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Tété-Michel
Kpomassie
Michel the
Giant
An African in
Greenland

Michel the Giant

Tété-Michel Kpomassie was born in 1941 in Togo. At the age of sixteen he ran away from his traditional village and embarked on a twelve-year journey through West Africa and Europe to reach Greenland. Once there, he immersed himself in the life and customs of the local people and the landscapes that had captured his imagination from afar. On his return, he wrote about his travels under the working title of *Mikilissuaq* (*Michel the Giant*), the nickname he had been given by the children he met in Greenland. The resulting travelogue, published in French as *L'Africain du Groenland* in 1977, was awarded the Prix Littéraire Francophone International and shortlisted for the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award.

TÉTÉ-MICHEL KPOMASSIE

Michel the Giant

An African in Greenland

Translated by James Kirkup

Afterword translated by Ros Schwartz



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For Jean Callault

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PART I

The Python God

I

The Snake in the Coconut Tree

‘Not awake yet, is he?’ Uncle asked contemptuously.

He spoke softly, making visible effort not to raise his voice either to control his anger or so as not to disturb those who were still sleeping in the neighbouring huts.

‘Not yet,’ my brother Tété replied. ‘What a job it is to wake him! May the gods forgive me for what I’m about to say, but I think if a thunderbolt struck the roof, he’d still go on sleeping! I shook him and smacked his bottom, but he never even stirred!’

‘Is he breathing?’ Uncle asked.

‘Breathing? Like a blacksmith’s bellows!’

‘So he’s only pretending to sleep. He just wants to spend the day alone at home doing nothing. Like a big fat lizard, the lazybones!’

There was a moment’s silence, then Uncle said:

‘Splash cold water over him.’

A shiver ran through my body when Uncle uttered those words, but still I made no movement. I was rolled up in my loin-cloth, arms folded under my head. I squinted at my brother Tété. By the dim glow of the palm-oil lamp I could see him moving towards a corner of the room, behind the door, where we put drinking water to cool in an earthenware jar called a *canari*. He picked up the gourd which lay on the *canari*’s wooden lid, filled it brimful of water, took it in both hands, and crept towards me. I leapt to my feet, hugging the loincloth to my

body, and implored my brother not to throw the water over me. Reluctantly, he put the gourd on the ground, though not before dipping his fingers in it and flicking a few drops of water in my face.

Under the stern eye of my uncle, still standing in the doorway, I quickly rolled up my sleeping mat and leaned it against the wooden wall at the far end of the room. Then I started looking for my khaki shorts. They were on the beaten earth floor of the hut, in the corner where I had thrown them before I went to sleep: we were forbidden to sleep in anything except a loincloth. After putting on my shorts, I picked up the loincloth I had used as a cover during the night. It was an indigo loincloth, a colour I loved. The material, a beautiful cotton twill, had been dyed by one of my *navi*, the wives whom my father had married after my mother. Now I had to tie the cloth around my waist, or else wrap my whole body in it against the morning chill. To do this, we stretch the loincloth lengthwise behind our backs, holding it by the two upper corners, which we then cross over the chest and tie around our necks. It took me some time, because I was still only half awake. I kept yawning and scratching myself.

‘Get a move on!’ yelled my uncle. ‘Everyone’s ready but you. It’ll soon be daylight!’

Uncle was exaggerating. The cock had just crowed for the second time.

We used to set off like this, very early in the morning, to gather coconut tree fibres and branches. We used the fibres to make straw mats for sale. That morning we had got up earlier than usual. In fact, the night before, we had decided to leave before dawn, hoping to return at noon and spend the rest of the day weaving our mats. It was the school holidays. We were forbidden to climb the coconut trees near the houses and inside the courtyards, to avoid accidents if people (especially children) were to pass under the trees just as we were cutting down a

bunch of coconuts. Despite this ban, we had already collected all the good nuts from the trees in our neighbourhood. Now we had to go farther afield to find new ones.

That morning, I didn't feel like going to the coconut plantation; I had a foreboding. Uncle wasn't altogether wrong to call me a lazybones, but a few hours later he would regret having forced me to go with them.

