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THE INNOCENT
ANTHROPOLOGIST

Notes from a Mud Hut



PENGUIN BOOKS

affront to Cameroonian national pride and an affair necessitating the direct intervention of seven different sets of officials.

There came the day, however, when I waved farewell to my friends from the mission, without whom my work could simply not have been done, and was asked for a final 'loan' by Mathieu before climbing into the plane.

The Cameroons had a last card to play. I was obliged to spend the night in the port of Duala where eating a single meal was enough to give me a riotous attack of the vomiting and diarrhoea for which that town is famed. My only comfort was that at least I had both a lavatory and bidet, so that I could escape that agonizing choice imposed by an English bathroom. The next morning I had to be virtually carried to the plane.

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Most air journeys are nasty, brutish and long. The final stage of my fieldwork was made even more so by the fact that I was obliged to sit bolt upright, sipping like a maiden aunt from a bottle of Vichy water, all attention focused on my heaving stomach while something like a French 'Carry On' film was played at high volume for my delectation. The Sahara slipped away below.

It was at this point that I had the bright idea of stopping over in Rome where I had to change planes. I had a beatific vision of a quiet, cool room with fresh, slightly starched sheets. The shade of a leafy tree would fall on the bed; there might well be a calming fountain.

Once on the ground, I found that I could no longer carry my luggage and was obliged to deposit it in the left-luggage office. I watched my precious field notes and camera disappear into its gaping maw with a sceptical disbelief in their reappearance and in my lunacy at parting with them. Gripped firmly in my hand was my somewhat travel-soiled wardrobe. The trousers given me by my local missionary's wife attracted the curious stares of the elegant Romans. My wild-eyed and haggard look led *carabinieri* to follow me with their gaze.

I found my room. It was hot and noisy; all the lights buzzed; the price was obscene. This seemed about the right relationship between the desired and the attained. I settled down to sleep.

One of the least appreciated differences between an African village and a European city is in the passage of time. To one used to the regular pulse of farming life, where one thinks in seasons and the days have no names, urban dwellers seem to flash past in a frenzy of frustrated endeavour. I paced the streets of Rome like a Dowayo sorcerer whose unearthly slowness sets off his ritual

role from everyday activities. Café menus offered so many possibilities that I felt unable to cope: the absence of choice in Dowayoland had led to a total inability to make decisions. In the field, I had dreamed endlessly of orgiastic eating; now I lived on ham sandwiches.

Having been warned repeatedly that I would quite inevitably be robbed, beaten and looted on the streets, I had been at pains to have only enough money on me to cover the cost of ham sandwiches. Perhaps it was no surprise to find on returning to my buzzing hotel room that the door had been levered from its hinges and all my possessions carried off: air-ticket, passport, money, even the remnants of my Dowayo wardrobe had vanished without trace. The management were adamant about their lack of responsibility. My West African abilities to rage and scream were greatly admired but left the situation unchanged. A quick survey of the one intact pocket in my outfit revealed that I had about a pound in the world. In such circumstances, the next move is quite obvious. I went to a café and, dispensing with ham sandwiches, ordered a beer and reflected on my plight. The proprietor was huge and quizzical. He established my nationality, my occupation, my marital status. He showed me a well-thumbed photograph of his large and much-loved brood. He had, he revealed, been a prisoner of war in Wales. The girls there, he affirmed bashfully, had been very passionate. Soon I was telling him all.

'So,' he summed up in an odd Romano-Celtic accent, 'you have no money, no ticket, no identification.' I agreed. 'Then I lend you ten thousand lire.' He slapped some notes on the bar. I ordered a ham sandwich. In my bemused state, such incredible generosity seemed no more unreasonable than the disaster that preceded it. I was back in fieldwork gear.

My benefactor rang the British Embassy while I demurred at further involvement with such persons, picturing an endless tour of Rome in search of stamped documents that would be plucked from my grasp by *ragazzi* before I could attain the plane. It was all arranged. First, I must go to the police to make a statement, then the Embassy would arrange for me to be repatriated. The very word seemed to imply shipment home in chains.

At the police station were assembled a vast horde of outraged,

despairing and desolate tourists of all nationalities who had, it seemed, suffered the harsh attentions of Roman youth. The British, for some reason, were patiently sorted by a bored and indifferent policeman and placed in the same room as the Germans. The French were assigned, we noted with rage, a room that was both larger and cooler. A man with a strong Bradford accent addressed us all. 'It were Beryl I felt sorry for,' he announced. 'That's my wife.' He indicated a demure matron in tweed. 'She couldn't leave the camp site but they thought she were on the game. Men coming up to her, honking their horns. She had to throw plums at one bloke.' We regarded her speculatively. 'Then these two young fellers come up behind us on their motorbike, broke the window of the car at the back with a hammer and carried off us luggage like we wasn't there.'

