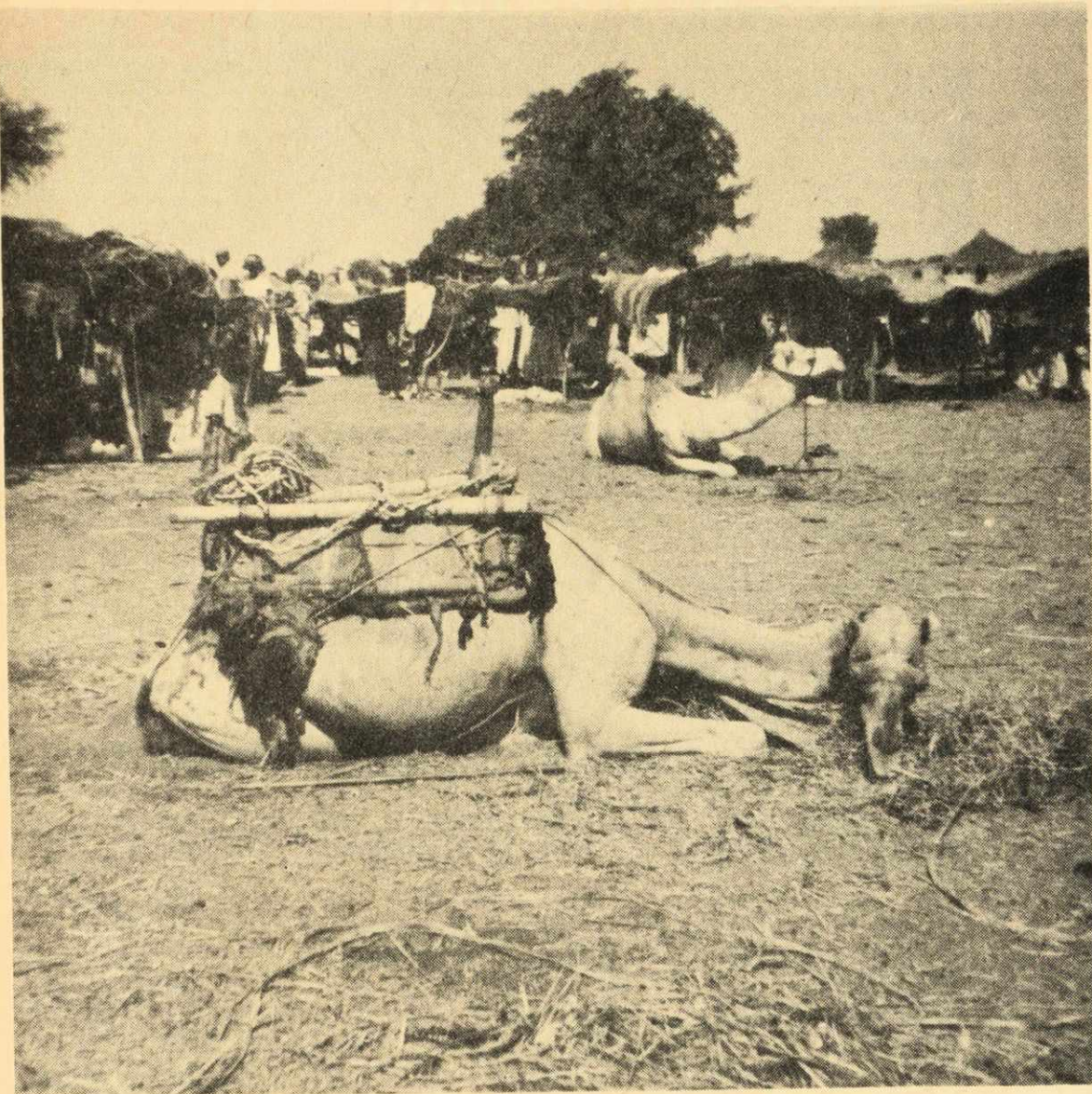


THE FIRST DAY



by
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It was nearing noon when we turned off the tarred road from Ulmuahia and jolted along the narrow, sandy road that coiled through the hills towards Asaga. A few minutes later we drove slowly onto another road, a road even more sandy and more narrow, churned our way up a slight grade, and came to a halt beside a grey and red building that seemed to have been stretched all out of proportion like a piece of licorice in a small boy's hands. After weeks of expectation I had at last reached the spot where I would dwell and teach for at least the next two years.

Father Kelly stepped out of the car and strolled towards the house. For some reason or other I hesitated a few seconds before joining him. Whether I had in the back of my mind the old theory that anticipation is superior to realization I am not certain, but I was at any rate hesitant to put my feet on the ground. Perhaps I thought it would all be a dream, and that physical contact would prove it so.