I tied my loincloth around my neck and we were finally on our way. The courtyard was in darkness. On our left, a large building roofed with corrugated iron occupied the centre, facing the entrance; my father lived there, and he was still asleep. In front of us, along the wall, was a row of huts belonging to the five wives he had at that time. These huts were made of unbaked bricks and roofed with straw. They formed a linked series of individual single rooms without communicating doors but very spacious, for each of our mothers slept there with her younger children of both sexes: on one side, the smaller boys, who were not considered real men and so not entitled to separate huts in the big courtyard, and on the other side the girls of all ages. The girls would get married some day and leave the family, so they lived there only temporarily. Father seldom entered these huts, and we had never known him to sleep in any of them. Instead, for one month each wife would leave her hut in the evening and live in intimacy with our father in the big central building. The wife who shared his bed was the one who made his meals for that month. As a rule, she cooked two separate meals: one, dainty and delicious, for Father, which required endless time spent preparing various little appetizing dishes; the other, less elaborate, for her children, whose food she nearly always shared, while Father took his meals alone.

This monthly selection of a wife was not done by lot or by my father's choice, but was in order of seniority, from the first to the last wife in fixed rotation, so as to avoid threats of divorce.

Like it or not, each of the wives was periodically omitted and had to absent herself from felicity because of our father's rigorous observance of certain traditional prohibitions. The wife whose turn it was must not be in the process of being 'visited by the moon', which causes menstruation, and must not be nursing a child. Any wife in either of these states was temporarily impure in our father's eyes, and he would not touch food prepared by her or share his roof with her. (The children, both boys and girls, were not affected by this ban.)

When we got up, none of the wives was yet out of bed; no sound came from that side of the courtyard, though behind us, through the closed doors, we could hear our elder brothers snoring. We stepped over the sheep and crossed the vast courtyard without a sound, the soft sand muffling our footsteps.

When we reached the well, whose cemented rim formed a darker mass in the blackness between our mothers' huts and our father's house, I drew two buckets of water which I poured into a larger bucket, where we dipped our hands to wash our faces and rinse our mouths. Just then, Kunugnan (Innocent), our household dog, left the threshold of my father's hut, approached us and, wagging his tail, tried to lick our wet faces. After making sure to empty our washing water on the sandy ground, we left the compound. Kunugnan followed us.

Soon we had passed the last houses in Kpéhénou, one of the outlying suburbs of Lomé, and set out along a narrow footpath through the bush. The great feather dusters of the coconut trees, now more numerous, were swaying above our heads like gigantic parasols whose outlines stood out in infinite recession against a pale sky that was slowly growing brighter. Not far away, a dark blue sweep of sea was sparkling in the first rays of the rising sun. A warm breeze played around us, slowly swaying the ribbed branches of the coconut palms and dislodging big

drops of dew that spattered our bare shoulders, making us shiver.

I was the youngest of the three, so according to custom I was walking in front. Behind me came my 'revered big brother' Tété, five months older than me. He was the first son of my father's second wife. Our young uncle, Ahouanssou, brought up the rear. He was almost as old as our eldest brother, but none of us, not even my big brother, was allowed to address him by name. We simply called him *Atavi* (paternal uncle); he was one of our father's cousins. Nor were we allowed to address our older brothers – even if they were only one week older than us – without using the title *Fofó* before their names. This means 'revered big brother'. Even twins are not exempt from this rule in our traditionalist families, though for them the order is reversed: the elder of the twins is the one who is born last. We explain this by saying: 'It is the last-born twin who ordered his little brother to go out first and find out if the world was worth looking at. And depending on the newborn child's first cries and what he says, the big brother comes out either alive or stillborn.'

Togolese fathers cannot conceive of any community, however small, without authority, without one or several heads who issue the orders; the absence of hierarchy is unthinkable, even among brothers! As the sixth of my father's many children, I had to obey without a murmur my four elder brothers and one elder sister, not to mention this very distant uncle. Of course the rest of my brothers and sisters had to show me the same respect and obedience. So if an order was given for some tiresome job, the elder brothers could get out of it by foisting it on the younger ones. The youngest son of the family, crushed flat at the base of a pyramid whose summit was our father, was the one to be pitied most.

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We walked on without a word, chewing our toothpicks.

