

THE DAY THE THUNDER STRUCK

MUKHTARR MUSTAPHA

A hole was dug in the ground, a goat and six chickens were slaughtered. Wrapped round a banana stem were rolls and rolls of black and white thread. A monkey's skull with a bell on its head rested on a clay pot containing assorted bird feathers. Beyond the Sacred Bush of Bambey stood the most respected hut of divination. From within the huts the sound of gongs and human cries rocked the atmosphere which up to this time was still and mysterious. And now light had started to penetrate in the thick foliage of the jungle, I could see somewhat strange objects flashing swords in the air, stamping their feet with caution and dancing round a circle in the middle of which stood a carved human figure. And now a man would crouch on his belly holding a horn and reciting prayers which he alone could hear, at short intervals the occasional owl would hoot and register its mystical message then disappear into the wild with Messianic swiftness.

This is my home. Africa. What are you doing here? What is your business here in the dark forest? Leave me alone old papa, you cannot help me so do not provoke me. 'Something will happen today' the old man growled as he spoke to himself. 'I say something will happen today, how could she die without blood flowing?' But still the old man went on 'How could she have died a bloodless death?' 'It must be the work of one of those medicine men' I said, 'They sucked her blood without leaving a single scratch on her face, they took away my only daughter whose voice could pierce a palm kernel and bring the Panther to submission'. The old man said with his right hand clutching his matchete and gritting his teeth, his head was raised towards a tree plunged in deep thought his eyes have now turned leopard green. It was nearing midday and it started to rain non-stop but the persistent drumming and stamping of feet from the sacred bush drowned the effect of the torrential down pour. As the rain ceased the drumming and dancing became more frantic. The dancers wore headbands trimmed with horns and cowries, round their legs were small bells and porcupine quills sewn into a pad made of raffia.

I started to pick my way cautiously through the dense undergrowth and positioned myself at vantage point from where I could observe this curious pantomime. And now the body of the dead singer was carried by seven women shoulder high trotting with short paces as if marching to the tune of martial music. The body was lowered in the middle of a clearing. Then from nowhere appeared the most frightening

mask with horse tail in one hand and a chicken in the other. The chicken was stripped of all its feathers and its throat was slit and the blood smeared on the four corners of the clearing and on the forehead of the dead singer. By this time the head priest was sitting nude by the feet of the deceased apparently interrogating her as to who her assailants were. The deceased herself is now being questioned to accuse her murderers.

Priest to deceased: Why are you so still? You were singing two days ago, why are you so quiet today? Tell me your quiet thoughts? Say to me the name of your murderers? Your father is here, your mother is here but you have gone. You left without a drop of blood on your bamboo bed. Who took you away? Confess. Speak loud. And now the right hand of the deceased by some inexplicable force raised itself towards the sky and dropped again. The chief priest dipped his hand into a bag made of crocodile skin (Kuma) removed certain particles, one of which he chewed and spat the juice in the eyes of the deceased. The other particles were scattered in the wild. Then someone started a song from the corner where the tall drums were standing. The response by the cult members left me in awe and unparralleled fright. Each time the singer pitched a song a kola-nut was thrown in the air and all to a man the atmosphere would become hugged by the powerful chorus. Then the chief priest stood up, moved a few paces and touched the head of the deceased and started singing. "Gba tun gbay tun gbay tun vare kun" and the men and women will respond thus "Shay ke lun shay kun shay, kun shay shay kun shay". After continuous chanting which lasted for about twenty minutes the chief priest raised his hand signalling the chanting to an end. Then the chief priest dipped his hand into a calabash containing mystical herbs, palm nuts and cowries, still sitting by the deceased head the chief priest has now consulted the oracle as to what the meaning was when the dead raised her hand upwards towards the sky. Except for a goat that walked past the ceremonial gathering with its bell jingling no other sounds were uttered. As the deceased was a practitioner and worshipper of the thunder God the help of thunder God was solicited to unravel the mystery that surrounds her sudden death.

In these words:

- O Thunder
- O Mighty Thunder
- I stand by your Gates
- O Thunder
- Open to me the Secrets of this death.
- O Thunder I will worship you the more
- O Thunder I will sacrifice to your altar the choicest bull.
- Tell me Thunder
- Tell me the meaning of this death.
- O Mighty Thunder

By this time several men and women have fallen into a trance, the mystical drum now started to talk in special rhythm, the chief priest with a bag of beads shaking furiously invokes the God of Thunder with prayers and praises, licking his lips and chewing his tongue. The minor priests had positioned themselves by the feet of the deceased rubbing their feet together and clapping their hands. A mask ap-

peared, a bull is fetched, its throat was slit with split second accuracy, the drum rolled thunderously, the horns of the bull were removed, the head placed in a calabash, drops of blood were sprinkled on everybody's forehead. The Chief priest now moving slowly forwards with his face revealing nothing called aloud the name of the deceased singer seven times and with a crash he dropped the calabash he was carrying. "The God of Thunder has revealed to me that your daughter during her lifetime had prayed seven days during which time she had offered her virginity to the most mighty God of Thunder in return for which she should be endowed with the sweetest voice in the whole country. Furthermore your daughter was given several commandments one of which is that she must not stoop in front of any man or worship any other God. Also she was to have offered to the God of Thunder a new born ewe, a mea-

sure of corn and her hair, all of this she failed to do. And lastly she gave her virginity to the river God, a lesser God than the Thunder God whose cult she has always been a most devout member of. Therefore the all-powerful Thunder God had withdrawn her from this earth. The Chief Priest went on "During the performance of this ceremony you all saw a goat walking past. That was the spirit of the deceased singer. The mighty Thunder God has withdrawn her from this world. But in order that her surviving relatives would be clean from all the sins of the deceased, the God of Thunder requests them to shave their heads, confine themselves in their huts until the seventh day when they shall smear themselves with mud and dance through the village as a last and final cleansing act for the sins which their daughter committed. By this act the God of Thunder would forgive you all.

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Tome X, N°38 - Avril - juin 1969
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