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The Good Death of Balekimito

AFTER TWO YEARS' further preparation at Oxford I felt ready to return to the Ituri, to try and understand just what it was that made the People of the Forest what they were, what made them so very different from the villagers all around them, what made them seem to adopt village ways with such enthusiasm, only to abandon them with utter unconcern the moment they left the treeless confines of the village and returned to the forest.

If you land at Lomé, you drive first of all along the coast of Togo and Dahomey, where the Atlantic surf pounds day and night on

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the sands, beating right up to the first line of tall, waving palm trees. Then you climb gently inland to the rolling hills of Nigeria, lightly wooded in places, but for the most part open and fertile. When you cross into the Cameroons there is an abrupt change. You pass steeply up into a massive range of mountains, through a narrow but dense belt of forest, and climb still higher until you are above tree line.

The road is appalling, covered with loose stones and boulders, with a gradient as much as one in four in places, deeply scoured with gulleys made by the heavy rains pouring off the mountainside. The road twists and turns until you lose all sense of direction, but at the top there is an open, flat stretch of grassland, and at the far side of that, in the French Cameroons, you find yourself faced with a descent as uncomfortable as the climb on the British side. But here, instead of looking down on rich farmland, open and sunny, you look out over a vast sea of dense, shimmering tree tops, so dark they are almost black. On all sides this ocean of forest stretches for as far as you can see, quiet and peaceful, asking only to be left undisturbed, or at least approached in peace. But the darkness also carries a threat, a warning to outsiders that they would do well to stay away. The same darkness welcomes those who understand, and there is no feeling quite the same as the refreshing coolness of the first shadows cast by the leafy giants at the forest edge, after years away from its shade and shelter.

From there on, the forest stretches east and south, silent and aloof, for thousands of miles. To the west the Atlantic is only a short distance away; to the east the forest reaches all the way to the Mountains of the Moon. It is still with you when you cross the Ubangi Chari River, possessively covering the land right down to the water's edge. On the far side of that great river there is still another thousand miles before you reach the river Aruwimi, the wide and proud tributary of the even mightier Congo. After a few hundred miles the Aruwimi becomes less wide but more tempestuous and turbulent,

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and its name changes to the Ituri. This is where the forest becomes the home of the BaMbuti, all the way through to its easternmost fringe, north as far as it is dense enough to cast its protective shade, and for unknown hundreds of miles to the south, where it is still unexplored. This was the home of the Pygmies thousands of years before Europeans thought of Africa itself as anything much more than a myth.

To be back was wonderful, but the changes at Camp Putnam were so drastic that I wondered if I had done the right thing in returning. Now that Pat was dead the name of the district had been changed to Epulu, the name of the river that ran past his old home. And more than the name was changed. A few hundred yards on, past the turning to the old village of Camp Putnam, the road crossed the river by a rickety wooden bridge. The bridge was as rickety as ever, but the forest on either side had been cut down, and backing onto what had once been Pat's estate was an ugly modern motel, built by an enterprising Belgian who hoped to attract tourists. The main attraction was that on the other side of the road the government had established a *Station de Chasse* for the capture of forest animals, particularly okapi, and for the training of forest elephants. Between these two innovations down by the bridge and the old entrance to Camp Putnam stretched the mud houses of the workers, with a few tiny African stores and an establishment proudly calling itself Hotel de Bière. The village of Camp Putnam remained unaltered. Even the old mud mansion still stood.

Not only the changed appearance of Epulu was disconcerting; so was the fact that this new community was attracting Pygmy labor, particularly since Pygmies could be paid even less than other tribes. I found that several of my old friends were working either at the Animal Station or the motel, buying their food with money at the local stores, instead of freely roaming the forest hunting and gathering for their needs. One of them, a youth called Kenge, had

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even become bugler at the Animal Station, where almost every hour the air was shattered with attempts at military bugle calls.

Kenge's father had died a number of years ago, when he was just a boy. His mother had returned to her village, but Kenge had stayed around Camp Putnam. Pat Putnam encouraged him to become a jack-of-all-trades, and Kenge had come to spend more time at the camp than in the forest. He even learned the work of hotel boy, such as pressing clothes for Putnam's guests. He wore shorts and shirt, meticulously scrubbed and pressed with the Camp Putnam flatiron, but usually without buttons. He was very sophisticated and a little conceited, but a good friend to me at all times, and eventually he made himself indispensable.

During my last trip Kenge had been with me practically the whole time; since no women were allowed in the initiation camp, he helped with the cooking, and he had told me how to behave. He tried to interpret my questions to the others, for he had a better idea than most Pygmies of the peculiar sorts of things that Europeans want to know. Such things to an African are often forbidden topics of conversation and even to mention them would be grossly indiscreet or even insulting. Kenge became so familiar with the kind of questions I liked to ask that he would even conduct inquiries in my absence, then tell me what he had discovered about so-and-so's mother's brother's daughter. But for all his sophistication, what he liked best was to take me through the forest, as though he owned it personally, showing it to me with infinite pride.

