

The High Plains

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One morning I saw André, the boy from the parish in Minembwe, set off down the hill with a chicken under his right arm. He'd stuffed the legs of his trousers into his rubber boots and he was wearing a crumpled shirt over a T-shirt. That was all he had on him. Apart from the chicken, which he would carry all the way to Uvira to sell there.

He would walk through the hills, valleys and swamps, cross streams and take narrow paths through the forest – fifty-five miles as the crow flies. All that time the chicken would accompany him. He'd have to feed her and she was bound to soil his clothes. And at night? Would she sleep beside him, tethered to the string he'd knotted to one of her legs with the other end around his finger? None of this seemed to bother André. He was happy, he smiled. He was off to visit his wife, and Curé Jorojoro, the priest of the parish, had given him a chicken for her that was worth three dollars in Uvira – fifty cents more than here. That was the economy I found myself in and soon I'd be making the same journey. Not in four days like André. No, I'd look about me as I went, visit the markets of the high plains and try to understand how people lived in this inhospitable part of Congo – a place without roads or electricity, where people were so averse to bureaucracy that my Belgian forebears never managed to get a firm grip on them.

That image of André with his chicken, however vividly it had stuck in my mind, didn't prevent my own baggage from steadily expanding. From the town in the valley I'd brought a sleeping bag, a sheet, thermal underwear, a fleece, walking shoes, trainers and rations, but Curé Jorojoro, who subjected it all to a careful inspection, told me I'd also need rice, sugar and tea. The diet here consisted of potatoes and milk; people I stayed with would be glad of something extra.

The colonel in command of the high plains lived in a large fenced-off house on a hill at the edge of Minembwe. He'd assigned me a guide, a sombre man with a little moustache

and a glassy look in his eyes. Bavire he was called. He'd broken off his law studies in the valley to be with the colonel, who quickly appointed him boss of his legal service. Bavire would accompany me on my journey, but first we'd take a trip or two in the surrounding area to get used to the 'milieu', as everyone called it. And to each other, as Curé Jorojoro added.

It was market day in Gakangara, and Bavire and I had set out early. He walked beside me, ramrod straight, sweeping his stick. We attracted a lot of attention, because white people rarely ventured into these parts. We were waylaid repeatedly and bombarded with questions: Where had we come from? Where were we going? Bavire kept it short, since every answer prompted another question.

The traders, who walked from market to market with their wares on their heads, laughed and called out to me. They were Shi, small wiry men who had come from the valley to 'seek a life'. I looked at them and realized that after only a few days in Minembwe I'd become used to the introverted ways of the Banyamulenge, the people to which Bavire, like the colonel, belonged. The Banyamulenge are cattlemen, descendants of herders most of whom arrived from neighbouring Rwanda in the second half of the nineteenth century. With their slender build, their archaic pride and their majestic cows they succeeded in overshadowing all the other peoples who live in the high plains, from the Bembe, Fulero and Nyindu to the Shi.

We crossed a river where men were standing up to their knees in water. On the far bank three young men with spades were digging a pit. They were barefoot and muscular, dressed in torn shorts and covered in fine dust from the soil. The dust was mixed with sweat, which ran down in irregular runnels – as if someone had painted their skin with fanciful patterns. Gold diggers. They'd already made a fair bit of progress, three metres at least, and they waved to us from the depths. They always dug close to water, Bavire told me, so they could sluice the sand. Sometimes their digging would change the course of a river. They too were Shi. They paid taxes to the colonel, which helped sustain his politicomilitary movement. Near the riverbank they'd driven stakes into the ground and laid leaves on top to make a shelter. On the roof, jumbled together, were the clothes they'd taken off that morning and underneath it their shoes and traces of a wood fire. It was a touching still life, but Bavire had no time for it. He'd already walked on and was waiting further along the path. 'Are you coming?' He made no attempt to hide his impatience.

'The gold diggers live in a village over there,' he said, pointing into the distance.

Their huts were close together and in the evenings the men drank maize beer and homedistilled liquor.

Now and then we passed women with hard whitened faces and hair in plaits that stuck out from their heads like antennae. They too lived in the gold diggers' village, Bavire told me. They'd come all the way from the capital to provide 'ambiance'. During the day they went shopping and fetched water and firewood; in the evenings they shuffled along the dark village alleyways in search of men.

When we arrived in Gakangara after three hours, shouting children flocked around us and Bavire used his stick to chase them away. It had looked impressive from a distance, but the wares laid out on the wooden tables were paltry: cigarettes, batteries, matches, pencils, exercise books, pens and plastic sewing kits — all cheap items, made in China. Dangling from coat hangers were the second-hand jackets, trousers, shirts, dilapidated raincoats and weather-beaten hats that gave the Banyamulenge such an old-fashioned look, no matter how young they were. If a girl wanted to buy underwear she had to point to it furtively, Jorojoro had told me. While she wandered off for a moment, the trader would pack it in non-transparent paper. Then she paid and took it with her.