Custom did not lay down the position Kunugnan should occupy on that narrow path, so he often amused himself by scampering off. He would gambol through the thickets, his body drenched with heavy drops of dew, sniffing out dead lizards and pausing outside rat holes which had been taken over by snakes.

The sight of a dead lizard suddenly recalled a fading memory. I must have been about twelve or thirteen, for I had long been circumcised. We were hunting a kind of lizard with a pink, iridescent skin. It is hard to kill them on the ground because of their astonishing speed, but sometimes, unfortunately for them, they try to escape by climbing a coconut palm. We call them, in the Mina language, *adimbolo* or else *adambolo*. To hunt them we would use a long whip of fine, plaited wires. When we spied a lizard clinging to the trunk of a coconut palm, we crept around to the side opposite the animal, then cautiously approached the tree, the whip concealed behind our backs, and placed the index finger of the other hand against the tree trunk. We believed these creatures were deaf, but all the same we never spoke or made any noise while approaching for the kill. One of our brothers would stand some distance away, making signals with his head, not with his hands, to let us know if the position of that finger was exactly opposite the centre of the body of the wary reptile crouched stock-still on the other side of the trunk. 'No, not there . . . a bit higher . . .' the brother would signal, slightly lifting his chin. 'A bit lower . . .' he would continue, with a slight downward movement. 'Yes, that's it,' he would finally grin. Then the hunter would silently take a step or two back, gather all his strength, and *whack!* – give the coconut tree a vigorous lash while at the same time pulling on the whip, which zipped around the trunk. The lizard was nearly always killed on the spot.

When we had killed a dozen or so in this way, we would hide among the bushes, so as not to be interrupted by the adults. There we gutted the lizards with sharp stones or with shards of broken bottles. Then came an operation of great importance in our adolescent lives. We arranged the corpses on a piece of broken earthenware or bit of iron sheeting that we placed – unknown to our parents, and especially to our mothers and sisters – on the roof of a shed. We kept a careful watch on these lizards. When the weather was rainy, we smuggled them into our rooms, not minding having to live with the smell all night. Finally, after several days on the roof under the burning sun, the lizards would sweat a tiny quantity of melted grease that we carefully collected. After this, the carcasses were thrown away or sometimes even buried, so as not to arouse suspicion.

The ceremony which then took place was conducted by our *Fofogan*, the first son of our father's first wife, therefore the eldest son in the entire family. We held it in the middle of the night when everybody, including our father, was in bed. Then, in one of our rooms we would form a semicircle, standing on the beaten earth floor or squatting on a mat. We would remove our loincloths. *Fofogan*, also naked, would dip his fingers in the lizard grease and spread it on his penis in layer upon thin layer. Then it was our turn, according to age. The scene took place by the flickering light of a little palm-oil lamp. The aim of this operation was to make the penis longer and thicker, and to prolong erection, and those, we believed, were only a few of the grease's many virtues. We didn't wash ourselves for three days after applying this grease, so that, we claimed, it could work more effectively by getting right under the skin. For us, this avoidance of washing was the hardest part of the operation, for custom required us to wash three times a day, before each meal. So when we carried fresh water into the wash place, we would splash and trickle it all around, in a pretence of washing. We

repeated the lizard grease ceremony time after time: sometimes, the lizards yielded so little grease that we were forced to use the carcasses. However, three days after each ceremony, we went back to regular washing in the traditional way. Then we started all over again. Finally, in order to test the efficacy of the grease, we would try our luck with the neighbourhood girls.

Then our *Fofogan* would gather us together once more in great secrecy, and ask each one of us who had tried the ultimate experience:

‘How many times?’

‘Three times,’ some would say.

‘Five!’ boasted others.

‘But it should have been *seven* times!’ he would cry in consternation, and the ones who scored too low had to go through the whole procedure again.

Once more, the lizard war began.

Kunugnan came running out of a thicket towards us with a lizard in his jaws: he laid it at our feet, but it was not the right kind. We continued along the path, each sunk in his own thoughts. The morning sun was rising; with each moment the sand was growing warm, and we knew that towards eleven o’clock, on our return, the path would be burning hot under our bare feet. So we hurried. Our machetes, whose notched blades were thrust through our belts, slapped against our thighs. Soon we had reached our destination.