He had insisted on working for me, and I had fired him regularly every two or three weeks, because, sophisticated or not, he was as unpredictable as any Pygmy, and just as disinclined to do anything he did not want to do. Several times he announced that he was going to get food for my supper, and I would give him the money to buy something special in the village. Of course he would go straight to the beer house and leave me to scrounge what I could. I soon learned

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to raid the Negro plantations myself, and to cut the huge banana leaves on which we used to sleep every night. On such occasions Kenge would return late, when he thought I was asleep, lie down beside me, and very soon begin to work the blanket off my back until he was comfortably covered. If I objected, he merely muttered something that I couldn't understand but that brought titters of laughter from all the other Pygmies lying around the fire.

When I told him he was fired, he took it as permission to take two or three days' holiday. Then one morning I would wake up to find a neatly dressed and unrepentant Kenge squatting over a smoky fire concocting an especially elaborate breakfast for the two of us. In the middle of eating breakfast, without asking me if I had had enough, he would often take the dish and pass it with a grand air to the other unmarried youths sitting hungrily around. If I protested he would simply tell me that I had eaten enough. If I said that I couldn't afford to feed all the bachelors in the camp, he would ask me how much my Leica camera had cost. Since it cost me four hundred dollars, and for four hundred dollars I could live in the Congo for four hundred weeks, there was no effective answer. Kenge knew it, and besides, he was on his own territory. I was a mere intruder.

So when I heard that Kenge had become chief bugler for the Animal Station I was both relieved and sad. I knew I had been saved a lot of headaches, but Kenge was worth them all, and more. I began to look around for someone else who could take his place. Then one morning, just a few days after I had arrived, I woke up, and there he was, a well-groomed Pygmy in buttonless shorts and shirt, a cup of coffee balanced expertly in one hand. I asked him about his bugling, and he said he was tired of having to get up so early every morning, and anyway it hurt his lips. He announced that he was going to work for me again. I told him I could not afford to pay him much, as I wanted to stay a long time and had to make my money last. Kenge looked at me in the frank, open-eyed way of the real

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Pygmy and said he didn't mind. He suggested 40 francs per week, a wage considerably below what he had been earning as a bugler. He said that if I could afford a present when I left, that would be fine. Pygmies have a way of letting you know when they really mean what they say, and this was one of those times. In all the many months that followed, Kenge never once asked me for money, beyond his meager salary. And once when I was short of cash and we were down in the village he spent his own savings to buy food for the two of us.

In the course of my two previous trips I had come to know most of the Pygmies in this area quite well, and the initiation had cemented our friendship, though at the best I suspect they regarded me merely as a rather harmless outsider. I was soon brought up to date on all that happened during the past three years. Kenge said that the hunting group was still hunting and gathering, but that they sometimes came down to the village and spent time there, earning money at the Station de Chasse or at the motel, money which they promptly spent on food, tobacco, and palm wine at the new stores. They still brought in meat for their *BaKpara*, or "masters," and took plantation foods in return. But, encouraged by the administration, they had begun to make their own plantation in the forest. This was the worst possible news; once the Pygmies have plantations their hunting-and-gathering existence is made impossible. They become tied to one place and do not have time to follow the game.

The two busiest workers on the plantation and those who had the finest clearings were Njobo and Masisi. They were two of the most influential hunters of the group. Njobo had killed two elephants single-handed, and two more in company with other Pygmies. He had three wives, but had only one child, a son by his second wife. The son, Nyange, had been a healthy lad when I had last seen him, but now he was crippled with tuberculosis of the leg bone.

Masisi was a relative of Njobo's, and though not such a renowned

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hunter he was blessed with a large family. He had a powerful and penetrating voice, took an active part in any dispute, and usually managed to shout his opponents down, which is one of the chief ways the Pygmies have of settling a dispute. His family were all strikingly fine-looking, with almost Greek-like appearance although of normal Pygmy stature—under four and a half feet.

Most Pygmies have unmistakable features, other than height, that set them apart from the Negroes. Their legs are short in proportion to their bodies; they are powerful, muscular, and usually splay-backed; their heads are round and the eyes are set wide apart; they have flat noses almost as broad as their mouths are long. The head hair grows in peppercorn tufts, and the body hair varies from one extreme to the other—some Pygmies are covered thickly from head to foot. Another characteristic is the alert expression of the face, direct and unafraid, as keen as the body, which is always ready to move with speed and agility at a moment's notice. All these traits are uncharacteristic of the Negro tribes that live in the forest around the Pygmies. These tribes are a rather shifty, lazy lot who survived the ravages of Tippu Tip's slave-traders by treachery and deceit. In the villages you will sometimes find Pygmies who are like this too, but they are scorned by the BaMbuti who have remained in the forest and have refused to be settled.

