Chapter 9

The famous islands of the Bijagos heathen, the fertility of their soil, and the character and industry of their inhabitants

The situation of these islands leaves nothing to be desired, being what the poet Lucian called "of luxuriance the most luxurious", for divine favour has made them the best situated islands in all this Ethiopia. Their aspect is the most charming and pleasant, the flat countryside being open to view /f.33v/ and covered throughout with groves of high palm trees, as well as being crossed by a number of creeks entering from the sea, whose sands are, in recollection, attractive above all others. The perennial springs of the countryside have the same quality. (a) In sum, these islands are a paradise. Yet they belong to the worst people in Ethiopia. The land is fertile, and produces in large quantities a variety of crops, such as milho, macarras, mafafas, rice, beans and wood-yams.

But let us discuss the main point. It must be understood that there are no heathen more astute than these. Hence what mainly occupies them is the art of war. Excellent warriors, they have spread terror and desolation among all those to the windward. They have destroyed the Biafas and even burnt the house of Our Lady of Guinela in 1610, and they have made large-scale assaults on Biguba. This is the reason why the preaching and propagation of the Gospel has had limited success in these parts, for although many of the kings wish to revere the true King, they fail to do this because of the daily outrages and hardships committed and inflicted by the Bijagos. An account has been presented to His Majesty. (b) Yet perchance the covetousness of the majority of these in Guinea would otherwise have obstructed the achievement of a successful outcome. For it has been necessary to contend with an opinion spread by those least devoted to the eternal interests of such a number of souls, souls who might with great ease have been brought from darkness into light. What has been said is this: "Upset the Bijagos and Guinea is finished!" As if such an evil people were the fundamental substance of Guinea! The canard only serves as a snare and as eternal fetters for many souls who, being directed only by temporal interest, have lost eternity. This piratical lot (the Bijagos) are here in large numbers, all of them living on loot, unjustly, which is precisely how they collect the goods. Whatever they come upon at sea they grab, even if it belongs to their own people; and so, once they get into their canoes, they plunder the Biafas,

(a) Although these are mainly wells containing small quantities of water, dug in marshy ground, or near the sea in the sand-dunes.

(b) Or not actually presented, because, as it happened His Majesty in full splendour of royalty accepted the truth of what was alleged. (?)
the Falupos, the Papels or Burames, the Balantas and the Nalus. To sum up, those not aboard the Bijagos fleet cannot escape their claws. They themselves say that the sea has no king, just as they have no king, even on land.

When they go on these raids, their boats are the sort called canoes, which are constructed out of a single piece of timber. Canoes ride level with the water, but it is the habit of the Bijagos to raise (the sides) with two planks we call false-sides, fitted on top, so that the canoes can ride deeper and carry more robbers and loot. A canoe normally carries 22-24 men, each rowing; and as well as the men it carries their weapons. These consist of a long spear, and some canhacos with iron points shaped like large barbs and about the size of a small spit, which they hurl while keeping the spear in their hand and using it like a sword, and also shields or bucklers of thatch, larger than ours, through which only a shot can pass. They are so adroit that, using only the spear, they can protect themselves from stones thrown by two or three men, without being hit by a single stone, and can keep this up. They also use bows and arrows but not very often, only when essential. The captain stands at the prow, flourishing his shield and spear, and chanting (war-songs); and this soldiery of hell row to the rhythm of his chant. If they encounter two or three canoes from other points on the coast they do not avoid them, even if they are war-canoes, unless they are (overwhelmingly) stronger. Hence they say that all other nations on the sea are their chickens, which is just what the French scum say nowadays of the Portuguese. For the Bijagos, being followers of the French, tread in their footsteps in committing outrages.

Now that I have mentioned the French, I will report a facetious remark made by one of them on the (Windward) Coast, concerning the wealth of the Catholic rulers of Portugal. When a native of the Canary Islands said to him that he was not leading a good life and was therefore risking his salvation, which is the true riches, the Frenchman replied: "What has this got to do with salvation? I am trying to look after myself, and I go to sea to do this since I cannot on land." Then he added: "For what reason should I stop doing this?" The islander replied that what he did was against the seventh commandment, 'thou shalt not steal.' The retort was this fatuous comment. "Haven't we French and your king the same father, Adam? And did Adam's will make the King of Portugal the only heir to gold, silver and everything else? Did it deny us the whole lot, though we (too) are his legitimate children? We go to sea to overturn any will giving such an unfair disposition, since a legitimate heir cannot be passed over and excluded by a genuine probate."

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(c) Facetious saying of a French pirate on the Guinea Coast.
(d) Adam made all his heirs. Ita thus according to Joam de Padilha, familiaris of close acquaintance of the said Álvares.
And so they say that the sea has no king, neither can it be disposed of by /f. 34v/ will. Since what arrives on beaches belongs to the first who seizes it, why not the same for what is found at sea? Especially since it involves much more trouble, including, as well as difficulties of many sorts, a constant risk to life. If the Portuguese call them 'chickens', they retort: "You are Frenchman's chickens".