Whenever we started to cut branches in the coconut grove without first going to say good morning to the watchman, he would start giving us trouble as soon as he spotted us in the trees: threatening us with his machete, he would order us to come straight down, then chase us away and confiscate the branches we had cut. But if we went to pay him our respects as soon as we arrived, he would leave us in peace.

Before making our way to the watchman's house, I handed three five-cent coins to my uncle, as did my brother, to which my uncle added his own share. Then we took a shortcut, walking on the grass. Uncle was in front, followed by my brother, while I walked behind them now, for it was up to the eldest to approach the watchman and do the talking.

This watchman lived alone among the coconut trees, in a straw hut surrounded by a fence; and there were no other houses for several hundred metres around. The tight-woven branches of the fence were firmly tied to thick stalks stuck into the ground. These stalks would begin to grow again, forming a dense hedge above the fence that half-concealed the conical roof of the hut in the middle. Mountains of copra for the manufacture of coconut oil were piled up in front of the house, near the water trough, and some of them had begun to sprout, too. Hens scratched about in the courtyard.

Uncle clapped his hands to announce our approach. A moment later, the watchman appeared on the threshold of his hut and motioned to us to wait. He crossed the yard, making his fine white slippers slap against his bare heels as he walked. He wore a long blue tunic, and his shaven head was covered by a conical cap pulled down to just above his jet-black, slanting eyes. His hands were wrinkled, and the veins stood out like gnarled, spreading roots. His weasel face, ending in a little pointed beard, seemed very funny to us. He was a Peuhl herdsman – a different tribe from ours – and didn't speak our language well. Although he might have been about our father's age, we didn't call him by the respectable title of *Ata*, or papa, as we did other adults, for he was a 'foreigner'. Instead, we called him *Yessuvi* (little Jesus) because of his goatee beard and the solitary life he led. But as he was a Muslim, this nickname infuriated him. He had no wife, and on this score we badgered him with all kinds of rude and even cruel jokes. As he kept cattle, we

would ask: 'Hey, *Yessuvi*, is it because you prefer doing it to your cows?' Then the culprits would take to their heels. Fortunately for us, he did not always recognize his persecutors when we returned to the coconut plantation. So he greeted us with a broad smile, revealing two rows of disgusting teeth yellowed by cola-chewing.

We didn't have time to tease poor old *Yessuvi* or to play any tricks on him, so after the usual greetings *Atavi* handed him the forty-five cents. 'That's very kind of you,' said the watchman, closing his fingers on the coins. 'You're good boys, you are. Go and pick the nuts, but don't waste the new ones.'

Then he turned round and left us.

That immense coconut plantation, called the 'Pa' or 'Papa de Suza' plantation after a Togolese VIP, covers all the southern region, from the Ghanaian frontier to the borders of Dahomey (Benin) – a distance of fifty kilometres. The trees stand one behind the other in perfectly straight lines, which shows that they did not spring up naturally. Often I would count twelve paces from one tree to the next and see only a tiny crack of blue sky between the spreading branches overhead. Sometimes you would come across a tree still solid enough at its base, but dead at the top – it had been struck by lightning. The weird impression made by these leafless, blasted trees was similar to what one might feel on seeing lepers, who have lost their fingers, in the middle of a crowd of healthy people. Nobody touched these blasted trees; they were left to rot and crumble on their own. After a few years, when nothing remained but roots and the stump of a trunk, the watchman dared to approach the spot and replace them with saplings taken from the piles of copra and cultivated in a kind of nursery next to his house.

I've no idea why, after leaving *Yessuvi* that morning, we headed westward into the plantation, when we usually went north. We moved away from the sea, which a narrow strip of

beach separated from the first row of coconut palms, whose slender trunks were green from the spray.

