Chapter 11

The island of Bissau and the nature and characteristics of its inhabitants

The land is healthy, and its situation is beautiful and pleasing because of the variety of trees and the abundance of (flowing) water, which the island has in sufficiency. It is deserving of general adulation for it serves those who pass this way as a hostelry or inn for their refreshment. Here vessels are provisioned with water, and with other essentials for the completion of their voyage; and these it has available since it abounds in foodstuffs of different kinds, such as rice, local types of funde, beans, yams, etc. Also pumpkins and much wine. There is no lack of cows, goats and hens. Everything is low-priced but can be obtained even more cheaply because of the kindness of certain Portuguese who live there. I pass over the buffalo, antelope and wood-hens found in large numbers; also chocas, ducks, etc. The wild animals include elephant, buffalo, leopards, wild-cats, sanchos and green parrots. The supply of fish is as much as the land requires, and the same is true of oil. Everyone there is skilled in agriculture. There are many fairs on the island, and to these the Balantias bring cows, goats and various foodstuffs, which the Papels buy from them for iron, Santiago cloth and oil.

The education of their children calls for no comment since it is the same as that among the other heathen. They all have many wives. No son succeeds his father; succession to the kingdom is from uncle to nephew, to a son of the dead uncle’s oldest sister. Sons have only what they have themselves acquired. The King of Bissau is an emperor; he bestows the (royal insignia of the) bow and cap on the King of Bussis. Their customs are barbarous, for a man can have as his wives two sisters. They have clean eating habits. In the winter season the poor go short in respect of the necessities of life, but they manage on chaveo and tarafe. They are all well-disposed and friendly towards the Portuguese, as what I said above shows. Their system of justice contains great abuses for they can enslave a person for little. (a) I shall give an instance. A woman asked for and borrowed /f.38/ something not worth 10 reais from a man. She lost it. He asked for it back. (b) She said: I have lost it but I will pay you for it. He

(a) They employ ‘red water’ which they administer to a man as he is standing up, with his private parts covered with banana leaves.

(b) When a debt is demanded, a hen is killed: where the body falls indicates which party is guilty and he is condemned.
refused, on the grounds that she could not give him the exact object, and
he enslaved her. Here then is another of their unjust reasons for enslavement. A further instance. A man married a woman and discovered that
before she became his wife she had fallen into sin with three or four men.
This friendly husband had them all enslaved. Moreover, he asked her to
arrange to trap other men by leading them on, so that the two of them could
cart their food this way; and he assaulted the poor wretches. Thus, for all
her offences of this kind, whenever committed, whether when she was under an
obligation (of fidelity) to her husband or not, that is, before she came
into his power and when she was single or a widow, the wretches had to pay
up, contrary to all notions of right. Some men are so crafty and malicious
that they beat their women in order to see if fear will make them confess.
Suppose now that a man twice commits adultery. If he is poor, the first
offence counts. But if he is rich, he wipes out this crime by paying money:
(only) the second offence counts against him. And if he has the means to
free himself he does so, but if he cannot do this he is sold. Hence whoever
falls into adultery, whether he is a freeman or otherwise, always pays; and
lords often lose their slaves this way. If a noble woman marries a commoner,
any time she pleases she can leave him and take another, or she can reject
this one and take yet another. These women are so wicked that if their
second husbands are not kind to them, they pay them out by taking any
children and returning to their first husband; and the second husband is
turned from a freeman into a slave merely by the scheming of an evil wife.
For the wife persuades her first husband that the second committed adultery
with her and the former hands over the latter for punishment. Yet it is
all untrue, since these ladies normally arrange these seizures only because
they have been ill-treated by particular husbands.

If a nobleman takes his own slave as wife and she gives him any cause
for dissatisfaction, he can sell her with her son, if the latter is young,
and it is of no account that the child is his. If a son has intercourse
with any of his father's wives, the father can sell him and will give the
money to the members of his Council without touching any of it himself.
If the wife of an important ruler commits adultery, he has her and the
adulterous man speared to death in a public place very early in the morning
on a fair-day, so that those attending the fair can see that justice has
been done. Relatives come to bury them but they cannot hold a wake.
Similarly there are no wakes for magicians/witches, and they are not buried
in the cemeteries I am about to describe, /f.38v/, but in an ant-hill, as
thieves are. These two sorts of persons are buried naked, and their heads
and genitals are displayed on a stake at the fair. If a commoner marries a noble woman, he cannot leave her whatever happens, nor can he enslave any noble who commits adultery with her, however frequently. But if she commits adultery with a man of his own standing, and he can manage to secure the man, then he can take his case before a nobleman for judgement.