Masisi's children had finer features, with longer faces and straight noses, and they were slimmer and less stocky. His eldest son, Ageronga, was a fine hunter and often used to take his father's place.

Another member of the same clan, a cousin of Masisi's, was Manyalibo. A traditionalist, he was older than Masisi, and the son of an elder brother of Masisi's father, yet he had less say in everyday matters because he was not such an active hunter. Nor did he have such a fine family. He had two daughters of his own, but no sons, and although he had adopted a distant nephew, Madyadya, the boy was proving a great trial, having been spoiled by everyone, as orphans

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usually are. Both Manyalibo and his wife were great humorists, and they made use of the powers of ridicule to break up some of the more serious disputes, because there is nothing that upsets a Pygmy more than being laughed at.

The oldest member of the group, a member of the same family though even more distantly related, was old Tungana, who had so many children and grandchildren that neither he nor his wife could remember all their names. Strangely enough, he was a progressive Pygmy, and whereas Manyalibo was constantly decrying the Pygmy plantation in his deep bass voice, Tungana thought it was fine. He also thought living near the village was a good thing as there was so much good food to be had for the stealing. And wasn't stealing easier than hunting? I think the truth was that poor old Tungana was getting too old to follow the hunting band with ease, and he was afraid of being abandoned. In fact, he often remained behind in the village when the rest were far off in the forest, and one of his many sons would come in every few days bringing the old couple gifts of meat and forest fruits.

Moke was another of the elders. He claimed a fictional relationship with Tungana because it made him feel at home, since he had no real relatives in the group other than his own children. Moke was the greatest traditionalist of all, and when the Pygmy plantations were mentioned in front of him he just laughed dryly to himself and smiled his toothless smile, saying he had not tasted any Pygmy bananas yet, but if any grew then he would be glad to eat them.

It was Moke who had come with Kolongo and Njobo to cut the marks on my forehead three years earlier. Kolongo had been as much of a traditionalist as Moke, as indeed were all his family, particularly the wizened old mother, Balekimito, and his oldest sister, Asofalinda, who was now a widow and thoroughly enjoying her freedom. Moke had thought of her as a companion for his old age, but Asofalinda liked life as it was, so Moke was still a widower and she a widow.

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About a year after I had left the last time, Kolongo had been killed by a crocodile, and his mother had been so upset she had left the group and her entire family, and gone back to her old village. Her other son, Ekianga, remained as head of the family. It was a different clan but related by marriage to Njobo and Masisi and Manyalibo.

Ekianga was anything but a traditionalist in some ways, though in others he was as conservative as the rest of his relatives. His most untraditional act was to have three wives. He was a very great hunter, and as vain as could be, and he liked imitating the ways of the outside world, where it is a sign of wealth to have many wives. The Pygmies say that one is enough to manage, and judging by Ekianga's constant domestic difficulties they are right. He was hairy, broad-chested, and powerful almost to the point of ugliness, and from somewhere he had learned how to put on a perfect toothpaste smile. He always built his huts a different shape from everyone else's, and in the Pygmy camp near the village his house was the biggest and the smartest of them all, sheltering his entire ménage.

His youngest wife was a beautiful girl called Kamaikan. She was even lighter than most Pygmies, yellowish-brown, instead of the more usual coffee-brown. Her brother and mother also lived with the same hunting group, and there was constant friction, for on marrying her Ekianga had given a "sister"—actually a fairly distant relative—to her brother, Amabosu, in exchange. This exchange is made with the full consent of all parties, but none the less it leads to a division of loyalties, and Amabosu was a very temperamental Pygmy. He was a fine hunter, but he was particularly renowned as the best singer and best drummer and best dancer in the area; for these qualities alone his prestige was enormous. His skinny old mother, Sau, was not without fame of her own. Old and infirm people, amongst the Pygmies, are regarded, not exactly with suspicion or mistrust, but with apprehension. In a vigorous community of this kind where mobility is essential, cripples and infirm people can be a great handi-

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cap and may even endanger the safety of the group. Hence there are numerous legends of old people's being left to die if they cannot keep up with the group as it moves from camp to camp. Like old Tungana, Sau knew this, and although she was still healthy she made sure everyone knew it by taking the most vigorous and unexpected part in any dispute, her sharp acid voice betraying a certain bitterness at the way she was treated. For not only was Sau old, she was also almost alone, with only her son and daughter near her, while everyone else had brothers, sisters, cousins, parents, children and grandchildren.

The Negroes said that Sau was a witch and should be killed or driven away. I used to look at her, squatting over the fire outside her hut, knees hunched up to her chin, staring silently into the middle of the camp. She certainly seemed sinister, as she gazed without blinking, taking in everything that was going on, not moving hour after hour. Her son Amabosu, the great singer, had those same staring eyes, and at times looked even more like a witch than his mother did. This family nearly always built their hut next to mine, and I came to be very fond of them.