When the Bijagos are making their preparations ashore for a voyage, the captain begins by consulting some magic medicines at the same time as he states the intended locality. If the results are as he wants them to be, he kills some cows, as many as are required for his men, then he announces (details of) the journey, and the warriors who are going to go with him eat the meat. But the Bijagos are so credulous regarding omens(e) that if anyone falls into the sea after they leave, or if they hear certain birds calling, or they hear certain other sounds which they regard as a bad omen, they return home. But if nothing obstructs them along their route then when they reach the place which is to be attacked, and they reach it always at night, they send out spies who know the entrances and exits of the place like natives. Such spies are sometimes natives of the land who have been captured when young and who have continued to live among them willingly and have been permitted to take a wife, if they deserved this. When the message comes back that the inhabitants are asleep or engaged in feasts and off their guard, the Bijagos enter the place and set fire to the houses, all of which consist only of thatch. The inhabitants rush out in order not to be burned and the Bijagos are ready for them outside, so that when the poor wretches emerge they kill them if they resist and make captives of all they can. What happens to the village depends on the course of the battle and the number of people involved. If it resists fiercely, the enemy forces withdraw very cautiously until they reach the canoes they left in the sea, with three or four men remaining in each to bring them ashore when required. When the Bijagos return victorious with their plunder, their wives and the rest of the people come to help them to unload the spoils of war, which they then offer to their chinas in gratitude. The chinas are mostly horns of cows, sheep or other animals, covered with hens' feathers and splattered with blood.(f)

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(e) A characteristic of generally all idolaters, such as the Manes, etc.
They call these events correr (?)

(f) The idol of the Bijago heathen. It is a bundle of sticks the thickness of a Bengal staff, and a palm-span and a half long. They kill a hen over it, anoint it with the blood, and place the feathers on it. Similarly with a goat, cow, etc.
When this ceremony is over they go to their houses to rest, eat and drink, and dance. The next day they divide and share the booty, forming it into three parts. The owner of the canoe who provided the necessary victuals for the voyages takes one part, the war-captain who killed the cows takes another, and the last part goes to the men who organised and carried out the seizure of prizes during the action (?). These Bijagos are so cruel that if, as they are laying hands on /f.35/ a black, two or three of them grab him and cannot come to an agreement, then they split him down the middle to give each a piece. Those captives brought back to the land (of the Bijagos) are sold to Portuguese ships which regularly visit their ports to trade. But if a captive has no buyer because he is a cripple or very old, they bring him back ashore and as soon as he steps out on the beach they spear him, once or a hundred times (as necessary), until they kill him.

The normal trade of the blacks is in cows, red cloth, copper kettles, iron, coral, cloaks, caskets and other trinkets, horses’ tails — which they originally valued so much that they even used to give a black for three of them — brass rattles and bells. Yet nowadays in this Ethiopia things are very different because of the many Portuguese who make a living here. They do this by such efforts and with such trouble to themselves that, if they instead strove in the direction of gaining eternity, less effort would with doubt bring them greater and more certain profits. Consider the watches that are necessary on a ship by day and night, the unceasing quarrels of the sailors during voyages, at times their desertions, the perils from pirates, and so on.

Let us proffer some advice (on how to behave in Guinea). Always act with courtesy, otherwise all will be lost. Never make a gesture which the heathen can imagine to be derogatory. If you are disparaging, if you talk loudly, if you are irritated, since the black is suspicious by nature he will think it is directed at him, even if you are referring to another person or another matter. In this place one must be/well-tempered clavichord: just a

(g) Nowadays they generally use a canhaco on a slave who is going to escape after first ascertaining that he is their own property. If he is jointly owned they sell him and divide the money.

(h) This is not common.
the strings vibrate in the air, to make sweet music to these heathen, so
must good humour vibrate from the eyes, the tongue and above all the hands
— for the black loves him who gives most. Nowadays should a great lord
give an Ethiopian ten of anything and should his slave offer a trifle more
— the latter is the better man. As for the devil, let him offer not a scrap
more and he will outbid the lord and the slave. You are given no thought by
these people unless you reward them or unless they hope you will — even though
in Guinea there is no room for hope. (i) Here the verbs are not conjugated in
the future tense but are entirely in the present. : Do [I give] not Dabo
[I will give]. If you promise something in the future they disregard the
condition. They always understand the promise to be of now, (j) so that if you
fail to act accordingly, they mark you out as a liar, as daily /f.35v/ we see
happening. Moreover they never understand our requests. If you ask them for
something, they say they cannot understand you; yet if you offer them
something, no matter how uncommon the term is, they always understand its
meaning. (k) Suppose we are making a bargain. The seller starts off with a
storm of preposterous and wild talk, so that one is willing to suffer a
considerable loss merely to avoid the sight and sound of the savage's face.
Observe the pleadings that make the black so persistent. If you do not buy
from him you are a bad man, the worst man in the world — though I reckon that
the worst man is he who buys Bijago loot. (l) Since the strings of disharmony
may be played, wine must be in evidence from morning to night. Wine is the

(i) General characteristic of our age.
(j) The heathen of Ethiopia only know the present tense.
(k) Their verb has no imperative or future tense.
(l) Dub. (?) Should one buy loot from heathen pirates or robbers?
    Surely not. Then why is the piratical trade of the Bijago tolerated?
    Vide et nota tu qui legeris aliquando haec [See and note you who
    read this here.]
worst enemy of Guinea, for if the blacks know that you have it and are denying them it, then you have a quarrel on your hands. You are permitted to deny them anything except wine. To bring them to conclude a deal it is necessary to behave generously. Hence, of the cargo which the ships bring, a third is intended as gifts. But despite all these little ways of keeping the blacks sweet, one has to be careful about one's speech, for they are so evil that they take offence at the smallest thing.

In connection with this I want to say what it is about these heathen that enables us to entertain the notion that they like us. Almost everyone holds that if they are attached to us it is an attachment to our goods alone. If the native of these parts is a friend to the white man's property (m) he is also a friend to him, because, as long as the white man is about, there is always hope of acquiring and possessing some of his material good things. But if the heathen shows little interest in our goods, be on guard against living near him for this is the surest sign that he does not want our friendship. This is what is generally believed here on the subject of the savages' goodwill, to wit, that whatever goodwill they have towards us is always at our own expense. [f.36]

(m) These heathen in Guinea only love the Portuguese to the extent that they value his money.