As is common, the idol of these savages is a bundle of sticks, anoint with the blood of birds, such as hens, and the blood of goats and cows, and with the feathers of a cock over the blood. Such is the crass error of all the Papel heathen. The king owns a single wooden figure, which is seated on an iron object shaped like a trivet. Leaning against it is a short, iron-shafted spear, whose head, made of the same metal, resembles a scraper. When the king is taken to be buried the spear travels in the coffin, and when the ceremony and the funeral rites are over, it is returned to the king's successor. An ancient object, it serves as the insignia of state for this empire. The chapel of these idols is a funco where the idols are assembled. The people come here in all their moments of need. Here a fire is lit at night.

Opposite this island is another one which is a seminary of devils, like Camassono Island at Serra Leoa. The site, which is completely green because of the variety of trees, is venerated for this reason. An ancient tradition tells that a very old king came here to die, and as he thought of other things the waves of the sea swept him away from the shores of the island. Some heathen who passed that way later succeeded in persuading the natives that they had seen the poor king's spear protruding from the ground. Hence it became the custom to go to the islet annually, or every second year, to sacrifice a very large ox, a black one without a blemish; and to hold great feasts. To these feasts come more than 3,000 men and women, including horsemen to the number of 70, more or less, riding on the horses which are bred on (Bissau) island in large numbers. But only 50 or 60 persons out of this great crowd go to the islet, where they roast and eat the whole ox and bring no part of it back. As well as the ox, they each year cast out on the islet a cock and a hen, which die of thirst in the summer season because there is no source of water there. When they go by canoe to make the sacrifice — either the king or his jagarefe goes in the canoe, for the king does not normally go to these feasts — they carry with them a dog, a hen and a woman./*39*/ If the crossing is rough, they throw the cock to the waves; and if they can make no progress, they throw out the dog, and the woman goes the same way. For she is the king's chief china and destined to die when he does, so that if the king is in danger because of the rising storm, they
reckon that the china should be cast into the sea before the king dies. The savages attribute all such storms to their own dead. The jagarefe is the second person (in the kingdom), after the king, as it were, and is the king's chief councillor. On him depends the whole government of the kingdom since the king does nothing without him.

That is enough about the land. Now we shall discuss the wakes of the heathen and their burials. When an important king of the Papels dies, the first thing done is to have a large cage made from thick canes, in the lower compartment of which is put a he-goat of astonishing size and in the other compartment a large dog. Over this cage another smaller one is built and intertwined with the first, and in this is placed the king, beautifully dressed in Portuguese style if he ruled lands or ports where whites live, his body having been previously washed in wine. The cage is covered with capias of various kinds, with coverlets and with other fine cloth. At the front lie the heads and tails of two or three of the first cows that were killed. For two or three days they process through the town carrying this bier of sorts, while uttering loud and sincere lamentations. No-one can be seen who is not plastered with earth all over, his head shaved, and with ropes around his neck and waist. In great distress and sorrow the Papels praise the dead king, saying that never had he an equal; and some are so affected that as an expression of mourning they refuse to eat, or to sleep on a mat, or to wash off their covering of earth. Everyone throughout the land makes his contribution to the burial, by killing cows or goats, or by presenting cloths; and it is not only the natives who assist in this way, for even those foreigners in neighbouring lands who have relatives living here support the occasion with their offerings. In the case of one of the more important kings, the expenses are so great that they exceed the value of 200 black slaves. This happened at Bissau when Fernão, alias Fena, died. He was a great friend of ours, for he used to practise good works towards the whites, by ransoming with his own money any whites who fell into the hands of the other heathen, and this on his own initiative and without making demands first. Again, when our ships were being harassed by pirates and were run aground /f, 39v/ in his ports, they were safe there and enjoyed his protection, for no-one was permitted to harm them or remove any goods from them. It was because he was so keen to retain our friendship that he was once almost killed by a cannon-shot. A French ship, escorting a Portuguese vessel it had taken, came to this port to ransom the prize. The Portuguese community arranged with the king's Council for the French to be told that, when they brought the stolen ship in and came ashore themselves, they would be given as a hostage the king's eldest son. But the hostage was
not the son, for they had prepared a trap by dressing up a slave in all manner of fripperies and pretending that he was the son. However the enemy were apprehensive of treachery, and when the king appeared in the port they fired a cannon whose shot went through a cloth the king was wearing. He was not harmed, and it seems that the Lord wished to preserve the barbarian in gratitude for the affection he had shown the Portuguese nation.

