Chapter 10

The way of life of these heathen and their customs, also a discussion of their superstitions and idolatry

As I said above, these heathen are more devoted to the art of war than to anything else. The men have no interest in life other than the amount of plunder which arises from the success or otherwise of their wars, as we shall continue explaining below. (In other respects) their way of life is the same as that of the other heathen. It is on the women that everything depends. They are the ones who work the land, after cutting down and burning the bush; and they build the houses. In general, in the same way as slaves do for us, the women look after the men, and when the latter are on land they have nothing to do except tap wine and have a good time. The Bijagos are thoroughly untrustworthy. They have a common trick involving slaves. They pretend they wish to sell them, but when they put them aboard (Portuguese launches) they do so in such numbers that it enables them to kill the crew and seize the launch. On land they act in a disorderly fashion, and for no good reason they treacherously kill each other. If guests come to visit them, before the guests can make their farewells the Bijagos are sending out canoes to lie in wait for them along their route, to capture them. On land the Bijagos never steal from each other. They have no kings; the most powerful among them acts the king. Adultery, witchcraft and murder are punished by enslavement, and they sell their own people (for these crimes). They do the same with those captured in the wars which take place within the islands, and they spare no-one. Among the men of power, if a husband finds his wife with another man he kills them both and puts their heads on stakes near the entrance to his house. When men are young and have little wealth, in order to get a wife they give their (future) father-in-law two black slaves in exchange for a girl; and if it comes about that she commits adultery or leaves her husband, he can sell her. Women whose husbands die marry warriors renowned for their daring, and such men acquire many wives and a large number of war-canoes, and so become important and powerful. Apart from what has already been said about these canoes, it should be noted that they are extraordinarily light, because they are made of such /f.36v/ small amounts of wood. The sides are about the thickness of a thumb, and the bottom about that of two fingers.

The men all wear goatskins. The women, although their only upper garment is a dressing of ochre, powdered or dissolved in palm oil, remain decent with a grass-skirt which hangs from the waist to near the knees. All of the Bijagos eat in a disgusting manner. Instead of eating in the house
they eat out-of-doors, in the streets, where they can be seen; anyone passing can join in if they so wish. Hence the tagarra, or gourd, from which they eat is common to all. The man of standing, the slave, the child, all dip their hand in; and he who is most forward and vigorous, whoever he is, is allowed to have the best of the dish. Similarly, when a cow or goat is killed, as many persons as are present have a share.

They carry superstition to the point where the following can happen. A Portuguese, who was living in the land because at this period it was completely at peace (within), was walking along the shore reciting his prayers when a canoe happened to return in a battered condition, from a raid, with many of its crew dead. (The survivors) threw themselves in a rage on the poor man and killed him, saying that he was to blame for their lack of success, which was due to the magic of his prayers by which he had arranged with God for their trouble and losses.

The Bijagos are especially lacking in decency and they force the captives they bring back into the vice of sensuality, even in public. Their behaviour towards the captives is most tyrannical, for they ill-treat them and torture them in various ways. Captives who are rejected when offered for sale, they (used to) wound and kill, although today they no longer follow this practice, as stated in the marginal note to chapter 9 above. When they leave to go to war they anoint themselves with ochre, charcoal-dust and white clay, and they cover their heads with hen's feathers. Before they leave the harbour, a female magician steps into the canoe and breaks a rotten egg over it, at the traditional part for this ceremony, in the stern. Then she takes a mouthful of salt water, and splatters it around the stern, so that the water touches the bolis and jars of beans. At the prow, the captain holds up to the sky some antelope horns; and he begs for a successful journey, without rain or other difficulties, for numerous prizes, and for the safety of the warriors. At this they all shout and raise their oars in the air; they lower them and row so vigorously that in no time the canoe has disappeared, leaving the woman who performed the ceremony behind on the shore. The captain has a fixed period of time /f.37/ during which he is to return, and if at the end of this period he does not appear, the best warriors arm themselves and set off in the direction they think appropriate. Trumpets are blown, and those men who are located where they can hear them assemble by following signals given by the trumpets. The women remain at the harbours where they maintain a look-out until the men re-appear.
Their idol comprises a bundle of sticks, as already stated, and also two short antelope horns which are attached to two of the sticks, and these are anointed with blood and covered with feathers. These sticks lie above the bundle. This abominable idol, this turd, is placed in a little hut shaped like an oven and made solely of clay. Here are also placed some bolis made of gourds, containing red beans. To this place the people make their way in order both to give thanks for favours received and to seek remedies in times of trouble. The priest, whose office is here filled by magicians, enters the hut, and closes and blocks the entrance with a mat, while everyone else waits outside. He touches makes a sound with the boulis to call on the evil spirits, according to his superstitious belief, and the poor heathen believe that he is invoking their dead. The devil replies to questions with a cry which has no meaning, but the priest expounds it as he wishes. And so they give the priest credit (for the contract), and will not deviate a jot from what he says to them. When someone dies, all he owns they bury with him; and they kill cows, which they buy for this purpose when they need them and when there is a supply in the ports. At burials) they do not kill people, (but) if a woman with a child at breast dies, they put the living child in the ground with the mother. They are such brutes that they say that this must be, because if God had wished the child to live he would not have taken away the person who sustained it. At wakes, the men perform war-dances with great yells. All are masked and they make a thousand threatening gestures with their spears as well as other war-like motions. They especially do this when the burial feasts are those of their captains or of warriors who died in battle, since they hold these persons in very great veneration. The women, who remain within doors, make their lamentations at night and at dawn, by chanting verses; and during this period they all shave their heads, smear white clay over them, and wear a slatted bonnet dyed white, with no top in it. They hang a collar of cibe leaves around their necks and cover part of their body with a skirt of bark, which is beaten out like esparto grass.