

BA ILA AND BUFFALO

THERE IS no outstation in Northern Rhodesia that is more wholly African in setting than Namwala. For sheer untamed beauty and wilderness it surpasses any other Boma I have ever seen.

Every rural district, of course, has its own particular African characteristic and some are more picturesque than others. Invariably the district headquarters of even the most beautiful parts of the Territory are slowly becoming little townships each with their own incongruous air of propriety. Not so Namwala which is much the same as it ever was. Time has dealt with it gently and in so doing the station has an atmosphere of age and dignity.

The Boma is close to a large lagoon which has an outlet to the Kafue river, the biggest of the Zambezi tributaries. The lagoon is wide and deep and is often mistaken by visitors and newcomers for the main river. Between the lagoon, which is a mere stone's throw from the D.C.'s office, and the Kafue is a huge island. Again, to those who do not know the area, because of its size the island is often taken to be mainland. The half a dozen or so official residences, which have been spaced well apart, are stretched along the bank of the lagoon. Each one, standing in its own grounds, commands a magnificent view of the water, the island and the backdrop of papyrus grass, palm trees and river swamp country.

Being so near to the Kafue river and its lagoon it is not surprising that the Namwala Boma literally stands in sand. When at certain times of the year the wind sweeps across from the river the district headquarters is blanketed in minor sandstorms which are unpleasant in the extreme and play havoc with the open verandas of the residences.

But the most delightful characteristic of the station is its varied and prolific bird-life. Day begins at Namwala with the screeching of the fish eagles (Northern Rhodesia's National bird) and the "honking" noises of the giant maribou storks that frequent the many enormous wild fig trees that surround the Boma. The black and white eagles that nest in the trees along the banks of the Kafue river nearby begin sweeping across the little station as soon as dawn appears. Their cries echo from the

lagoon, defiant, proud. At the same time, and occasionally even before the sun comes up, the ungainly yet friendly giant maribou storks will flutter down from the huge wild fig trees and begin a morning chorus that is reminiscent of the noise of London traffic. Then as the heat of the day approaches the eagles and storks disappear to cooler parts and give way to the many different types of sun-loving birds. Towards evening flights of wild-fowl of every description are seen making their way to their regular night haunts. Even after dark at Namwala the air is filled with the sounds of the night-jars, the owls and other nocturnal winged creatures, and so for twenty-four hours of the day there is a symphony of wings and a melody of Africa.

Living within a few miles of the Namwala Boma is the senior chief of the Ba Ila. His name is Mukobela and he is, as far as I can gather, some seventy-five years old. At the time I first met him he had nineteen wives of varying ages including a few who were certainly under twenty. He had but very few children.

Chief Mukobela, unlike many of his people, has a very ready wit and is something of a character. He is very wealthy, owns huge herds of cattle, two motor-cars and a lorry. I remember only too well the occasion when he purchased one of his cars. He came on a "State" visit to the Boma one day and announced his intention of buying a certain vehicle that was priced at £965. He told me that he wanted me to make the purchase on his behalf and when I agreed he said that he would send me the money on the following day. The next morning ten men arrived outside my office each holding two money bags of the type issued by banks. When the bags were inspected I was horrified to find that Mukobela had sent me £965 in small change—the largest denomination was a half-a-crown and there were not so many of them.

I enjoyed my occasional talks with the chief and found him to be a dignified old gentleman with a lot of sound sense. Although he was always courteous and well-mannered he liked to show he was a bit of a wag and would delight in getting in a dig at either the Provincial Administration or Europeans in general.

He told me once that he did not know if education was a good thing for his tribe. "It has done our children little good except to teach them to become rude to their elders," he said. "But on the other hand it has helped us old men to learn much of the ways of the European. Being old men, of course, we have only taken notice of the good things and have ignored the bad."

Then, rather tragically I thought, he referred to what he called his "beloved cattle". He said: "To the Ba Ila, cattle are

not only wealth as you Europeans know it—we live and we die with our cattle and when we are no more their spirits join ours. In the old days the young men of our tribe knew all about our beasts but today with so much education they have no time for them. When we old men are dead what is to become of our herds! What a disgrace it will be if ‘foreigners’ have to be employed to do the traditional work of the Ba Ila.”