The track we were following grew narrower and narrower. Tall bushes came right up to my shoulders. Some leaves, when they touched our bodies, gave us a violent itch and made us scratch furiously. Birds with brilliant plumage flew off at our approach. The undergrowth to our left and right was a mass of all sorts of shrubs. There were some *djémakpan* (salt-leaf plants), and an abundance of the curious fern that in the Mina tongue we call *miongui-miongui* or, in other regions, *mianta-mianta*, both expressions having the same meaning which, freely translated, might be rendered as 'modesty', because this fern reacts quickly to the slightest contact. The great gales of the bush, as they batter the fern from all angles, have no effect upon it, but it closes up its leaves as soon as you touch it with your fingers. The leaves on the branches which have felt the contact react immediately by standing up symmetrically, two by two, flattening themselves against one another. They cling timidly together along the branch for about five minutes before beginning to open slowly again, thinking the intruder far away. As soon as you touch them again, the same thing happens.

The track finally led us to a wide open space where the grass had been cleared, and Uncle decided that we would make this our meeting place because now we were to separate, each going his own way to look for branches that he would bring back to this spot in small bundles of a dozen or so. This precaution allowed us to keep in contact with one another on that immense plantation. If one of us took too long to report back, we would go and see if anything had happened to him.

Our loincloths usually got in the way when we were shining up the trees, so we preferred to leave them behind at our meeting place, taking care to roll them up neatly and place a small bunch of grass or a handful of sand on top of them. This

way anyone passing by in our absence would realize that the loincloths had not just been discarded by their owners. Like any other Mina, I would never take any object marked like this because the tuft of grass and the handful of sand bring bad luck to anyone who steals the object hidden underneath. We are brought up in the belief that anyone appropriating an article covered with such signs risks the vengeance of Hêviesso, the lightning god, or of Sakpatê, the earth goddess – represented here by the tuft of grass or the handful of sand – whose punishment comes in the form of smallpox (unfortunately, she forgets that it's contagious).

My brother was the first to leave. A few seconds later I caught sight of him in the distance. He was halfway up a coconut palm. From where I was standing he looked like a giant ant, and he was climbing steadily. Soon he had reached the top and merged into the great fan of leaves. *Atavi* had left, too, but the high grass round the clearing kept me from seeing which way he had gone.

Left alone, I in turn moved towards a tall, slender coconut tree about twenty metres high and only a few paces away from where we had deposited our loincloths. It was enveloped in creepers. A shadowy fear took hold of me as I looked up at its great tufted crest. Though the tree was big and solid at the base, near the crown it was incredibly thin, swaying precariously in the wind. But it was loaded with ripe coconuts, so I quickly shrugged off the apprehension inspired by the creepers and the fragility of the upper trunk, till I had only one thing in mind – to send all those coconuts crashing to the ground! I even felt glad that neither my uncle nor my brother had been the first to notice this special sort of greasy pole with prizes at the top.

My bare foot was already set on the broad swelling formed at the base by exposed roots. My arms embraced the trunk in a powerful squeeze, I spread my legs out, flexed my knees to raise

my feet and clamp the tree between my thighs, then relaxed the grip of my arms and heaved myself farther up by shoving with my feet. In this way I used my feet and arms in turn to hoist myself rhythmically up the tree. Clambering without a rope up coconut trees, which are nearly always smooth at the base but rough from the middle up, was an almost daily exercise for us boys, and I had no trouble doing it, though it often left me with a few grazes on my chest. But those very scratches made us proud! Often the scar tissue would open again as we were climbing.

I had reached the thinnest part of the trunk, just under the first dry, reddish branches hanging around my head, and I stretched out my legs horizontally, then crossed them to squeeze the trunk firmly between my thighs and gain a solid grip, enabling me to free my arms. Taking hold of a dry branch, I gave it a tug: it came away easily and I was showered with dusty debris. This often contains small creatures like centipedes (whose bite is painful, sometimes dangerous) and scorpions. It was to prevent these nasty little creatures from slipping into our pants that before climbing we would tie round our waists a belt or even a piece of rope that also served to hold our machetes. I shut my eyes so as not to be blinded by dust, and quickly ran my hands all over my body to dislodge those little pests, if there were any. An instant later, I heard the branch land on the ground.

After pulling off two or three more branches, all dry as tinder, and cutting off some yellow ones, I found myself high up in the green branches of the palm. These are tougher than the others and cling strongly to the trunk, from which they still draw sap. They spring vigorously skyward before bending half-way down to form that familiar graceful curve. Each one forms a large cavity at its base, where it joins the trunk, and these cavities collect rainwater. However, as the branches of a coconut

palm grow one above the other, the highest shelter the ones below, which get less rain. Some species of birds make their nests there.

