



THE SHAPE
OF AFRICA: VI

AKIGA

A MUSHROOM IN TIME

By Harold M. Bergsma

YOU my Tiv brothers of this new generation that can read, read this and tell it to others who cannot; of the things of our ancestors; so that whether they are literate or not, at least they will be able to know something about the fathers who have gone on before us. Further, do you, however great your knowledge may be, remember you are a Tiv. Remain a Tiv! Know the things of Tiv, for therein lies your pride. Strengthen yourselves. The old mushroom rots, another springs up in its place, but the mushroom (tribe) lives on.

EVERY ETHNIC GROUP, tribe or nation looks with pride to those few among its sons who have brought renown and honor to the group as a whole. Western European cultures have produced "men of stature" in the arts, the humanities, and the sciences, whose creative works live with us today or are reflected in the unique heritage one might term "Western Civilization". It would be possible to show that men such as Karl Marx, Shakespeare, Beethoven, John Stuart Mill, Freud, Madam Curie, Charles Darwin and Herbert Spenser were all products of their unique civilization and past. More, each in his or her own way possessed a rare quality of being able to create for other humans something new, exciting and enriching which was and will remain unique in the future: a musical composition which stirs succeeding generations of listeners and performers; a well turned phrase which becomes part of an

evolving linguistic heritage; an insight about nature based on broad experience, experimentation and deep intuition and perception; a commentary about the reason for man's existence, an introspective view and theory about the mysterious workings of men's minds.

There is a tribe of more than a million people in Nigeria, in West Africa, called the Tiv (tēv). Until 1910 none of the sons of Tiv had come into prolonged contact with persons from the "Western World". There had been a few military or administrative European incursions into West Africa prior to this time. British administrators and military personnel in the post-Lord Lugard era had established outposts and district offices in remote parts. A few entrepreneurs looking for an expanding market in palm oil, "benin" seed and yams had wended their way by

boat and steamer between numerous and shifting sand bars in the Niger, Benue, and Katsina Ala rivers, and come to the town of Katsina Ala, a Tiv outpost. Telegraph lines were strung by British administrators to connect the district headquarters at Makurdi, on the edge of Tiv land, to Ibi, a trading post just beyond the Tiv boundary. The wires were repeatedly cut by the Tiv, who reportedly used the copper for "bashi" (money) or for ornamental purposes. In 1911, just a few years after the arrival of Europeans, the Sudan United Mission and the Dutch Reformed Church Mission established outposts, one of the first of which was in a Tiv town called Said.

Akiga Sai, son of Sai, a village head of considerable prestige among his own people, was known to possess great supernatural powers (Or-kombo) and to be a member of the cult of Iwa or Iwar ("the blacksmith") who held and used the Ijembe Aondo, the axes of God, to overcome evil. The first Tiv person to come into prolonged contact with Europeans, that is, to be taught their ways and live with them over a period of time, Akiga Sai will be viewed by all present and future generations of literate Tiv as unique, or as the modern vernacular puts it, "something else". Akiga Sai had that extra perception, the ability to sacrifice self for a cause he felt to be great, in order that others long after his death could appreciate and understand what it meant to be a Tiv. Akiga's proverb, "The mushroom rots away, another springs up, but the mushroom lives on", was more than a play on words. Akiga himself was an offspring of the Tiv "ancestors" and their heritage.

This unusual man, lame and having only one eye, produced a monumental work in history and ethnology he called "A History of the Tiv", which long after his death remains in manuscript form only and which has been read by less than a dozen of his people. This amazing document, written in the Tiv vernacular, represents approximately eleven years of work for the late Akiga, and unknown miles of travel on foot and by bicycle across an area that comprises more than 10,000 square miles.

Rupert East, in "Akiga's Story," said about his work:

"Other books have been written by Africans about the life of their own people, though not yet in Northern Nigeria (since then "Baba of Karo" was written). Others will be written, but they will be written by more sophisticated authors who have the advantage, or disadvantage, of a modern education, whose outlook is no longer primitive and whose knowledge is no longer subjective. The old men have that knowledge, but they are inarticulate, or rather have no channel of communication with us. Only a man such as Akiga can act as the mouth-piece of the elders and of the old order."