I slid out of the car and moved towards the house. I did not get far. Out from the shadows of nearby buildings emerged a stream of black faces and bright garments.

"Welcome, welcome", came the friendly greetings. "Welcome to Nigeria". I thanked them for their kind reception and chatted a few minutes with one of the natives who spoke English quite fluently. He told me he lived in a nearby village and invited me to visit him as soon as possible for a glass of palm-wine.

You may indeed laugh at this, but as I talked to him I kept thinking of various films and various books about characters entering strange and exotic countries, and tried to imitate their manners and actions. I'm sure the people must have been somewhat amused by me.

After this greeting I entered the sprawling house, met Father Murphy, and spent the next two hours over the noon chop, forcing question upon question into their patient ears. After lunch we all retired to siesta.

VISIT TO ASAGA

My eyes remained open. After resting for an hour I slipped out of the still house and descended the hill towards the nearest village, Asaga. Along the way I was joined by one of my students, who acted as both a guide and an interpreter for me. It was only a few minutes walk to the village and very soon we were standing in a square section of sand bordered by several long pavilions. The student, a boy in Class Five named Francis Arva, introduced me to a long line of extremely elderly men. There were no women, just men. I soon learned that advanced age in this country is not treated with the same contempt and disrespect as it is back home, in our more "civilized" societies. Instead, the aged here are the most respected people in the village.

Slowly I mingled among the old men, offering them my hand as they offered theirs, returned their friendly smiles, and carrying on a sort of limited communication that consisted mostly of hand-shakes, grinning, nodding and more hand-shakes and more grinning and more nodding.

At the first few hand-shakes I was surprised to find when I attempted to withdraw my hand it remained firmly grasped. It was soon evident that the custom here was to hold one another's hand for several seconds.

The initial impression in my mind was that of the intense gregariousness of the villagers. They had their community buildings, their pavilions, where each day they gathered, chatted,

joked, or merely sat quietly side by side. No matter what their actions there was a feeling of family solidarity encompassing the whole village. Apparently one of the criticisms against the African people is that they are not independent enough. Well, one of the criticisms against the Canadian people, and others is that the family unity is disintegrating. Perhaps both cultures could profit from each other in this respect.

After a quarter of an hour the student led me away from the village square towards the mud-huts surrounding it. After a few yards we passed a second group of people. While the first group had been all me, this group was all women. They sat on the sand, or on boxes, and looked up with both surprise and curiosity when they saw me. Some of the women who were feeding their babies suck while they gazed in my direction and jabbered away in their Ebo tongue. The response of the women was slightly different from that of the men. While they were every bit as friendly, and while their eyes and teeth glistened every bit as brightly, there was a distinct change in the air, a definite twist in the feeling and the attitude of the women compared with that of the elderly men. For a few seconds the identity of the tone, of the shade of emotion flowing between us, eluded me. But little by little the women became more relaxed and demonstrative. Shyness gave way to overt expression, and subdued amusement gave way to spontaneous and hearty laughter.

WOMEN AMUSED

Humour - the tone in the air was humour. It was a simple as that. It was a wonder that I had not been able to recognize the tone more readily, but the answer probably was that I was not expecting it. For some odd reason the women found me quite amusing. I pondered whether or not they were laughing at my skinny legs. I knew I shouldn't have worn shorts.

I asked the student what it was that they found humorous. While he did not give me a completely clear answer he told me that they laughed because they were happy to have me visit the village. Their laughter, I should make clear, had no cutting or sarcastic connotations, as is found in much of humour, but instead was pregnant with warmth and geniality.

One of the ladies uttered something that caused the whole group to burst out again in laughter. The student told me that she had asked me if I would be her personal teacher. I had the feeling that the student had only partially interpreted her words.

Many expatriates had told me that the Nigerians had no sense of humour, but this first visit completely demolished that opinion.

It is true that if you relate joke which demands a figurative interpretation, the students will rarely be amused; but neither would we if we had to interpret a joke from the Ebo tongue. Actually, I found the villagers to have a tremendous sense of humour. They laughed easily, naturally, spontaneously. I suppose they have not yet become sophisticated enough to falsely equate stoicism with maturity, as is found in our own society.

COMMUNITY HOUSING

We left the group of women chattering and tittering behind us and strolled along a narrow path that wended its way between the rows of mud-huts. The huts are constructed by first erecting a network of branches and bamboo road, and then by packing the skeleton with red clay. The roof is covered with various kinds of reeds and leaves. Each hut contains a small opening that serves as a door. Apparently the huts are completely rainproof, a very

necessary requirement in the wet season.