If these names are confusing to the reader, they at least help to give a picture of the apparent confusion created in any Pygmy camp by the complicated network of intermarriage and sister-exchange. Essentially a camp is a happy-go-lucky, friendly place, but it is also full of all sorts of little tensions that can suddenly become magnified out of all proportion and lead to full-scale disputes.

This particular group was a rather large one, consisting of the two main families—that of Njobo and Masisi, Tungana and Manyalibo; and that of Ekianga and his relatives, including Sau and Amabosu. But to add to the tensions there was a third group which was constantly trying to attach itself. It was intermarried heavily with the other two, as often happens in an attempt to strengthen bonds and establish an unbreakable relationship.

The leader of this group—although with Pygmies it is always unwise to talk of single “leaders”—was a wily but rather naïve Pygmy by the name of Cephu. Most Pygmies use their real names among themselves, but they all have additional names, in KiNgwana, by which they are known to the Negroes. Cephu always used his KiNgwana name, pronounced just slightly differently from the Negro equivalent, Sefu. No matter what language they are speaking, the Pygmies always retain their own peculiar intonation, which renders the language almost incomprehensible to non-Pygmies.

Cephu’s family was large, but not large enough, even with all his in-laws, to form a hunting group of his own. To do this you have to have at the very least six or seven individual families, each with its own hunting net; only in this way can you have an efficient net-hunt, with the women and children driving the animals into the long circle of nets, joined end to end. Cephu’s group was usually not more than four families, and so he tacked himself onto Njobo and Ekianga. Sometimes this worked out well enough, as Pygmies are great people for visiting their relatives, and one or the other group might be depleted by absences. But at other times they would have a number of families visiting them, and then the addition of Cephu and all his relatives made the whole group far too large and unwieldy. But as he had taken the precaution of exchanging sisters, he could not be refused, and so he would make his own little camp close by connected by a narrow trail. He would follow the others whenever they went hunting and was invariably blamed when the hunt was not a success. At night he and his family kept to themselves, seldom venturing into the main camp. They sat around their own fire, offended, aloof, and rather unhappy, but with hides as tough as that of a forest buffalo and impervious to the most obvious hints and thinly veiled insults. But Cephu was the best storyteller in the forest.

Kenge’s position in the group was an undefined and rather happy one. His father had married a sister of Njobo and joined his wife’s

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group, as often happens. But Kenge was his son by another wife, from a totally unrelated group. By Njobo's sister his father had one daughter, and she was Kenge's only real blood relative in the whole group. This was important, as it enabled him to flirt with almost any of the other girls, with the added spice of its being thought incestuous, because they belonged to his group even though they were totally unrelated.

Since I had been with them before, the group had changed slightly, with a few additions and subtractions. At their suggestion I decided to build my own house in their village camp. It looked as if we were in for a long spell in the village. The camp was in a strategic position between the village of the workers of the motel and Station de Chasse and that of Camp Putnam, near the stores and the beer house, and—even more important—near all the surrounding plantations. Progressive old Tungana said that it was a good site because tourists could drive close by and take their photographs and give them money. Manyalibo, in his dry way, said the only good thing about it was that it was close to the plantations so he didn't have to go far to steal his food. The youngsters liked it because it was near the houses of Negro villagers, where they could go begging for cigarettes, old clothes, and palm wine.

It looked, in fact, as if these Pygmies had become as professional as those that line the roadside at Beni, on the edge of the forest, selling their services to tourists, letting themselves be photographed doing things they would never do in the forest, wearing clothes they wouldn't wear except in a village, even selling the tourist weapons used only by Negroes. But Moke reassured me. His face wrinkled up in smiles, and in his soft, toothless voice he told me not to worry, that we would all be back in the forest long before my house was finished. "That is where we belong," he said, "and we shall return soon. We cannot refuse the forest." He was right, but it was in

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circumstances he could not have foreseen or he would not have been so cheerful.

For the first few days I went out with Kenge and others to the new "Pygmy plantation," to collect the poles and saplings for my house. The plantation was a chaotic tangle of fallen, broken, splintered wood. The Pygmies, armed only with their small honey axes, and a few bigger blades borrowed or stolen from the Negroes, had chopped the smaller trees down at about shoulder height, or rather less. The bigger trees they had attacked higher up, working from a flimsy frame from which they gnawed with their tiny hatchets like rats until a hundred and fifty feet of timber came crashing down. They had evidently caught on to the idea that if they attacked the big trees first, those, as they fell, would bring down a number of smaller ones, saving that much work. The result was that even they found it difficult to pick their way among the debris, and they had no means of clearing it. None the less, they had hopefully thrown down banana stems here and there, hoping for them to take root. Njobo proudly showed me one he had "planted," which was struggling manfully to raise its withered leaves above the debris into the sunshine. The only clearing had been done by Negroes, like myself in search of building materials. Evidently the Pygmies' enthusiasm for their plantation had not carried them very far.

