

WEIRD FUNERALS OF AFRICA'S KINGS

BY GERALD A. RODERICK



~FUNERAL RITES~

THE old king of Totoquell was dead. It was in the Liberian hinterland, four days back from Monrovia, a region where the government levies no taxes, where the native African chiefs reign supreme, where the only statutes are the laws of the bush. A couple of English prospectors, an English rubber trader and an American missionary compose the foreign population all the way back to the French frontier. There is no part of the west coast of Africa so lightly touched by the white man, for even the occasional government officials who visit the region are black. In all the towns the babies yelled at my approach and the children fled in terror if I walked toward them.

While King Wobeh's star was in the ascendency death came out of the foggy bush and laid its hand upon him. A famous mullah man was called to make incantations and the "sand cutter" brought out all his paraphernalia of divination and peeped impressively into the future. That which Wobeh really needed, a good physician, does not exist in that region. The mullah and the "sand cutter" gave an unfavorable prognosis, so the suffering king was prepared for his departure in the manner prescribed by the law of the bush.

Secretly and in the dead of night he was carried back into the bush to an obscure "half town" called Goomah, no woman being allowed to know his whereabouts. Courtesy to the mullah and the "sand cutter" demanded that Wobeh should promptly pass into the unknown, but the old man held on to life with his characteristic tenacity. It was several weeks before the news was quietly brought to Totoquell that its founder was dead. The information was passed on to Boporo and King Sow came over to take charge of the town until all its palavers were settled.

The funeral of an African chief follows the law of the bush implicitly, but the details vary in different parts of the west coast. The proceedings in this case extended over a period of about three weeks.

First Wobeh's body was removed from the hut where he had died and placed in an open kitchen in Goomah. These kitchens are merely large huts without walls, or, rather, with walls about three feet high. The roof is of thatch and the floor of clay. In the center of one of these kitchens a shallow grave was dug. Then the feet were bound together, the arms were extended down the body and the hands bound together by means of a strong stick placed between hands and feet, the body was placed in the grave and lightly covered. After it had lain there for two days it was taken up by night and carried to Totoquell, where it was again placed in a shallow grave, but in a hut where no woman could bring ill luck by looking upon it. The law of the bush shuts out all women from any approach to the dead. Then the family and the town began to make ready for the obsequies, formal notices were sent out to all the big kings within two days' walk, in order that they might come (with gifts) and assist Wobeh's spirit into rest.

The funeral continued for eight days. First the body was again lifted from the grave and "laid out" in an open kitchen carefully screened. The king's women were then segregated in another kitchen and intrusted with the duty of making great lamentation. Then the head of the "devil bush"—he is a great functionary in West Africa—came into the village to announce the king's death—a performance on a par with the formal notification given to a presidential nominee by a committee from a national convention. The "devil bush" is a sort of combination of secret society and a boys' boarding school. It is a collection of huts hidden away in the bush which women must avoid or pay the penalty of death. Here are collected most of the boys of the community and they remain in seclusion for a period varying from three to six years, being taught some sense and much nonsense. The grip of superstition is so strong that the head of the bush becomes a great man in the tribe and death is the penalty for any woman who looks upon his face. Totoquell's "devil" preceded his entrance into the town by an unearthly yell, which was the signal for all the women and girls (and every man not a member of the "devil bush") to secrete themselves. Then with a series of ventriloquistic yells he came into the center of the town, announced the death of Wobeh, ordered the funeral to proceed and vanished into the bush. Then the real noise began.

large enough to be heard. Meanwhile for two days and nights the men of the town made it lively for the spirits of evil that were supposed to be hovering in the bush that surrounds the village. Guns heavily charged with powder were fired at intervals throughout the entire time, causing the evil shapes to take to flight. Most of the night was given over to the beating of drums, the women and younger men dancing in procession all over town.

When night closed in on the scene and the moon began to shed its soft light through hazy clouds the night's dancing began. There was no undercurrent of sadness in it; everybody was literally out for a good time. The dancers were drummed up in groups, the drummers shuffling all through the town to organize a procession. A second crowd was gathered under the leadership of a man with a string instrument made from a calabash, and eventually a third group shuffled along to the tune of a calabash string with iron rings, the sound being that of a gourd half filled with dried peas.

The succeeding day was one of the most eventful of all. Before sunrise the men of the town brought large stones to the grave and walled it in, making an enclosure about six feet wide and 10 feet long. Dozens of empty gin bottles were brought and placed all around the grave—a very common custom on this coast. The mound was then leveled down and the entire enclosure covered with stones and wet sand. At the head they placed a couple of small ivory tusks, a rice bowl containing Wobeh's silver ring and some kola nuts, two pitchers and a small brass kettle. Across these was laid an unshathed sword. The fixing of the grave was not completed until they had brought a small jug of rum and poured a little of it into each vessel. The thirst of Wobeh's spirit was apparently more easily quenched than had been that of the man in life—and this enabled the men about the grave to put the greater part of the rum to better use.

After the grave had been properly arranged the town assembled to witness the significant ceremony of killing the white chicken. The principal nephew of the late king knelt on the grave and held the chicken's head above Wobeh's head. King Sow made a long speech and then different members of Wobeh's family gave the chicken messages to take to his spirit. This part of the ceremony was very solemn and impressive. It was clear that they implicitly believed that their messages would reach their destination.

Then the nephew pulled off the chicken's head and threw the body down on the grave. Curiously enough, the headless chicken fluttered around until it reached the head of the grave and then seemed to be trying to bore its way down to the king. It then fluttered away, the

strong crowding each other in their efforts to watch every movement. When it finally ceased its struggles there was a chorus of "Ah!" followed by some excited talking. It was explained to me that when a chicken dies with its feet in the air it is a sign that the nephew has been true to the king and has not meddled with his women. In this case the chicken had died on its side.

Then another chicken was brought for another nephew to kill. It likewise died on its side and there was another chorus of excited grunts. A third chicken was killed by a niece, with the same result; but the fourth, killed by another niece, stopped with its feet in the air. The crowd went wild, caught up the girl and marched around the town with her on their shoulders. Wobeh had one relative that had been true.

This ceremony was followed an hour or two later by that of eating the chickens, together with rice cooked in yellow palm oil. The food was placed at the head of the grave and Wobeh's head wife presided over the pot. All the children squatted about on the grave and the other relatives were assembled around it. King Sow had a good many remarks to make before he called up the eldest son and motioned for him to take the handful of rice which the widow had held out. Before eating it he made certain promises relative to peace in the family. Each of the relatives was called out in turn and required to go through the same performance. Old King Sow kept his ears open and whenever he was not satisfied with a given promise he arose and cross questioned the relative like a country lawyer until he made him promise what he wanted. Parts of this ceremony were exciting; at times there were outbursts of laughter at one of Sow's

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