

Legends of Our Common Heritage 6

My First Christmas in Mankon

Who Am I?

My name is Fru Munya (Fru Junior). I am a Mankon man but born and bred abroad. When I was younger, and that was so many years ago, my parents brought me home for my first Christmas. I am a grown man now capable of making my own decisions. The treat I have given myself this year is to enjoy Christmas in the land of my ancestry. I look forward to doing this with a lot of excitement. My excitement stems from the memories I still have of my first Christmas in the village. I wish nothing has changed. As I wait to enjoy this year's feast of the Nativity, let me share my nostalgic reveries with you.

Christmas Eve

The atmosphere in my grandparents' compound during my first Christmas in Mankon had the *avant gout* of a grand feast. The weeds and bushes around the house had been cleared. Grandma had shopped for everything she needed for cooking. She would not allow the kids to touch any of the dresses my parents had brought for them from the Whiteman's Land. The kids would have a feel of them only on Christmas Day itself. Grandpa had slaughtered the pig he had nurtured all year round in a fence behind the house. The slaughtering had shocked me (I had never seen an animal being killed before), but I soon got over it. Grandpa also had a lot of meat from his club (njangi) and he sent us to share some of it with family and friends around the village. We also received a lot of gifts from other people from far and near much of which were meat and rice. Some of the meat was smoked and boiled and the kids always made sure they pinched and cut off little pieces to roast and eat.

We went to Church on Christmas Eve. The service seemed to be dedicated to kids as they said Bible rhymes and sang to the praise of Baby Jesus. I didn't go to bed early because I wanted to see the "shooting of Christmas" at midnight. We were all gathered in grandma's house when there was what I thought was the loudest noise I had ever heard somewhere outside in the yard. I was terrified, but to my surprise, everyone else was jubilant. We went

outside just in time for the second "explosion", at which point I discovered it was nothing but grandpa firing his Dane gun. Then his friends with whom he had been drinking in the sitting room fired their own guns too. Simultaneously, gun fire could be heard all over the village and this went on for about fifteen minutes. When it was all over, Tse *Sogiy* (Tse the soldier), my cousin and best friend in the compound, explained to me that the gunfire was a sign of ushering in Christmas. Then I immediately equated this symbol to the midnight fire works on Christmas Eve in the whiteman's land. Not long after that, we retired to bed, eagerly waiting for the break of Christmas day.

Christmas Morning

Everybody was up early on Christmas morning. The children fetched water and helped with cooking. Even grandpa, whom I was told never entered the kitchen throughout the year, had his special dish of pork, plantains and bitter leaf to cook. All the young boys had had a haircut and the girls wore long braids. When food was ready, all the kids gathered and ate from the same tray. They all wanted to eat rice, and never could understand why achu, which was eaten all year round in the compound, should be prepared on a special day like Christmas. My grandparents ate achu anyway. You can never really understand this adults sometimes, we sighed! There were lots of chunks of meat in our meal, but it was the rule that we should all finish our food before the most senior kid among us would share the meat. Even on such a special day, any overly longing for meat by a kid was considered greedy and gluttonous. After the meal, grandpa and grandma gave me some more food and meat. They somehow knew that I couldn't keep pace with the rest of the kids when we ate together and especially when the food was hot. I was about finishing my extra food when there came a terrible scream from inside the house.

I rushed into the house and found Neh *Nimoh-Ntaw* (Neh, grandma of the palace) thrashing about, and wailing on the floor. What was the matter? Then I saw it! In an attempt to iron her new dress with the red hot charcoal iron, Neh had burnt out a big hole in the middle of it. I had never seen a young lady in so much agony about a simple dress! I rushed to my mom and pleaded with her to give Neh another dress. My parents had brought a lot of stuff for the family and had saved some of it for the New Year feast. Neh *Nimoh-Ntaw* finally had her dress replaced by even a better one, but not before she got some bashing from her mother: *O fee-eh tising-eh* (you are too pompous)! However, calm returned in the compound and everybody,

dressed in new outfits, was ready for church. An added element of importance about the church service for that Christmas Day was the baptism of Nji-Nwi and Ndoh-Nwi, my twin cousins, who were dressed in perfect white and looking so humble and solemn. Before departure for church, coins were shared to the kids for offering.

Christmas Church Service

The church was jammed to capacity with children, women, men and old people sitting on wooden benches staked on a roughly cemented floor. It was the smallest Baptist church I had ever seen, just as big as a school classroom. The people were colorfully dressed and exchanged a lot of pleasantries. But when the service started, the only voice that could be heard was that of the pastor. His sermon was in Mankon and he reminded the congregation about the importance of having the mind of a child to be able to enter the kingdom of Heaven. Thanks to my understanding of the Mankon language (my parents had made it a must in our home abroad), I was abreast with everything that was going on in Church. The sermon was punctuated with songs by the entire congregation and, sometimes, by the single choral group present for the occasion. Occasionally, the entire congregation would belch out a soulful song and those who did not know the lyrics by heart, read from a hymnal. There was a lady by my side whose voice was louder than everyone else's. She held an open hymnal and looked straight into it as she sang. Because I did not know the song, I decided to share her hymnal with her. Too bad! Her hymnal was held up side down! I looked up at her again and there she was staring right into the book. I could not wait for the service to be over so I could ask Tse *Sogiy* about this weird woman.