The building of my house followed much the same pattern that characterizes every Pygmy endeavor outside the forest world. It began with a lot of noise and big ideas. Their own camp was built in the manner of a Negro village, mud huts in two lines facing each other. The huts were only about seven feet long and five feet deep, some without roofs, some without walls, none of them really complete. Larger families joined two houses together. Only Ekianga's was different, as might be expected. His house stood at the far end and ran across between the two lines, facing down the middle. It was about twenty feet long and had a fine wooden door that opened and

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closed on hinges. The only other hut to have a door was that of Njobo, which was at the opposite end and also faced down the middle, but not quite so blatantly as Ekianga's. The rest had leaf-covered frames which were simply pulled across the opening to close it.

My house was built opposite Njobo's, with the old witch Sau and her son Amabosu to my right. At first the Pygmies were going to build me the biggest house ever built in the forest—bigger than Camp Putnam. We finally compromised and when the framework of interlaced saplings was finished I had two rooms, each about ten feet square. Even so, I knew it would never be finished, for by then the number of workers was dropping off rapidly; so I suggested mudding the walls of only one room, but leafing the whole roof so that our "village," would have a veranda. This was thought to be a fine idea.

One day I was on my way out to the plantation with Kenge, Manyalibo and Moke, when on the way we met Cephu's handsome nephew, Kelemoke, a very light-skinned youth who had two children even lighter than he. He was wailing and crying, and told us that Cephu's daughter, only a few years old, had just died. He then continued on his way, wailing loudly. I expected the others to turn back, but they continued as though nothing had happened. Kenge made some remark about Cephu's virility and the others snorted with laughter. Kenge had the charming habit of laughing at his own jokes, which seemed funnier to him the more he thought about them, so he was still clapping his side and doubling up and shouting to the forest what a funny joke it was when we reached the plantation. Then he stopped. Although we could see nobody, Moke called out quietly that Cephu's daughter had died, and Njobo and Masisi and a few others appeared from where they had been "working," looking rather cross at being disturbed. Njobo said it was a nuisance. The girl was his wife's niece, and this meant that his wife would keep

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him awake with her wailing and would probably forget to cook for him. He set off at once for the village, grumbling, and Moke went with him. Masisi started one of his loud tirades, saying in his sharp voice that Cephu never looked after his children properly, so it was no wonder they died. This must have reminded Kenge of his joke, because he started laughing again, or perhaps he was laughing at Masisi, but Masisi got angrier than ever and said he was going straight to the village to tell Cephu what he thought of him. He stamped angrily after Njobo and Moke, still shouting deprecating remarks about the bereaved father.

Kenge laughed happily and said that there was going to be a dreadful noise when Masisi got back to the village, so we would do better to stay where we were until it was all over. Manyalibo, who had not said a word, suggested looking for *itaba*, a sweet edible root, and with food our foremost thought we set off.

When we got back to the village in the late afternoon we found everyone sitting around outside their little houses, staring gloomily at nothing in particular. Masisi was still talking loudly, pointing at the sky and over in the direction of Cephu's camp, from which I could hear women wailing, and saying that it was a shame that Cephu should let his children die and cause everyone so much trouble. Tungana mournfully said that he didn't like funerals; the Negroes made so much noise at them. Masisi's younger brother, Mambunia, still a bachelor because one of his legs was crippled with paralysis and he was not able to hunt well enough to support a family, added in shrill falsetto that Cephu was so inconsiderate and such a trouble-maker that he would probably let his daughter die completely—completely and absolutely.

I did not understand what he meant at first, but it provoked an immediate response from Asofalinda, Ekianga's widowed sister. She strode across the camp, marching with long swinging strides to where Mambunia was sitting, his paralyzed leg stuck out in front

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of him. She pointed her skinny hand at him, flinging her arm backward and forward with every step, rhythmically enumerating all the reasons why he should keep his mouth shut. He was a great one at complaining about other people being trouble-makers, but he made more noise than anyone. Besides, one should never say that anyone had died completely unless they had died for ever.

Madyadya, Manyalibo's adopted son, lazily wandered in between them and spitting on the ground said that Asofalinda made a pretty good noise herself. Old Moke laughed noiselessly. Asofalinda strode back to her house and slammed the fine wooden door; Mambunia continued to grumble to himself for a few minutes, and Masisi asked who was going to give him some tobacco.

It seemed that the girl was very ill with dysentery but was not yet dead. The Pygmies express various degrees of illness by saying that someone is hot, with fever, ill, dead, completely or absolutely dead, and, finally, dead for ever.

Unhappily, early the next morning loud wailing from Cephu's camp, a quarter of a mile away, told us that the little girl was now dead for ever. When someone is ill the women relatives will wail, but it is a formal act, perhaps copied from the Negroes for whom it is an obligation. But when someone really dies, for ever, there is among the Pygmies a burst of uncontrollable grief, not only from relatives, but from friends. Even men will weep if they have been close to the dead person. It is a very different sound, and a terrible one, and that is what we heard shortly after dawn.