The Germans demanded a translation, thinking that some important secret was being kept from them. I attempted to explain but had to give up since they seemed to be a group from a part of the Tyrol where there were no vowels.

Glutted on ham sandwiches, I sank back into fieldwork gear. At length I was led to an office deep underground and interviewed by a policeman. 'You were robbed at the railway station?' 'No, my hotel.' He grunted and made a note. 'What you lose? I listed my possessions. 'How much cash?' 'About £100.' He shambled off.

Another officer appeared and, without explanation, deposited a wild-eyed, implausibly hirsute man in chains in the chair across from mine and departed. The man leaned forward and fixed me with a crazed stare. We both knew that the moment I looked away he would be at my throat. He stared at me. I stared back. Neither spoke. After an eternity my policeman reappeared, ignored the hirsute manacle and handed me a statement to sign. The elegant Italian was not hard to comprehend. It declared roundly that I had been robbed of £1000 at the railway station. Feeling that I had been schooled to sterner stuff than this, I blithely signed.

I was now ready to assault the Embassy. Here again was a band of ravaged tourists attended by a stern and tight-lipped female consular officer. She was lecturing a very young and dirty

girl in torn jeans. 'This is the third time you have been robbed at the railway station. We cannot keep on giving you passports. I shall telephone your parents.' The debauched waif sniffed. 'They don't care do they?' The consular officer compressed her lips in grim disapproval. 'Who was it this time?' 'Well we met these two boys . . .' The disapproving lady cut her off with a wave of the hand. 'I am bound to phone your parents. Wait here.' She departed, leaving us all feeling a mixture of sympathy, embarrassment and curiosity. The girl eyed us defiantly. The man ahead of me said something to her and she laughed. They went and sat down on a seat by the window while I dropped yet again into suspended animation.

Eventually the prim officer returned. 'Come here. I have agreed with your parents to advance you the fare back to England but I cannot permit you to remain here any longer. You will leave tomorrow.'

We all tensed, sensing that this was no blushing violet who would passively take such treatment. To our amazement, she smiled sweetly. 'That's all right, luv. This bloke' — she indicated the man who had been speaking to her — 'has invited me to stay on his yacht.' Together they swept out to our thunderous, though silent, applause.

My own processing was more routine. With hardly more than a glance of distaste at my trousers and a pout of disapproval, my passage was arranged. I took the precaution of adjusting my version of events to fit that contained in the statement.

So it was that eighteen months after my departure I arrived back in England, possessing a pair of torn trousers, seven smeared and stained exercise books of notes on West Africa, a camera clogged with sand and a statement in Italian. I had lost forty pounds and was scorched a dark brown, and acquired vivid yellow eyeballs. I confronted the immigration officer.

'Passport?'

'I'm afraid I've lost my passport.' I handed him my statement in Italian. He narrowed his eyes. 'You *are* English, sir?'

'Oh . . . ah . . . yes.'

'You would be prepared to sign a statement to that effect, sir?'

'Certainly.'

'All right. On your way.' He waved me through. It couldn't be that easy. I suspected a trap. I looked cunning. 'You mean I don't have to shout, threaten you or offer you money?'

'On your way, sir.'

A paradox that has much exercised mathematicians is that of the Einsteinian space traveller. Having journeyed at great speed for several months around the universe, he returns to Earth to find that whole decades have passed. The anthropological traveller is in the reverse position. He goes away for what seems an inordinately long period to other worlds, ponders cosmic problems, ages greatly. When he returns, only a few months have elapsed. The acorn he planted has not become a great tree; it has scarcely had time to put forth a tentative shoot. His children have not grown to adulthood; only his closest friends have noticed he has been away at all.

It is positively insulting how well the world functions without one. While the traveller has been away questioning his most basic assumptions, life has continued sweetly unruffled. Friends continue to collect matching French saucapans. The acacia at the foot of the lawn continues to come along nicely.

The returning anthropologist does not expect a hero's welcome but the casualness of some friends seems excessive. An hour after my arrival, I was phoned by one friend who merely remarked tersely. 'Look, I don't know where you've been but you left a pullover at my place nearly two years ago. When are you coming to collect it?' In vain one feels that such questions are beneath the concern of a returning prophet.

