AFRICA in Today's World

By C. I. West, M.D.

(Continued from last week)

TWENTY YEARS AGO, when nearly all of Africa was under colonial rule, and when there was little interference with ancient tribal custom, I had the rare privilege of being a spectator at a Gri Gri Bush graduation ceremony. The event took place on Bushrod Island, across the Mesurada River from Monrovia, the capital city of the Republic of Liberia.

It was a beautiful balmy day with a few scattered clouds floating about in the azure blue tropical sky. The traffic on the Mesurada was unusually heavy as hundreds of native dugout canoes made their way toward Vai Town, headquarters of the Vai tribe's paramount chief. Our party was a part of this traffic as we crossed the river from the mainland by native canoe taxie.

We had been extended the high honor of a personal invitation from the paramount chief as an expression of his appreciation for the services which my late brother, Dr. John B. West, and I had rendered his people in our duties with the United States Public Health Service. The entire ceremony was so impressive that after twenty years it remains just as vivid in memory as if it were only yesterday.

There were six highlights of the ceremony that stood above all others. They were, 1. The message of the drums that the Zo was nearing the town with her girls; 2. The chant and rythm of the approaching procession which was picked up and joined in by the anxiously waiting tribal people assembled around the town square; 3. The Zo 'stopping the rain' which suddenly came in torrents at the moment the parade of the Gri Gri girls reached the ceremonial grounds; 4. The dance of the Gri Gri girls around the perimeter of the open town square, to the musical rythm of the Gri Gri alumni and the sounds of the sa sa; 5. The bargaining of the tribesmen with the chief for purchase of each girl; 6. The paramount chief's gift to me and to my brother of a complete ceremonial costume of the Gri Gri graduates.

A sa sa is an African musical instrument made of a dry gourd enclosed in a net of rafia with tiny sea shells sewed into the net. The neck of the gourd is held in one hand, while the other hand grasps the rafia fibers which hang below the net which encloses the belly of the gourd. By a deft tug the sea shells sewed into the net strike sharply against the hollow gourd and produce a melodious note. The sounds produced by hundreds of sa sas is an exciting new sound to the uninitiated, and judging from the hysterical effect upon the native tribes people, it is exciting to the initiated also.

THIS CEREMONY HAD a most auspicious beginning. There were more than a thousand people assembled around the open ceremonial grounds with the paramount chief seated upon his native throne, his six wives standing behind him. Ringing the open area were about a dozen town chiefs of the Vai tribe, each dressed to the hilt in ceremonial splendor, and surrounded by a group of males from his town. The center of the square was occupied by the witch doctor who was performing his tribal duties of driving 'devils' from the town.

The tribal medicine man, adorned in a grotesque costume, was the first to receive the drum message that the Zo was nearing the town. He rushed toward the paramount chief calling attention to the drum message. A spontaneous silence fell upon the scene for a brief moment until the drums were heard in the distance. Immediately the whole crowd, led by the women standing well behind the men who were ringside spectators, broke into a melodious rythmic chant to the tempo of the sa sas which were being deftly handled by the alumni of the bush.

As the Zo and her entourage of about forty Gri Gri girls reached Vai Town the rains came down in torrents. The Zo corralled her young proteges and entered the ceremonial circle. The sa sas beat out a different rythym and the Zo went into her dance and her chant, making gestures of defiance toward the heavens. She stood in the center of the square, stomping the ground violently with her bare feet, making belligerent motions toward the sky with clenched fists and screaming orders for the rain to stop. Frequently she reached into a bag attached to her loin cloth, grabbed a handful of her magic dust and hurled it skyward.

Within four or five minutes the rain stopped and the sun shone more brightly than it had before. Audience reception to this performance was most impressive. I am certain that the powers of the Zo sank deeply into the minds of the spectators when she stopped the rains with her magic.

The ceremony went into high gear immediately. The chief returned to his throne, the people reassembled about the square, and the Gri Gri girls entered the ceremonial grounds behind the Zo and danced around and around the area at a frantic tempo for the next thirty minutes. The girls were then lined around the outside rim of the open area and one by one, each girl came down stage front and center and performed her own improvised dance before the throne of the paramount chief and before each of the gatherings of town chiefs and their entourages.

Before the end of each individual performance there was big palaver in each group of town tribesmen, and runners were dispatched to the paramount chief to place offers for purchase of the performing Gri Gri girl. The father of the girl would make his way toward the throne to confer with the chief as to whom they would chose as the future husband of the girl. When the choice was made, the purchaser would pay forty dollars to the paramount chief, who then divided 50-50 with the father.

Each girl, after sale to the prospective husband was completed, would leave the square and retire to one of the town huts to remove her ceremonial costume and put on the standard garb of a tribal woman.

Upon completion of the ceremony the paramount chief presented a complete Gri Gri costume to both me and my brother. The costume is one of my prize possessions. It is made of rafia straw, richly adorned with decorative coloring, and is a true masterpiece of native art and craftsmanship.

EDITORIAL

IN THE FIRST 100 DAYS of his administration, President Lyndon Johnson clearly demonstrated that when it comes to civil rights issues, he is a man of forceful action, according to Louis Martin, deputy chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

"President Johnson broke new ground in significant appointments of Negro men and women in the first 100 days of his administration," Martin said. "He has thrown the full moral might of his office into the struggle for civil rights legislation and has sought to rally Americans in the South as well as the North in support of full first class citizenship for Negroes."

A review of some of the highlights of the President's first 100 days in office, according to Martin, follows:

1. CIVIL RIGHTS BILL: The strong and unqualified commitment to passage of the legislation has dominated the legislative program. There have been countless meetings, discussions, phone calls with Congressional leaders, minority group representatives, and administration personnel directed to passage of the bill along the basic lines recommended by the House Judiciary Committee.

2. GOVERNMENT EMPLOYMENT: In addition to the historic appointments of Carl Rowan as director of the United States Information Agency and a member of the National Security Council who attends Cabinet meetings, President Johnson named Spottswood Robinson and Leon Higginbotham as federal judges and Mrs. Frankie Freeman as a member of the Civil Rights Commission. There has been continuing emphasis on providing minority groups full and fair consideration in government employment and promotion policies.

3. MEETINGS WITH NEGRO LEADERS: Presidential meetings with the leadership of national Negro organizations, including women's groups, having provided an opportunity to establish cooperative approaches to civil rights problems. The President personally met with the Committee on Equal Opportunity in Housing, Committee on Equal Opportunity in the Armed Forces; Subcabinet Group on Civil Rights, consisting of key top level governmental personnel, and companies participating in the Plans for Progress program.

4. EDUCATION: During this period

(See Page 8)