The funeral took place the same day, directed by the Negroes. I helped with the digging of the grave, but Kenge, Kelemoke, Amabosu, and Masisi's eldest son Ageronga were the chief diggers. The Negroes lent the tools and stood there, giving instructions, and they became impatient and angry when we stopped and climbed out of the grave for a smoke. The young Pygmies laughed and joked, and

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Kelemoke, although he was a close relative of the girl's, was in particularly good humor.

Meanwhile the body had been bathed, scented, wrapped in a white cloth, tied up in a mat and placed on a rough wooden bier. This was strictly according to Negro custom. In the forest the Pygmies would have been unable to get the soap and scent and cloth, for one thing, and would not have had the tools to dig an elaborate grave, for another. The bier was brought to the graveyard, which lay behind the village, in a noisy, wailing procession of Pygmies and Negroes. The body was carefully lowered into the grave. Rather grotesquely they made sure which end was which by grasping the head and twisting it under its covering. The body was oriented, laid on its side in a niche that had been cut under one wall of the grave, and held in place with three stones. Sticks were placed at an angle over it, and these were covered with leaves, then with moist earth, so that no soil should fall on the body. Then the grave was filled, some people throwing in a handful of earth, others just standing and watching. The mother and older sister tried to throw themselves into the half-filled grave and had to be dragged away. Cephu was weeping so bitterly that he had to be supported. Among the Negroes there is a strict ruling about funeral protocol—who is allowed to wail and who is not, who is allowed to support the chief mourner, a purely formal gesture, and so on. But this funeral followed no such rules. Whenever it made no difference to them the Pygmies followed the Negro custom, but the moment they wanted to go their own way they did.

Before the grave was completely covered the women left. The Negroes directed the operation of guiding the spirit safely away by pouring a bucket of water, first into a hole left in the earth above the head of the corpse, then down the grave and off in the direction of the forest, away from the village. To the Negroes the forest is the place for spirits of the dead; they must be kept away from the

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village at all costs. Rather to my surprise this struck the Pygmies as being funny, and they began sniggering. Kenge, carefully dusting the last specks of earth from his spotless shorts, pretended to be severe and said this was no time for laughter. He then promptly cracked a joke at the expense of the Negroes and joined his friends in howls of mirth. When Pygmies laugh it is hard not to be affected; they hold onto one another as if for support, slap their sides, snap their fingers, and go through all manner of physical contortions. If something strikes them as particularly funny they will even roll on the ground, but this time the disapproving looks they got from the Negroes discouraged them.

The Negroes, having restored order, went on to the business of settling who was responsible for the death of the child. To them no death is natural; some evil spirit, some witch or sorcerer, had cursed the girl with dysentery and made her die. They tried to find out who had been fighting in Cephu's camp, who were the enemies of the girl's family. Their concern was a real one, for if the witch was not found, it might strike at them next. But the Pygmies were not co-operative. They were bored and listless. The girl had died and that was that. The Negroes finally gave up and we all returned, washing from head to foot as we crossed over the Nepussi.

Back in the main camp everything was normal. Only in Cephu's little camp was there quiet, subdued wailing from the house of the child's parents. There was some discussion as to whether or not the molimo should be called out. Cephu said in an aggressive manner that it should be, the only trouble being that he didn't have one. Certain families own them; others do not but when in need can borrow them from relatives. Cephu promptly called on Njobo, who reluctantly agreed.

That night, after the evening meal, a small number of men from the main camp went over to Cephu's camp and sat down around the central fire. The women and children were in their huts; some

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talking, some sleeping, some sobbing softly. The men started singing, and after a while I heard their song echoed from far off in the forest and recognized the wistful sound, hollow and ghostly, answering the men with snatches of their own song, sometimes singing its own variations, sometimes breaking off into low, growling, animal noises. The men continued singing as though nothing were happening, and I heard the molimo coming closer, circling around the camp. The women were all quiet in their huts now, and the fire had burned low; the camp was pitch dark except for an occasional glow where the ashes of some family hearth still glowed faintly outside a hut. Even near a village, Cephu never built huts in imitation of the Negroes, and his camp was a typical forest camp, a close little circle of small conical huts, made of a framework of saplings covered entirely with leaves.

The molimo was silent for a few minutes and I looked at the faces of the men around our fire, which was flickering faintly in the middle of the camp. They were all staring at the flames, their eyes wide open but seeing things I had never seen. Only Cephu was lying back in his chair, and he seemed to be asleep. There was a slight movement beside me and I heard the molimo almost in my ear. The sound was gentler and a little sad; it was now singing closely with the men, as if answering their song. Amabosu had joined the group and was on my left, and I saw that he had his hands up to his mouth. Then in the shadows I saw that he was singing into what looked like a long length of bamboo, a sort of trumpet, which was producing that eerie, hollow sound. After a few minutes he stood up. One of Tungana's sons also stood up, and I could see that he was holding the other end of the trumpet. The two danced around the fire, waving the bamboo tube over the flames, Amabosu singing into it all the time and the men's chorus growing louder and louder. Then the two performers dashed suddenly away into the forest behind the camp, and after a few leopardlike growls the trumpet was heard no

more. The men continued singing for about another hour, but as by then Cephu and the rest of his family had gone inside their huts, they stopped abruptly and returned to the main camp.