While the feasts continue in the village, the grave is being prepared. To determine where the mouth of the vault shall be, the king's chief china is brought to the place, her (?) ears are cut off, and the blood running from where those organs used to be marks out the spot. Later all the chinas are strangled. But first they feast and dance, beautifully dressed, in the great burial-ground, in honour of the deceased. From here these women are led away, some of them already in a condition approaching death; since they are given a concoction of musk in a bitter oil to reduce their sensations during the terrible draught of death; and as well as drinking it, they place some on their eyes. The way they are sacrificed and killed is as follows. Two strong blacks take a rope made of malila, which is from a tree and resembles one of our osiers in being very flexible, and they place the rope over the eyes and mouth (of the victim), and then pull on the rope, and so she is killed. Some of them are so cruel that even if the victim is still breathing, they will leave her and pass on to deal with the others. And thus they kill some thirty or forty women, the number depending on the wealth of the king or noble. The king's chief china serves in this role (of executioner) by killing the women who belong to nobles, wringing their necks; and some of them are so eager (to die) that she kills them with little effort (?). This king's china has special privileges. Without anyone preventing her, she is permitted to take anything in the land she fancies, cows, goats, foodstuffs, wine, etc. When the (sacrificial) ceremony is completed, the king is buried, and with him those persons he chose (to have with him) during his lifetime. Some of these are happy to die with him because they enjoyed his affection: others would escape /f.40/ if they could and would prefer to be sold (as slaves) because they value life.

This large vault is lined throughout with cloths. In it there lie only the king, his chief china on whom he rests his head, and three other women, one beside each arm and one at his feet, supporting them. The opening of the grave is closed, this being about the size of the bottom of a cask, and on it is placed a very carefully-made earthenware pot, with a lid, and into this some wine is put. Over the grave they build a hut made out of thatch, in order to protect the site from the rain. A man is given the task of lighting a fire there nightly. In a nearby burial-ground the (other) chinas
have a grave made the same way. This contains a number of beds on which the chinas lie, the men being segregated and placed in separate sections. There is also another tomb in which lies a dead horse, together with an ox and a boy. In former times, they say, were buried alive. Commoners have their own memorial ground at a distance from those of the king and nobles, but all of them are within the forest. Although the bodies lie in these spots, a regular and general custom among persons of all ranks is that they prepare an enclosure containing a mat and a piece of cut pacharís, and in the middle they set up the richão and the tagarra (bowl) from which (the dead person) ate, the gourd from which he drank, the jar from which he took the oil to anoint himself—all with a hole driven through them and secured on a stake. In the case of kings and nobles, their cows and goats are killed and this (memorial) niche or chapel is adorned with their horns and tails. When individuals are in trouble, they bring a hen to their padres in order that these (priests) will discover from their intercessors the reason why the individuals are suffering the troubles. Whatever this priest of abomination tells them, this they do. It is not only the wretched heathen who believe in this rite, but what is worse, so too do the Christian blacks, however hard we try to persuade ourselves that they really are Christians. At Cachoe, even in the combetes (?), there are many blacks who are more given to observing heathen rites than following God's law, their pretence at doing the latter being only for the reason of their desire to rise in the world from the connection with us. Since they have no scruple in using religion to help them on, that is, no scruple in pretending to be Christian, great scruple may be entertained by those who baptise heathens of such a disposition without the influence and backing of that force of arms which is so important for the spreading of the Gospel.

Every important heathen has in his house the idol of sticks and the pot-cover of wine, and in regard to small matters he makes sacrifices (employing these). But in regard to serious matters he goes to the regular office-holder who keeps and controls the /f.40v/ village idol. The idolaters believe that the devil enters this idol, or rather that the dead members of their family do, and that these speak through it on matters affecting their relatives, their parents or their children, etc. All of this is as false as the belief that evil spirits can come to this world instead of merely suffering in another world. But since they are/from accepting this latter belief and confine themselves to following the example of their ancestors, they put all their confidence in these corofins of theirs for the remedying
of the ills of life and for giving them prosperity during its course, in sum, for all pertaining to the material things of life. These heathen act so because they follow the principles of Epicurus, who said that nothing exists except what can be seen and touched.