had murmured feebly into his ear: '*I have been a snake*'. Such was the tale Godlove told of his village. This happened ten years ago.

I set off for Kano in about two weeks time, and from there will make my way – I don't yet know how – across the desert to Khartoum. If any of you should feel inclined to write, I should send your letters to Poste Restante, Khartoum. It would be lovely to find a little heap waiting for me which I could peruse as I drift slowly up the Nile.