Tse later told me that the lady's name was Mambo *Tita tibong-Andza* (Mambo, Jack of all trades. Or, Mambo, The omnipresent hot pepper). She had earned the name thanks to her pomposity in the community. She was an impostor in so many things, one of which was her claim of literacy although she had never been to school. I became very interested in this strange lady and immediately noticed that she wanted to lead every thing that was happening. During the procession to the river for the baptism ceremony, Mambo *Hot Pepper* would dance ahead of the congregation and then, suddenly spinning around and with her hymnal in one hand and a Bible in the other, she flapped her hands in the air as if beckoning to everybody to join her in the enjoyment of spiritual ecstasy. During baptism, the pastor waded into the river and as he immersed each new convert into it, the choir saluted with songs and joyous ululations. *Hot Pepper* had skillfully managed

to make herself the general conductor of the choir. She continued in this capacity until the congregation came to our compound to end the celebration.

The church members, family and friends gathered in the center of our courtyard. Mambo *Hot Pepper* sired gospel songs, (*Alongue*) and danced unrythmically (probably because her visibly tight shoes were starting to hurt), around the yard. The accompanying beats of the single drum, this time played laboriously by the pastor himself, gave an irresistible flavor to the occasion. I joined my newly baptized cousins and took a few twists in the center of the circle that had been formed. Even grandma, leaning forward on her walking stick, wriggled in her overflowing gown like a giant caterpillar. Almost all the songs said something about *Yesu, Yerosalem* and *abaradishi*. Tse *Sogiy* later told me that those words stood for *Jesus, Jerusalem* and *Paradise*. The ceremony closed with general feasting in the compound.

The Close of Christmas Day

My cousins and I visited many people around the quarter. In every home, there was the inevitable rice and stew with lots of meat. There was also so much to drink and in spite of my parents' opposition, I had my first taste of alcohol when my grandpa shared his palm wine with me from his drinking horn. My cousins had also made a toy gun for me out of a bicycle spoke tied to a short stick. We used matches for ignition powder. Some more "privileged" kids used explosives called "knock out", but I did not like them because of their potential of causing injury.

Eventually, Tse *Sogiy* said it was time to go home so he could get something that would enable us attend the tea time dance at *Akongni hall*. As we entered the compound, there came Ngang Bosco riding a toy he had made out of a dish lid and a bicycle spoke with one of the ends bent into a sickle shape. Tse became transfixed. Then suddenly, as if recovering from a trance, he dashed to the back of the main house, then returned almost immediately and grabbed Ngang Bosco. He half dragged the confused child behind the house and ordered the latter to show him whence he had taken the dish cover he had been riding.

There, said Bosco pointing generally in the direction of the dusty foundation behind the house.

Where exactly? Inquired Tse.

I don't know for sure, replied Bosco.

Leave this place before I kill you, screamed Tse.

As Bosco disappeared, Tse started digging uncontrollably into the foundation. He kept digging into different spots as I watched him. Before long, he had dug such a big hole that I was concerned he would dig out the house. Finally and luckily, he found what he was looking for, a small carefully wrapped bundle. He untied it to reveal money in the form of bills and coins. Then he explained that he had saved the money over a long time in preparation for the Christmas dance. He had buried it behind the house for security reasons and had marked the spot with the dish lid that Ngang had turned into his toy. Without the mark, it was difficult to tell the spot where he had hidden the money.

Anyway, we went to the dance that evening and Tse *Sogiy* paid my gate fee. It was my first club dance and I was kind of nervous about it. My cousins were so relaxed and danced freely with other young people. Somewhere into the dance, I noticed the constant look of two young girls sitting not far from us. Tse told me that they were his class mates in school and suggested that we go have a dance with them. I started declining but Tse was already heading towards the girls with a big smile. I followed him and danced with one of the girls who was slightly taller than me. After the dance, Tse told me to stay with the girls while he got them something to drink. I think he stayed a little too long at the counter. When he returned, I excused myself and hurried away. The dance continued til a little after dusk when it made way for the real thing meant for adults.

On our way back home, Tse asked me if I had said anything to the girl I danced with. I replied in the negative and wondered what he meant by that question. Then he turned and explained to my other cousins in pidgin English, *wouna know say di petit frere no tell that mboh anything?* They all burst out laughing and called me a *slack man*. As I lay in bed that night, I couldn't help retracing the rich events of the day in my mind. Inevitably, I drifted to sleep wondering what my cousins had expected me to tell the strange girl I danced with at *Akongni Hall*.

Today I am back in my village to spend another Christmas. This time, I am no longer a minor but a fully grown man. I don't know if things have changed since my maiden Christmas in Mankon. I know for sure that my grandparents are very old now. But will Mambo *Tita Tibong-Andza* and all the other people still be there? What about the small church house? Is there going to be another dance? I hope there will be a dance. As a young man, and a bachelor for that matter, I now know what to tell young women. I will surely attend the Christmas night dance with a lot to tell any beautiful Mankon girl who is ready to listen. While I wait for D-Day, I will appreciate if anyone can update me with any possible changes that might have occurred

in the celebration of Christmas in the land of my ancestry-Mankon. In the meantime, *aboh-boh* to everyone.

Fellow countrymen, let me start by thanking Fru *Munya* for sharing his experience with us. In fact his story is so real that I wonder if it didn't take place in our compound in Mankon. Anyway, while we reflect on how to brief him about what he may expect for this year's Christmas in the *Giant Tail*, let me remind us of the last *njalah* on this forum:

"I stand on a hill and beckon to my own death." What am I?

The answer is "cricket". In Mankon, crickets are mostly hunted at night. So those that chirp are more vulnerable because they betray their locations to the human predators.

The *njalah* for today is as follows:

"We overtake each other in turns." Who are we?

The answer, and possible winners will be announced with the next "Legends" posting.

As we enjoy *Crismair*, let our hands be full before they make the trip to our mouths!

Munyong-Abieri

Click here to return to the legends page. <http://www.macudaamerica.org/legends.htm>