Chapter 7

The offerings of these heathen, and the society of Menas

As these barbarians are extremely superstitious, and find omens in dreams and in any of life's happenings, they try in all manner of ways to propitiate their intercessory spirits. They rise very early in the morning and go to the open place where the idols are sited. Each person takes a gift according to his means, and they generally do this before sun-rise. They take a basin or carp, and put water in it, and salt, which they consider a substance of great value; and on top, they put cola, which is used in all sacrifices, some of the nuts white, some red. On the ground nearby they place a round stone which they always bring with them when they come to these cetecas. Then standing right and facing East, they hold the offering in their hands above their heads, and begin to repeat, "Cru cola camu", meaning, "God, here is your cola! Give me health, money, rice! May I kill (many) animals! May no-one do me harm!" All these demands are for material benefits. When the offering and the prayers are completed, they leave everything there. The offerings are sometimes so substantial that even black (slaves) are offered, something which Farma of the Logos has been known to do. They normally leave before sun-rise, because always the ceremony takes place and is completed before them, and the stone remains behind as a token.

The offerings belong to the first taker. The savages go away pleased with themselves and very confident that they will receive what they ask, because it seems to them that God will be grateful. If things go well with them afterwards, they say that God likes them and has accepted their cola. But if the opposite happens, they immediately utter a thousand absurdities, saying that God wishes them ill, as a Christian once said to me. If Our Lord did not prize so greatly our naming of him as the Merciful one, this (human) timber would burn today in hell: the same God has given it and continues daily to give it many blows, in preparation for the time when he will cut it down, to deliver it to the eternal flames. Their sins and the sensual excesses of their lives they take no account of. The public ceremony of cetecas is more especially practiced by kings and lords: the inferior sort perform the rites in the street, at their doors, and they always place the stone beside their offering. Those (acquaintances) who call on them (at their houses), to give them /f.69v/ their daily greetings, eat the sacrificial cola they find there. Cocks, etc., are offered on this occasion: anyone who cares to remove them (afterwards) does so, although pagans and the Christians who imitate them have some misgivings. But those who know what goes on, remove from their own idols whole capons and quarters of goat-meat, which will after all only go bad soon. Often God permits
those who make these offerings to find a remedy for their ill; for instance, those blind in one eye recover their sight, and so on; this is done as a greater chastisement, by impressing on them their ignorance, a point they do not grasp.

Now let us come to the second subject of the chapter. It is an age-old custom among the natives that when their daughters reach the age of ten or twelve years they put them in a training-school for their superstitious creed. Tangoma, who is the Superior, chooses for its location a secret place in the forest. Here the novices stay three or four months, secluded from all social intercourse and contact, even with their own parents. Such an ape has the devil become (that he imitates the monastic novitiate)! During this period of time, the master of the school occupies himself in teaching the girls the rules of the society and other ceremonial matters. It appears that to teach like this is enough to enable the devil to make them believe all these lies. The rules are unclean, as all their practices are. The first lesson is to give words a new meaning. Hence, when these cursed nuns afterwards speak to each other, 'stone' means 'wood', with the result that they can only be understood among themselves, and what they say cannot be understood by others or learnt by them. The devil has always encouraged and still encourages this sort of secretiveness among his own, and it has been the cause of the ruin of great edifices of sanctity. Apart from the male guardian, the girls have an abbess (or female instructor). From the time they begin this infernal exercise, the novices wear nothing. As their parents cannot visit them because of the strictness of their seclusion, they arrange for the girl to be provided with what is necessary, their servants placing whatever they bring at the door of this inferno. The girls do not come to collect it, because they consider it an abomination to be seen during the period of this dreary institution, especially by their parents or relatives. So the master takes care to have the donations collected, and he divides them among all the pupils, in keeping with the rules. The master’s name means ‘deprived of both sexes’, and indicates the great purity of behaviour practiced by the whole group during this period. The nuns are called Menas. Each year they number fifty or sixty. During the period of seclusion, the signal for meals is given with a drum, this being sounded for lack of a bell. The same happens at the time of their baths, bathing being a practice much followed by all categories of the heathen. Sounds of great feasting and of dancing to music can be heard coming from this place: this indicates, as I said above, that the master teaches them through songs, and they reply to him in the same way.
When the period of instruction is over, and the Menas have graduated, they have progressed so much that the master has confidence in their observance of the rules, and he sends them away from the infernal monastery. He leads them away himself, guiding them to the open place in the village, with great festivities as they go along. At the open place, a large crowd awaits the procession. Among the many people present are the parents of the nuns, who attend in order to identify their girls and take them home. Between the place of seclusion and the open place, the girls process basfully and decently, their eyes almost covered either by a round cap shaped like a coif, or in some cases by a red hat; and in their hands they carry whisks, a little bigger than our brushes because they have longer bristles and are not finished as neatly. And, to conclude, each girl leaves dressed according to her means. Feasting goes on in the open place for three or four hours, and then the girls are handed over by the Superior to their parents. These poor people weep with great joy when they take away their daughters because they believe that they have been improved, when in fact they have been depraved. Hence one cannot detail the cursed rules of the society, because all of them relate to sensuality and beastly behaviour. In this way the Mena is brought to her parents' home and dwelling, in the midst of a great hullabaloo, and then she is dressed up as finely as can be managed. The Menas reassemble on certain days and repeat the rules to each other, in order not to forget them.

(a) Before villages are founded, they make a medicine called toa and place it on a post and near it some wild plants which in time grow large. This ceremony is carried out by women when kings or lords go to war or are in some danger: they sleep and live near these places ( ? where the toa is), which become for this period almost places of pilgrimage, and here they seek from the corofins success or good health for their lords.
After handing them over, the Superior returns to his own home. The
all pay him very generously, and they thank him for his instruction.
Thereafter, these worldly nuns respect him, and throw themselves at his
feet and kiss them. The girls leave the school with new names, in the
same way as we give new names at confirmation, and anyone who refers to
them by their old names incurs severe penalties. Their new status gives
them licence to carry out vice, but they must not do this in the forest,
or in a room without a fire; and they are very particular about this.
If they happen to break the rule, and then fall sick and die, it is said
that this is the reason. When one of them dies, she is buried by the
diabolical sisterhood. If in ignorance any man happens to pass by the
'monastery' during the ceremony, and falls into their hands, they
emasculate him. This almost happened to Joao Loucao, who by chance went
that way, but as he was known to Farma the Great, King of the Logos, and
was a good friend of all his people, they spared him. /f. 10/