I grabbed the green branches one after another, shifted my feet on the stem, and hoisted myself to the very top of the tree, where I settled fairly comfortably, shivering in the wind. All the bunches of coconuts were now clustered underneath my feet, so that by giving two or three thumps with my heel, I could easily shake a whole bunch loose. But first I wanted to reward myself for the effort I had made in getting up there, so I sliced the top off a big, tender nut and drank all its milk, burping beautifully at intervals, then got rid of the empty shell by dropping it to the ground. It was just at that moment that, glancing sideways, I saw right next to me the gleaming neck of a snake that was furiously swaying its scaly head while its long, thin, forked tongue kept flickering nervously in and out. The rest of its body was coiled in the cavity at the base of a big branch, and its thick loops lay across a prodigious mass of eggs: some of these had already hatched, and the reptile came no closer, probably for fear of dislodging the baby snakes that twined around its body.

The moment I set eyes on that horrible creature and her young, I was overwhelmed by terror. I couldn't kill it with my machete, because we had often been warned not to cut a snake in two with any kind of blade, as we might be struck by the severed head jerking in atrocious convulsions and its jaws might fasten on some part of our body. The only way to kill it was with a stick, and I didn't have one. In any case, the paralyzing fright that took hold of me made the machete slip from my hands.

From that great height, I didn't dare drop to the ground. Taking a good grip on two solid branches, in seconds I was clutching the trunk again, meaning to slide down to the ground. But the

snake was quicker than me; she shook the baby snakes off her sinuous body and started unwinding down the trunk towards my forehead. I was in such a panic that I lost all sense of danger and was instinctively driven to use my own bare hand as a weapon. The reptile, which may only have been trying to see me off, swarmed down after me in my rapid descent. As the snake slid towards me like a long ripple of water, I could see that terrible white throat raised slightly away from the rugged trunk of the coconut palm, while the rest of its long body hugged the tree. I don't know exactly when the edge of my right hand struck that slack body, but the blow shook it loose. Wriggling, it slid over my hair, then down my spine, spun in the air like a great lasso and thumped down on the sand below. How lucky I was to have climbed up without loincloth or shirt, or the reptile might have lodged there. In a flash, I remembered the premonition I had had at dawn, when I hadn't wanted to get up, and my apprehension before scaling the tree.

I felt relieved to be rid of the snake, but a few moments of violent aftershock made me tremble all over. Then I pulled myself together and went on down as quickly as I could, though fearful of not having the strength to reach the ground. Lost in a sort of daze, I happened to glance downward and was stunned by an unexpected sight: the snake, having apparently wasted no time lying on the sand, had started to slide back up the tree towards her young. I couldn't believe my eyes. How was I to get down? Not for anything in the world would I face another meeting. I had no desire to see it sliding over my body again or fastening its fangs in one of my bare feet. So halfway down the coconut tree, I sprang into space. A drop of about ten metres.

I hit the sand with an impact that shook me to the bone. There was a stabbing pain, a terrible crash, a sort of lightning flash, then total blackness. I made a superhuman effort to drag myself along for a couple of metres or so, digging my elbows in

The Python God

the sand, wriggling, straining, trying to get up, but in vain. I blacked out.

My brother and my uncle told me, much later, that I was *kou pégni* (half dead). Alerted by my shouts when I was struggling with the snake, they had caught a distant sight of it slithering over my head. They had come running up with sticks, but too late.

The Sacred Forest

I don't know how long I remained unconscious. Hours, perhaps days later, I came to. Sweat was pouring down my face. Painfully I turned my head and gazed about me. I was lying on a mat spread over a smooth, cemented surface which was nothing like the uneven beaten earth of our rooms. I let my eyes wander over the walls and the objects in the room, and realized that I knew where I was – in my father's living room. I recognized the voice of a neighbour, a friend of my father's, saying: 'It was lucky he passed out right away, or else the fear and commotion would have carried the venom straight to his heart.' Besides my father and his friend, there were five or six people bending over me; I couldn't recognize all the faces. I closed my eyes again and once more lost consciousness, before I could answer a single question. It was not until much later that I discovered what had happened when they brought me home.