A strange alienness grips you, not because anything has changed but rather because you no longer see things as 'natural' or 'normal'. 'Being English' seems as much a pose as 'being Dowayo'. You find yourself discussing the things that seem important to your friends with the same detached seriousness that you used to discuss witchcraft with your villagers. The result of this lack of fit is a brooding sense of insecurity only heightened by the vast numbers of rushing white people you meet everywhere.

Anything connected with shopping seems inordinately difficult.

The sight of the shelves of a supermarket groaning with superabundance of food induces either nauseous revulsion or helpless dithering. I would either go three times round the store and give up the attempt to decide, or buy vast quantities of the most luxurious goods and whimper with the terror that they would be snatched from me.

After months of isolation, polite conversation is extraordinarily hard. Long silences are taken as brooding displeasure while people in the street react quite badly to the sight of a man quite openly talking to himself. Adjusting to the rules of interaction also poses problems. When the milkman left unordered milk on the step one day my reaction was to race after him shouting and raging after the West African fashion. I believe I may even have seized him by the collar. The poor man was greatly disconcerted. By West African rules I was merely being firm, by English rules an insufferable lout. Seeing oneself suddenly in this light can be a humbling experience.

Some small things give enormous satisfaction. I became addicted to cream cakes; a friend conceived a hopeless passion for strawberries. Running water and electric light were frankly incredible. At the same time, I developed odd quirks. It troubled me to throw away empty bottles or paper bags; in Africa they were so valuable. The finest moment of the day was waking up with a start and feeling a warm flood of relief to be no longer in Africa. My notebooks lay neglected on the desk; I felt a deep revulsion to even touching them which lasted for months.

One of the strangest psychological experiences was the arrival of the trunk of pots that I had dispatched what seemed like months before. I had wrapped them carefully in Dowayo cloth and packed them in a metal cabin trunk plastered with stickers declaring the fragility of the contents in four languages. Zauuidbo had been appalled at such meanness. Why did I not give them to the villagers? It was known that I was quite rich enough, like the woman who made the pots themselves, to buy gaudy enamelware from Nigeria. My wives would surely not be pleased when I handed them pottery from a village.

It was strange to see the trunk that had once stood in my hut lying in a dank, cold shed in London. Its shape had been com-

pletely transformed. On dispatch it had been rectangular; now it was almost wholly spherical. Large boot marks on the lid attested to the agent that had worked this wonder. I had to prise off the lid with a tyre lever. It is always odd to receive a package from oneself: it smacks of split personality, especially when the person who sent it is so rapidly becoming alien to him who receives it. My friends without exception admired the elegant simplicity of the pots. What a pity I had spoiled them by using them; could I not have bought some cheap imported pans and saved these as too beautiful to use? It would have been nice to introduce them to Zauuidbo and let them fight it out. The returned fieldworker accepts both positions, identifies with neither.

It is impossible, of course, at such moments not to try to draw up a balance sheet of profit and loss. I had certainly learnt a lot about a small and relatively unimportant people of West Africa. Finishing fieldwork is always a matter of definition, not of fact. It would have been quite possible to go on for another five years in Dowayoland, albeit with diminishing returns, without exhausting the scope of a project aimed at 'understanding' a people so different from ourselves. But more general competences always lie beneath the particular. Henceforth I was to find that the monographs of which anthropology as a subject is composed would appear to me in quite different light. I would be able to feel which passages were deliberately vague, evasive, forced, where data were inadequate or irrelevant in a way that had been impossible before Dowayoland. All this makes the work of other anthropologists more available than it had ever been before. I also felt that in attempting to understand the Dowayo view of the world I had tested the relevance of certain very general models of interpretation and cultural symbolism. On the whole they had stood up pretty well and I felt much happier about their place in the scheme of things.

Purely personally, there had also been great changes. In common with many other fieldworkers, my health had been shattered for some time to come. My vague liberal faith in the ultimate cultural and economic salvation of the Third World had received a sharp knock. It is a common trait of returned fieldworkers, as they stumble around their own culture with the

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clumsiness of returned astronauts, to be simply uncritically grateful to be a Westerner, living in a culture that seems suddenly very precious and vulnerable; I was no exception. But there is something insidiously habit-forming in anthropological fieldwork. The ethnographic hangover is no more effective as aversion therapy than any other. Several weeks after my return I phoned the friend whose conversation had sent me to the field in the first place.

'Ah, you're back.'

'Yes.'

'Was it boring?'

'Yes.'

'Did you get very sick?'

'Yes.'

'Did you bring back notes you can't make head or tail of and forget to ask all the important questions?'

'Yes.'

'When are you going back?'

I laughed feebly. Yet six months later I returned to Do-wayoland.