On the way back we visited a musician who lived in a charming green village; Bavire claimed he was famous far beyond the high plains. The whitewashed huts were edged with ochre and surrounded by vegetable gardens with banana and papaya trees. Inside too the huts were painted white with ochre trim. The musician produced a long wooden instrument he called a harp, with eight strings that would once have been made of cow sinews but nowadays were plastic. He and his friends were willing to sing for us, but the door to their hut would have to be closed. A shaft of light shone in through a small window-opening. Outside, children were playing in the grass with a plastic bottle. They were completely absorbed in what they were doing; squabbling fiercely they scraped a few inches of sand into the bottle and then let it slowly dribble out.

The harpist stood his instrument in an aluminium pan to create an echo, rested the other end on his knee and began to pluck. Mournful polyphonic voices filled the room. They sang about the history of the Banyamulenge, which had produced so many heroes: Chief Muhire led his people into the mountains above Uvira where wild animals lived; Chief Karojo fought with stones against the Bembe, who fired their guns at him.

Bavire had heard these stories a thousand times before and he yawned deeply as he translated them, but the men became more and more enthusiastic. They sang about a cow who woke her master to have him milk her, about a pregnant heifer bearing good news in the form of a female calf. The music carried me off to the deserts of Mauritania, over three thousand miles away, where Moorish men slurped syrupy tea as they listened to a melancholy song about a camel that had walked away in the night and never returned. At

first I'd found this kind of music monotonous, but then I grew to know it and fell completely under its spell.

The harpist had launched into a song about Imana, God, and the men really got into the swing of it now. One hammered away furiously at a little drum, another stood up and began to dance with his arms spread. He was tall and the roof of the hut was quite low, so he looked like a big flapping bird in a cramped cage. The children had left off their game and were jostling around the window-opening, whispering. I shut my eyes and let my thoughts wander.

My Congolese journey had begun almost twenty years before in the extreme west of the country. I'd travelled through Lower Congo in the footsteps of my great uncle. In the years that followed I moved further and further east, until I reached the border town of Uvira, almost a thousand miles from where I'd started. On one side was Lake Tanganyika, on the other a solid wall of mysterious blue mountains. Behind them lay the high plains, where a warlike people was said to live that came originally from Rwanda. Banyamulenge — no one had ever heard of them and suddenly they were on everyone's lips. They had helped President Kabila put an end to Mobutu's dictatorship. But they couldn't get along with the new president and soon a second rebellion broke out.

Kabila had since been assassinated and the country was reunited under his son Joseph, but the east remained restless. After independence in 1960 the region had been a hotbed of revolt for many years and now a colonel had established his own republic high up on the plateaux. Getting there was difficult if not impossible, everyone told me. But I'd already started to dream: the high plains would be the last stage of my Congolese journey, the final challenge to be faced.

Through an aid agency I sent a letter to the colonel, asking permission to visit his territory. I wanted to study at close hand the wounds of history, which seemed to be deeper in the east than elsewhere, I wrote. His agreement reached me by word of mouth. A short while later I chartered a small aircraft and flew to the main town, Minembwe. I would make my way back on foot.

An acquaintance in the valley had asked me to visit his father. Bavire went with me and along the way I watched him gradually loosen up. Although he reprimanded everyone who approached me, he was apparently starting to enjoy travelling with a walking attraction. 'Just look at that,' he said when we passed some cows that had stopped to stare at us. 'Even the animals are surprised by your arrival.' He sang the religious songs we'd heard in the

harpist's hut and explained the meaning of his name, Bavire Ntungane. Bavire meant 'he who does not resist', Ntungane 'the reliable'. He was destined to be a bridge between people, he said. That was why the colonel had assigned him to me.

My acquaintance's elderly father lived on a plot surrounded by a fence made of bamboo stakes to keep out wandering cattle. Unlike elsewhere in the world, where cows graze on enclosed pastures, the animals in the high plains move about freely and the houses, schools and vegetable gardens are fenced off.

The man received us in a hut with large window-openings that looked out on sloping meadows. His expression was friendly. 'How many children do you have?' he wanted to know. The security man in Minembwe had asked me the same question the day I arrived. I'd given him a piece of my mind, but of course that would be no way to behave towards this respectable father with his threadbare hat.

I glanced at Bavire, who was staring vacantly at the cows on the other side of the fence. 'I don't have any children,' I said finally. That wasn't a good start in this world of pregnant cows, I realized, so I repeated a saying from the high plains that someone had whispered in my ear: 'Those without children can at least leave words behind.'