They had inspected my hair carefully to try to find the marks of the snake's fangs, for my uncle and brother had said I was bound to have been bitten on the head, but they could find nothing. Then they had turned me this way and that, but among the bruises that covered my body like a rotten mango, they had not been able to discover the fatal wounds they were looking for, those two cruel little punctures that a snake usually leaves on its victim's body. Nevertheless, my father had sucked the blood out of all suspicious marks. To do so, he filled his mouth

with *sodabi*, distilled palm wine. Perhaps it was the burning sensation of this alcohol on my wounds that brought me around from my second fainting spell. When at last I was able to answer questions, my father asked me again and again:

‘Were you bitten?’

Painfully I shook my head to say: ‘No.’

‘What?’ he cried. ‘The snake didn’t bite you? Are you quite sure? Tell me quickly!’

‘No. It slid over my head, but it didn’t hurt me.’

At these words, there was a great stir all around me. My father was alarmed. I soon learned why when I felt a bitter taste in my mouth. While I was unconscious, he had forced me to swallow eight pills made of roots and toad venom. It was an antidote, and the eight pills amounted to a very strong dose, but as I hadn’t been bitten after all, my father realized that his home-made antidote, far from bringing relief, was slowly poisoning me. That was why his face showed such anxiety. He had me drink plenty of water, then stuck two fingers down my throat and made me vomit copiously.

I had broken nothing, but after two days I still could not get up. I lay there in the living room, where they had covered me with my father’s ceremonial loincloth, woven and decorated with bands of colours all broken up like the design of a parquet floor. It was a loincloth of the kind known as *kenté*. Some thinner loincloths were spread on the mat, and the wives had rolled up others and put them under my head as a pillow, taking care to leave out any that were plain white, a symbol of death, for the dead are buried in white cotton loincloths.

On the very first evening after my accident, fever had set in. I was delirious, and my nightmares swarmed with snakes. Everybody was worried, yet they didn’t take me to the hospital, either because it didn’t occur to them or because tradition dictated otherwise. My father treated me with two or three different

herbal potions, which I drank in small doses, and twice a day – in the morning at about eleven and in the evening before sunset – they took me out to bathe me. Rather than take me to the nearby yard, where the boys and girls who still lacked hair in their armpits and at the groin could bathe together, they walked me slowly to the wash place at the other end of the patio, because I was already adolescent.

On the evening of the second day, my condition worsened. At the peak of the fever my delirium increased, with prolonged intervals of lethargy.

At nightfall my father's first wife – whom I addressed according to tradition by the respectful title of *Nagan*, because she had been married before my own mother – entered the living room to bring me food. She had brought some *akassa*, a porridge with a maize flour base. *Nagan*, bending over me, was struck by the fixity of my gaze. My eyes were dim and I was staring into space, with no feeling in my limbs. My breathing was slow. *Nagan* put down the calabash of *akassa*, and waved her hand in front of my face: my eyes didn't follow it. Then she spoke my name: I didn't answer. She thought she was watching my last moments! That's how we generally await death, not clinging to life with frightful moans, but calmly and with resignation, much as we wait for a train or a 'bush taxi' in our country, indifferent to the time of departure or when we'll reach our destination.

Nagan called out in alarm to my father, who was sorting plants in the yard, in the big barn that we used as our kitchen.

'*Fofó*, come quickly!'

Father came running, a loincloth knotted around his hips. When he saw the state I was in, he sent two of my brothers to look for more plants, especially one root whose name I forget; then he sent two other brothers to fetch a white chicken. It appears that, while in that state of prostration, I had a brief moment of hallucination when I spoke a phrase that sick people

close to death often pronounce in our land. Apparently I told them that I was standing beside a great river; drawn to the opposite bank by the beauty of its landscape, I was calling out for a boat to take me across. That signified that I wanted to pass from this life into the next, and my father said this would inevitably have happened if, during my delirium, I had taken my place in the dugout canoe I was asking for in my dream. As soon as I spoke these words, father dismissed his weeping wives and shut the door of the room. Only *Nagan* remained. My brothers hadn't been able to find any completely white chicken in the yard: the one they brought had a few black feathers at the tips of its wings.