The next evening the singing was around a fire in the middle of the main camp. After all, the molimo was Njobo's, and Cephu just went to sleep, so why should we go to his camp? A few men from Cephu's family came over, but not Cephu. The singing went on for about four hours, but the molimo did not appear again. The third night it was the same, except that nobody turned up from Cephu's camp.

I thought this a little strange and asked Moke about it. He said that normally one would not call out the molimo for a child; that was why nobody was really enthusiastic, but Cephu had insisted. Besides, the molimo should only be in the forest, not so close to a Negro village. It was all right to sing molimo songs as long as there were no Negroes about, but even then it was not good to sing them near a village. The molimo itself, however, should come out only in the forest, where it belonged, and there was a lot of work attached, as it had to be given food to eat, water to drink, and fire to keep it warm. He stopped there and could not be persuaded to go any further. He just waved his hands in the air and said emphatically that this molimo was empty, meaningless, a farce.

At the end of a week the mourning period prescribed by the Negroes was over; the women, who were meant to wail at sunrise, noon and sunset, stopped wailing. A relative of Cephu's Negro "master" had come over to the village the night before, and the men had had a final burst of singing for him, but with their tongues in their cheeks. Moke told me not to think that this was a real molimo; it was what they did for the villagers to make them think their molimo was the same as the Pygmies'. The villagers also make use of a musical instrument called the *molimo*, but it is meant to represent the

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voice of the clan totem, and it makes only animal sounds—it does not sing.

To end the period of mourning there had to be a feast, a great deal of the food being supplied by the Bantu. I felt that this was really why the Pygmies went through with the Negro funeral ceremony. Everyone was in high spirits. Even Cephu and his group joined the festivities, glad that there was no longer any need for the women to wail, constantly reminding them of a death they would rather forget. It is better to forget the dead quickly, the Pygmies said, instead of making yourself remember them all the time, as the villagers do. When referring to the Bantu in this way, disparaging them or their customs, they used one of two terms, one meaning “animal,” the other “savage”; the Negroes used the same terms about the Pygmies, and there was no great feeling of mutual respect.

At the height of the festivity there was a sudden cry from the roadside, swelling into a burst of wailing that was infinitely more terrible than anything I had heard before. It was certainly worse than when Cephu's poor little girl had died for ever. Then old Balekimito, the much-loved mother of Ekianga and his dead brother Kolongo and of starchy old Asofalinda, was carried into the camp. She had been ill for some time, but as she was an old woman nobody had thought much of it. She had been ill before and not died completely, not even just died. But now she had died completely and absolutely, and her great hulking son, the great hunter, the man of substance with three wives, hairy, ugly Ekianga, was running up and down, his face streaked with tears, beating himself on the head with his fists and crying that his mother was going to die for ever.

Balekimito was carried gently over to her son's house, through the wooden door, and laid on the floor just inside. I went in to see her. The poor old woman was so thin I could see every bone in her weak, tired body; yet when I had last seen her she had been fine, upright, strong, and a powerful old matriarch if ever there was one.

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She looked up at me with eyes that already had a bluish film over them and caught hold of my hand. She said she wanted to die near her son and was glad to be back again. She agreed to take some white man's medicine, and the dispenser from the Station de Chasse was sent for. This was quite a departure, as this family had always resisted more strongly than any the use of modern medicine.

Ekianga was almost beside himself. Gray-haired Asofalinda, no longer stiff and rough, but full of kindness, tried to comfort her younger brother, but she was too full of grief herself. She knelt on the ground beside her mother and wept. The old lady was the only one who seemed fully in control of herself, though the room was filled with wailing men, women and children. When the dispenser came she flickered to life with a burst of her old flame and slapped feebly at him with a bony hand as he pulled gently at her bark cloth to give her an injection, telling him to mind what he was doing. I felt her wince as the needle went in, but she continued looking up and smiling her old sweet smile. She was among her relatives and her friends, and that was all she wanted; she knew the injection would do no good. She held onto me so tightly that I couldn't leave until she finally dozed off; then when her grasp relaxed I quietly left and went out into the sunlight. Everyone was sitting around morosely, almost angrily. Even the little children, whom I had seen playing contentedly through other funerals, were quiet, holding onto their mothers in a frightened way. Everyone was watching Ekianga's fine wooden door, waiting for the end, waiting for old Balekimito to die for ever.

It was only a matter of hours. She never woke up.