That saying didn't mean anything to the old man. I heard myself explaining that travelling was hard to combine with children, that... 'Not even one? Or two?' He shook his head in disbelief. The pinstriped jacket he wore with a regal air was moth-eaten and the collar of his shirt had seen better days too. A childless woman doesn't die, she disappears, another saying went — I suspected he was more familiar with that one.

His children had caught sight of us and they clutched the bamboo fence inquisitively with their tiny hands. Men go on having children here into old age. If a wife falls sick they place her fate in God's hands, instead of selling a cow so they can take her to hospital. After she dies they marry a younger woman. A wife who dies is like a broken gourd, they say — it needs replacing.

With every word I spoke I worked myself into a tighter spot. The man shook my hand courteously as we parted, but my visit had obviously confused him.

'I believe I have a problem,' I said to Bavire on the way back. He hadn't spoken up for me at all and now too he said nothing. Hesitantly I added: 'What do you suppose I could do about it?'

He waved his stick in the air. 'What do you think?'

'Shall I say next time that I have children?'

His face brightened. 'That's a good idea.'

'Two, would that be enough?'

'I think so, yes.' He sounded relieved.

'A girl and a boy?'

'Thank you,' he said, pleased I'd understood that two daughters would not solve the problem. For the past half hour he'd been particularly taciturn, but now he started to talk. 'A childless woman has no voice here,' he said. 'People think: What could she possibly teach us if she hasn't even got any offspring? Why should we confide in her? She's sure to tell us nothing but lies. Her words have no value, they're destined to disappear.'

In the silence that followed I let the curse of my childlessness sink in. Then Bavire began speaking again. 'I have a problem too,' he admitted. 'I'm thirty-three, but I still don't have any children.' As a student he hadn't found the time to look for a wife, and since he'd started working for the colonel there had been even less opportunity.

'Perhaps we could invent a few children for you as well when we travel down together,' I suggested.

The idea appealed to him. Three children, that seemed an appropriate number. 'I'll give you two,' he said, 'and you give me three.'

We laughed and slapped the palms of our hands together to seal our pact. 'Nous sommes ensemble,' said Bavire, an expression people in these parts use when they understand one another.

'Thirty-three certainly is late to get married,' I said as we walked on. Men in the high plains usually marry much earlier.

Bavire sighed. 'It's hard to find a suitable woman. I've been away for years, life in the valley has changed me, whereas here in the meantime...' Anyone who wanted to marry a girl had to give her father cows. Many young men couldn't meet the steep demands of their future fathers-in-law and decided to abduct a girl.

'Abduct her? How do they do that?'

'Oh, it's very simple. A boy lures a girl outside with the help of his friends, supposedly for a short walk. He takes her home with him...' — Bavire searched for the right words — '... où ils se cognent,' he said finally: where they bump against one another.

I laughed. 'Is that what it's called?'

'In this case, yes. The father-in-law is left with no choice. Once his daughter has slept under a strange man's roof she's no longer worth anything.'

In the past too, fathers-in-law were often presented with a *fait accompli*, Bavire told me, only then it was done in a more civilized manner. If a boy had his eye on a girl who'd been promised to a higher bidder, he'd send two friends to her house. They'd strike up an innocuous conversation with her father and then supposedly forget to take their walking

sticks with them.

Bavire suddenly put down his stick and scampered off. ‘When the father discovered the sticks he tried to run after them,’ he said, when I caught up. ‘But the boys were too quick for him, they were already well away over the hill.’

‘And then?’

‘The next morning they’d turn up again, pretending they’d come to fetch their sticks, and bring a cow with them. After that the man could no longer refuse their friend and the marriage was sealed.’

We were approaching Minembwe and had worked up a good pace. Bavire suddenly slapped his forehead. ‘My stick, where’s my stick?’ He turned round and started to walk back. In the heat of his storytelling he’d left it at the edge of the path.

The parish in Minembwe was a simple L-shaped building with white walls, green doors and a corrugated-iron roof, modelled on the mission posts of the colonial period. In my room I contemplated my new family history. My younger sister had a son and a daughter – I’d think of them whenever I talked about my children; that would help. Only I’d have to make them a bit older, since the next question people asked would of course be: ‘And why have you left those poor mites at home all alone?’ Because they’re at college, I would say.

Studying biology and literary history. That seemed a good combination.

As I continued to develop my fantasy I suddenly felt ashamed at the suggestion I’d put to Bavire. What would my Banyamulenge acquaintances in the valley think if they heard I’d lied to their parents? They lied in the other direction, I’d noticed. They kept quiet about the fact that they’d been married at seventeen to a fourteen-year-old girl and had three children by the time they were twenty – years might pass before you found out.

I put the matter before Curé Jorojoro. He’d lived in Minembwe for many years but originally came from the valley. He listened attentively and said: ‘Bavire’s right. Two children will ease your journey considerably.’