'That's not what I need,' he told them. 'Run and get a completely white one from the neighbours!'

The brothers who had gone off into the bush returned half an hour later bringing plants they had collected, roots and all. Father cut off one of these roots, wiped it on his loincloth, then snapped it apart and dripped its milky sap into my nostrils. I felt a prickling sensation in my brain, and in a few moments sat up and sneezed violently. Soon afterwards my breathing went back to normal. Then they brought the white pullet.

Father sat me up and passed the chicken fourteen times around my head, seven times one way, seven times the other. Then he passed it as many times over my body, from head to foot and foot to head, letting its outspread wings brush my body. He was holding the chicken by its feet, head dangling. Then he cut its throat and poured all the hot blood over me. He skinned the bird without pulling out a single feather and placed it on its back, the stomach open and pulsing, in a big earthenware dish covered with a white cloth. Next, he rubbed my body all over with cowrie shells,* which were cold to the touch, then

* Shells used as money in Black Africa.

with shelled cola nuts, and placed everything in the dish beside the chicken. That night one of my brothers went outside to deposit this dish and its contents at a crossroads. No one must recover that beautiful dish or its contents: it was a *vossa*, a sacrificial offering. The chicken had exchanged its brief life for mine to let me live a few more moments, the time my father needed to finish the lengthy preparation of the plants he was sorting in the yard. Soon afterwards the fever dropped, and I fell into a deep sleep.

When I wakened during the night, I heard the sound of arguing on the veranda. *Nagan* was saying:

‘You shouldn’t leave the child like that, trying to cure him yourself, even if you are a good healer!’

It was the first time I had heard her talking to my father in that tone of voice.

‘I’m just a poor woman,’ she went on firmly, ‘but I’ll tell you what I think. Before stuffing a sick boy with roots and herbs, first find out the cause of his sickness. Do we even know why the snake attacked him up in the tree? Who knows whether he hasn’t perhaps offended the ancestral spirits or done some wrong to snakes. Terrible accidents never happen by chance – there’s always some hidden cause.’

There was a silence. I could well imagine my father looking askance at his wife, surprised by the assurance in her voice. His condescending answer astounded me:

‘So what do you suggest? Send him to the hospital, where the doctors know nothing of our customs? Do they even know how we prepare our sick to face death when they’re dying?’

‘No, *Fofò*, I’m not saying we should take him to the hospital, but to *Bè*, in the sacred forest, to be cured by the followers of the snake cult. Only their *bokonon* can get to the root of the accident, discover its meaning, and perform the right sacrifices and the proper cure. You can’t do one without the other!’

The *bokonon* are priests who are in touch with divinities. Father, who was himself a *bokonon*, possessed a vast knowledge of plants, their virtues, and the illnesses they can cure: he knew how to blend and administer them. He worshipped and consulted a certain number of divinities. But, not being initiated into the python cult, he obviously couldn't back up the treatment he was giving me with the proper sacrifices. According to *Nagan*, those sacrifices were indispensable for curing me mentally, while the herbs and roots would bring me physical relief.

'You're right, Gbalessu,' my father finally admitted.

He decided to take me the next day to Bè, to the priestess of the snake cult.

Next day, a little before sunset, at the hour when the day begins to cool, they got me up. I was helped across the yard by our *Fofogan* and another brother.

Father, wearing straw sandals and clad in his great woven loincloth, which he wore like a plaid over his shirt, walked in front. My mother didn't come with us. For the last few months she had been staying in her native village because she was expecting a baby; fortunately for her, as yet she knew nothing of my accident. There was no telling how she might react to the news of my condition, for each of the two daughters she had borne had died of fever, one before and one after my birth, at the ages of eight and twelve, so that I was her only child left. Moreover our mothers, who were considered only as child-bearers, had no place in their husband's dwelling (in which they hold no authority, being nearly always under the thumb of our aunts, our father's sisters), except when a living child formed a link between them and our father's family. On the other hand, they in turn had great authority in their brothers' households over their nephews and nieces. While my mother was absent from Lomé, my father's first wife acted as my mother. *Nagan*