The demonstration of grief that followed was no mere formal expression ordained by custom; it was something very real and disturbing. I have seen death in a Negro village where the atmosphere was one of fear—fear of sorcery, of the power of evil that had been unleashed. Here it was quite different. It was not a feeling of

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fear, but a recognition of the completeness of a loss that could never be made good. There was a finality and terrible emptiness in old Balekimito's death which could not be answered, for which there was no explanation, not even through sorcery or witchcraft. For the moment it seemed that the Pygmies, faced with the death of an old and well-loved and respected person such as this old lady, had nothing to cling to, and I was genuinely afraid that some of them would come to harm. Young and old alike crowded around the house, trying to force their way to Balekimito's deathbed. They were even fighting to get in, and once inside they fought to get out. At one point several children came flying out in a frenzy and threw themselves onto the ground, beating it with their arms and legs, kicking and biting at anyone who tried to comfort them. Inside, the commotion was even worse—Asofalinda, looking almost as old as her dead mother, had put a noose around her neck and seemed to be trying to strangle herself, full of remorse at having let her mother die. It took three men to take the noose from her neck, and when they finally tore it from her she ran outside and collapsed on the ground, sobbing her heart out.

Even Moke quietly forced his way into the death room and stayed there for a few minutes, saying nothing, making no sound, while tears rolled down his wrinkled face. Then he went **out again** and helped Asofalinda into the shade. Only Tungana and **his wife**, Bonyo, remained where they were, outside their hut a few yards away. They were too old for the exertion, and they just sat and cried to themselves, unashamed.

I went to my half-finished veranda to get out of the sun and found Kenge and a number of youths sitting around a fire. No matter how hot it is, there always has to be a fire. After a while the rest of the men joined us and sat silently, as though waiting. Then Moke came into the middle of the veranda and started talking, very softly and quietly, so that it was difficult to hear him at all. The

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atmosphere was so tense I wondered if there was at last going to be a real accusation of witchcraft, though from what I had seen the Pygmies had no great belief in such things. But Moke's first words put me at ease. Choking back a little sob, he managed to say in a matter-of-fact way, "She died well."

There was a general nodding of heads. Manyalibo, who was a nephew of Balekimito's, said in his gruff way that everyone should be happy that she had lived so long, happy that she had died so well, and that all this wailing should stop at once. He added that the death was a "big thing," and that it was a "matter for the forest." There was a silence, and, looking around to make sure that there were no women about, Manyalibo announced, "I shall call out my molimo, and we will feast not for a week but for a month, or two months, or even three; we shall feast the molimo and make the forest happy."

Njobo, the great elephant hunter, had the final say. He stirred the fire idly with a stick, sending showers of sparks and ashes up into the warm air. "We have been in the village too long," he said. "We should have gone back to the forest before; that is where we belong. Now we must go back, far away from the village and from the people of the village. It is a bad place."

He said that a few would stay behind to finish the work on my house, but that the rest of us should gather together all the food we could and be ready to move within a couple of days. The next day we would put Balekimito in the ground, and maybe the day after that we would leave.

At this everyone cheered up visibly and began criticizing the women and children who were still pouring in and out of Ekianga's house, beating themselves and crying. Masisi said crossly that they would never behave this way if they were in the forest, and as he talked he raised his voice until he worked himself into a real temper. He stalked out of the veranda and down to the far end of the little

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village, brandishing one hand above his head, telling everyone to stop making such a dreadful noise, that it was not doing any good to anybody. "Crying is a matter for the immediate family," he said. "She was a mother to us all, but for all of us to cry is just too much noise." He clutched his head to illustrate the point, then grabbed a couple of children, one of them his own, and sent them flying. By now his temper was no longer artificial, and the women decided it was wiser to keep out of his way, and left.

As soon as the wailing stopped and the door to Ekianga's house was closed, with only the family inside, the cloud of depression lifted. Everyone started talking about the imminent return to the forest—about where they would go to hunt, where they would go for mushrooms and for fruit and nuts and honey, and where they should make their first camp. All agreed that it should be far away—but not so far that old Tungana could not come.

That night there was a little wailing from Ekianga's house, and a few women both in the main camp and in Cephu's camp were crying to themselves. Every now and then Masisi's sharp voice was raised, telling them all to go to sleep.

The funeral took place the following morning, again conducted by the Negroes. Balekimito was buried next to Cephu's daughter, and once again, when the grave had been filled in and the women had left, the Negroes tried to conduct a council to discover who had been responsible for the death. But the Pygmies were in no mood to play games. They simply walked off after the women, washed themselves perfunctorily in the Nepussi and returned to the camp to start preparations for going back to the forest.

After all, if Balekimito had died she had died well, and there was a lot to do—plantations to raid and food to steal. This was no time to fool around with Negro notions of witchcraft and sorcery; this was a time to get back to the forest as quickly as possible and to hold the biggest molimo festival the forest had ever seen, to make the forest happy again.