It had rained recently, and we picked our way carefully through the puddles of water and mud, and through the tiny mounds of goat-dung. Pigmy-sized goats bolted along the path, splashed the rain water onto the clay walls, and dashed abruptly through the openings of the huts, only to come bounding out just as quickly with the angry remonstrations of the residents chasing after them. The contented cluck of chickens blended agreeably with the bleat of the goats. Perhaps it was merely because all was so new and fresh to me, but the eternal hum of the village composed of the bleating of the goats, of the clucking of the chickens, and of the easy laughter and chattering of the people - the eternal hum piling up into a crest of notes and ebbing off into the relative silence, expanding and falling in rhythm, this worked its way into my interior until it became almost aesthetic in nature.

After winding our way along the path for several minutes we came to a slight clearing. Smack in the middle of it was a mud-hut that differed from the others. While the previous huts had been small and rectangular, this hut was large and circular.

We walked past it slowly. The student made no attempt to explain what it was, and I imagine we would have immediately left it behind if the middle-aged man hadn't stopped us. He emerged quietly out of a hut, his bare feet muddied in the mud, and spoke in fairly clear English, "You are the new teacher".

I nodded in assent.

"You are very young," he spoke, as he looked at me with a sharp eye. "Very young". I nodded again. "Would you like to see the shrine?" he asked, indicating the circular hut. I did not know just what the shrine was, but I told him that it would greatly please me to see it.

"I shall consult the High Priest", he informed me, and disappeared between two huts. I asked the student what was in the shrine and he laughed shyly and told me that it was the home of the Ju-Ju.

AT THE SHRINE

Hardly two minutes had elapsed when the gentleman returned with a skinny, withered, hoary-headed man and told me that I would be permitted to enter the shrine. The aged villager, apparently the High Priest, entered the round building and prepared the Spirit for my visit. After a couple of minutes the middle-aged gentleman beckoned for me to enter. Before I could do so he asked me to remove everything on me that was black. I left my watch and my belt with the student. I was glad that I had worn white shorts.

My new guide and I stooped under the lip of the roof and slipped into the shrine. In a few short seconds my eyes became accustomed to the light and I spotted the High Priest squatting on the dirt floor in front of us. I said hello to him, but received no response. He squatted there like a toad, completely impassive and uncommunicable. My guide told me that I was not permitted to speak to him.

Directly behind the High Priest were four statues. A man stood wide-legged with his wife perched upright on top of his head. On one side of him was a guard, and on the other side was a servant. As we moved around the hut I could see that it was ringed with numerous statues. All told a story. The man who acted as my guide gave me an interpretation of each. There were girls with various hair-styles, each style indicating a particular period in the history of the village. There were servants, hunters and warriors. I caught my breath as my eyes settled on a particular statue of a

warrior. He was leaning forward in a tense manner, grasping in one hand a long knife, and grasping in the other hand a head. My guide calmly explained that this was a warrior who was returning from battle with his booty. My guide peered straight into my eyes when he told me this, no doubt searching for my reaction.

I thought to myself that this practice was almost identical to the North American Indian's practice of scalping. By drawing this analogy it seemed to relax me for I had brought the practice into my own backyard.

There were several drawings on the walls. These, as my guide pointed out, were never done unless the High Priest received a message from their God. My guide suggested that this is quite similar to Christianity in which a high figure in the church, the Pope for example, acts on divine revelation.

At the far end of the shrine was a thatch of what looked to be hay tied about three or four feet above the floor. This was the sacrifice altar. It was sacred. No one except the High Priest and very important people could approach it. This, I imagine, in the past had been the place of human sacrifice, and of chicken and goat sacrifice even now. My guide reminded me that Abraham had almost sacrificed his son for his God, and that our Western laws demand that we sacrifice murderers and others to appease our God of Justice. I made no remark on this.

TOUR ENDS

The tour was over. We stepped past the High Priest, who seemed to be just another statue, and stood blinking in the sunshine outside. After thanking the gentlemen and receiving my watch and belt, the student and I headed back for the school. The student in answer to my questions, informed me that my guide had formerly been a teacher at Hope Waddell, a secondary school in Calabar where Don Davis, a CUSO member, is presently teaching. This former teacher had once been an important figure in Nigerian political circles, but had isolated himself in this little village, had withdrawn into obscurity, because his aims were incompatible with those of his fellow politicians.

A few minutes later I left Francis Arva and stepped into the licorice colored house. Over the evening meal the Fathers and I discussed the people of Asaga and discussed the Ju-Ju hut. They were rather amused at me for strolling through the village. Since they have been here for about ten years the novelty of the country has worn off.