But Akiga was so much more than a mere means of articulation. He was, rather, a representation in living form of the vast struggle of former men, the organic humus that is Africa now, which has arisen from the rich earth of the past. Akiga was a voice, a phoenix-like personality. Akiga's great asset was his ability to laugh and cry with his people, to feel deeply the value of the old customs and to be impatient with young people who imitated western fashions.

AKIGA WRITES about those insights he gained during years of personal research in a deeply involved way. When he relates beliefs about witchcraft he is able to live with his narrative from experiences he personally witnessed. The book has no index, and as a history it is much like a man going on a trip from one idea-city to the next, who stops along the way to observe a circumcision ceremony, helps to harvest a yam crop and store it, stops to take part in a wedding, a birthing and even a funeral. So Akiga becomes both witness and participant as he relates ancient folklore and oral history as well as the life experiences of his people.

A large portion of the book is a story about the coming of the white man and the problems and social conflicts this entailed. Akiga tells about specific white administrators by name. All these accounts were excluded from the work written by Rupert East in 1939. The stories of culture contact, of how British individuals dealt with the Tiv, are of great interest from a social-psychological point of view. The perspective they provide on white persons dealing in "strange and insensitive fashion" balances the early writings of the British, who reported about a hostile and primitive people called the "Munshi" (slang word for cannibal

applied to the Tiv). Students of social change will find in Akiga's history a rich source for documenting how traditional institutions changed their character and eventually their form and purpose in time.

Take the example of the origins of western education in Tiv land. The following excerpt is translated idiomatically by the writer directly from the Tiv manuscript he deposited in the national archives at Ibadan University in April 1964, for the Akiga family.

“The Schools of the Government:

White educators began a school in Wanune in the Ukar section near Mbakor in the year 1912. This was at the time that Makondo was at Abetse.

When they first began schools, the British educators had much trouble in finding candidates. The Tiv were afraid to give their children to the schools. Initially, the white educators did not allow children to come to school voluntarily, nor did they wish for just anybody to have a chance for an education; rather, only the chiefs, judges and clan-heads were asked to send their children to school.

The Tiv talked about this and said many things about this ruling, such as, it just may be that the white man is up to killing and eating a man; they call for soldiers who come and cut off the heads of the best looking ones and take them to the grave, who return as those appointed to watch over the clans . . .”

Akiga goes on at some length to describe the terrifying things that would happen to the children who would be sent to the white (Buter) school: the school changes their mouths so that the children speak nonsense when they return; the school gives them new hands that are unable to dig and plow and work the land. the school selects a few of the smartest and best looking and sends them across the huge water to change their hearts. . .

Akiga continues:

“ . . . So when the people heard these stories (of what happened to their children) they were really afraid. So one chief (when he was requested to produce a son for the school) was afraid to send a goodly lad and made a plan.”

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According to Akiga, those sent to the first schools were the bastards, the mis-shapen, partially blind or deaf, trouble makers and juvenile delinquents, those having serious or chronic diseases, or even slave children. When the representatives from the schools came to take a child, much lying and deceit went on.

“They taught them reading and writing and arithmetic and geography. They were taught weaving and cloth-making of various kinds. They were given food at regular intervals, they were clothed (perhaps for the first time), they were taught to keep their huts neat and to clean up, they were taught to wash their bodies and hands well and frequently before coming to school. Time passed, some became teachers, others learned other work which in turn they taught their people.”

The story goes on at some length and recounts how, over a period of fifteen years, the social, psychological and physical rejects and “culls” from among the Tiv became the intellectuals and political leaders; and of course became wealthy because of their government salaries.

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IT IS NOT POSSIBLE here to witness to the scope and breadth of Akiga's manuscript. As an educator I have selected a single vignette to highlight one portion of the work. Akiga was a man apart in his generation, whose work has provided a storehouse of historical matter for his people and others in the world. Because of Akiga's work, future generations of educated youth in Tiv land have a permanent record of a past tradition, a pride in their fathers' culture. At the time of his death, Akiga requested both Christian and traditional Tiv burial rites. His life and work show the man to have been one whose roots were in Tiv tradition, his work and heart for his people's progress — a mushroom in time.