About eleven p.m. we retired. The mosquito netting around the bed gave it what I thought to be an Arabian air. I could imagine a similar bed being located in some swarthy sheik's harem. The similarity, I assure you, goes no further.

As my eyes closed, my mind seemed to open. Goats catapulted through my head. Chickens jolted along in short spasms as if they were in need of shock absorbers. Elderly men rose and shook my hand. Scores of ladies laid back their heads and howled at me. And then a fibre of song - the low, secret hum of the village, the bleat of the goats, the cluck of the chickens, the swell of excited children and amused mothers - the fibre of song threaded through the various visions, linked them together, retarded the pounding hoofs of the animals.

I felt strangely at home in this strange country. Perhaps only because I realized that I felt a compatibility with these African people. I knew that my two years would nevertheless be exciting and stimulating.

Eight day investigation brings forward new highlights on student position in Rhodesia

By PETER WILENSKI

This article consists of excerpts from a report written by Peter Wilenski of Australia, who travelled to Rhodesia for an eight-day investigation of the situation.

For the average African citizen, Rhodesia today is a police state. An extensive network of police spies based on a system of arbitrary arrests and police intimidation and brutality, has made any attempt by a citizen to exercise his fundamental human rights of freedom of speech or even peaceful opposition fraught with danger of arrest and imprisonment.

Africans who actively oppose the regime are simply gaoled without trials. The few Europeans who continue to oppose the regime are harassed by police interrogations and searches, restriction orders, phone tapping and censorship. However - so far as is known in a country where it is a serious offence to disclose publicly the whereabouts of political detainees - only one European has been arrested.

The number of Africans arrested is almost impossible to determine - censorship is strict and communications difficult. The new attitude of the authorities is well illustrated in the "welcoming speech" given to new inmates at Khami detention camp by the commanding officer (as reported by one detainee): "The talks between

Wilson and Smith are over now. We can do what we want and we'll teach you how to behave. We'll knock hell out of you".

University students have been a particular target for the regime. U.D.I. came while some students were still continuing their exams. Only the intervention of the professional staff with the police permitted them to complete their exams. Other students were not so fortunate and many have been arrested. In most cases no charges have been made but they have simply been kept in prison. Some were released after periods from a few days to a month, others are believed to be in gaol. Other student leaders have gone underground to avert police arrest. Under these circumstances the student unions cannot function effectively (especially since all their mail is subject to censorship).

One student told me of his experience: "I was arrested in the middle of the night without being told why. I was placed in a cell about 6 feet by 12 feet together with 14 others. The only air came from the peep-hole in the door. A bright light shone day and night. The only toilet facilities were a pail in one corner of the cell which was cleaned out once a day. There was no washing water. After a day and a half my lawyer got me transferred to another gaol. I was lucky - some said they had been in there over two weeks."

The position of the University itself is being undermined. University academic publications are subject to censorship. Two papers of the history department have been banned - because the authorities did not like the facts of African history in Rhodesia. The University was searched by police (while a helicopter hovered overhead) for a letter to "The Times" signed by forty staff members refusing to recognize the illegal regime - the letter was not found and duly arrived in London. Staff loaned by U.N.E.S.C.O. (denounced by Ministers in the regime as a "Communist organization") to the University have been withdrawn causing serious difficulties in a number of departments. Students from Britain and Australia who have been completing the course for the Post-Graduate Certificate of Education have been declared prohibited immigrants. The requirement that students on government grants sign a pledge that they take no part in politics has been withdrawn, but has now been replaced by a regulation that makes students actively participating in politics liable to lose their scholarships. Increasing political regulation has made staff recruitment an increasing problem for the college. Freedom of speech at the University has been restricted, also, by the police practice of the use of intimidation and bribery to employ students to report on the activities of their fellow students.

The Rhodesian system of education has always placed great obstacles in the place of Africans seeking University education. The attitude to education of the illegal regime, were it allowed to continue, clearly places in grave doubt the future of the University as a multiracial institution.

However, this repression by the Smith regime has not broken the resistance of the nationalist. It has strengthened the opposition. Many told me, "Prison and beatings are an accepted part of our life now. Anyone can be arrested whether he is an activist or not, so more and more become activists. Many of us have been arrested more than once. We no longer fear arrest."

The extent of resistance activity in the rural areas is difficult to determine. There are many reports of uprooting and burning crops, of poisoning of stock and occasional attacks on police stations. These are denied by the regime - but these denials are shown up when Africans appear in Court and are charged with performing the very acts that spokesmen for the regime deny ever occurred.

Sanctions have had little effect on the man in the street as yet. Behind the peace and quiet the ticking of the time bomb can be heard.