On another occasion we were talking about the smoking of dagga and I was telling him that he should take severe action against those who smoked it. “Wa!” he exclaimed, “in the old days before you people came along all the people smoked dagga AND they were better behaved than lots of Europeans I have seen who drink too much whisky!” I did not think that there was much of an answer to that one.

When Chief Mukobela said that the Ba Ila lived and died with their cattle he was not exaggerating. These people are a pastoral tribe and their sole wealth lies in the ownership of large herds of cattle, their lives being dominated by the welfare of the animals. At the age of puberty the Mwila child has its four front top teeth removed as a token that it belongs to a cattle-owning tribe (cattle have no front top teeth). Although this practice is today losing favour as a result of Missionary and Government school teachings, there are still many families that insist on the custom being carried out. Formerly, it was also customary to drown any child which cut its top teeth before its bottom ones.

But the veneration of cattle by the Ba Ila loses all sense of proportion at the ghastly ceremony known as *Masuntu*. Shortly before I left Namwala I witnessed a *Masuntu* and I still have vivid nightmares about it! It was a particularly large ceremony and this made it even more gruesome. *Masuntu* is the killing of cattle by spearing on the death and interment of a member of the tribe. The reason for the slaughter of cattle is to ensure that the deceased person does not enter the next world alone and that he is accompanied by the spirits of some of his beasts. Hence the reason for Mukobela’s statement that his people “lived and died” with their cattle.

Each year there are many *Masuntu* ceremonies in the Namwala district and at each one there is a wholesale slaughter of cattle. The awful aspect is not so much that good stock is being unnecessarily destroyed and wealth is being wasted, but that the way in which the beasts are killed is inhuman, cruel and degrading.

At the ceremony I attended the corpse of a local headman had been buried immediately in front of, and about fifteen

yards away from, his hut. The village was a seething mass of tribesmen and women who had partaken of much beer and had come to see the fun and take home some of the meat that would soon be available. At a given signal the crowds made a large arena around the area of the grave and immediately the wives of the deceased headman threw themselves across the grave and began to wail. They wore only skirts of animal skins and their bodies were daubed in ashes and clay. Ten minutes or so after the wailing had begun a large party of tribesmen dressed in traditional monkey skins and lion-maned collars and carrying long spears ran into the arena yelling and chanting war cries. They were a fearsome sight. Then they began to run to and fro over the grave, stamping it down with warlike gestures to chase away any evil spirits which might be attempting to make a home therein. After this the warriors turned on the crowd and began to charge in to them with their spears upraised. The reason for this was to chase away any of the spirits which might be mingling with the onlookers.

When it was thought that sufficient of the evil spirits had been dispatched the *Masuntu* itself commenced. The deceased had been a wealthy man with a very large cattle herd. Now, according to custom, about fifteen per cent of his beasts were being sent into the arena for the slaughter. Drums were beating madly and the crowd was working itself up into a frenzy as the first victim was chased across the grave. Lined up ready for action were the tribesmen with their spears at the ready. Suddenly the drums were silenced. With a loud shout the first warrior ran after the beast and flung his spear. It was thrown without any care and pierced the wretched animal’s buttock. The crowd roared and the drums began to beat again. Then the line of tribesmen broke up and while more beasts were chased into the arena spears flew in all directions, some landing dangerously near the spectators. The first animal was soon standing in the middle of the holocaust bellowing out its death pangs. In its body there were more than a dozen spears; its entrails were hanging out of a large gaping wound in its belly, one spear had pierced its rectum. There was blood everywhere. One by one the same gruesome end befell at least sixty head of cattle, most of which were in their prime and each worth more than £20. It took these blood-lusty “braves” exactly two hours to butcher £1,200-worth of good livestock. When they had finished the arena looked like a battleground; among the deep pools of blood some of the less fortunate beasts were still kicking and twitching and were being worried by packs of village dogs; others that were beyond pain were lying

where they had dropped with spears sticking out of their bodies giving the impression of a grotesque pattern of giant pin cushions. Dripping with the blood and gore of their victims the tribesmen had dropped exhausted to the ground and were being refreshed by gourds of beer brought to them by the young women of the village.

A blood-letting, a barbarity, a degradation was over, and as I turned away half fascinated, half disgusted at what I had seen, the crowd were beginning to swarm over the dead animals like an army of ants, hacking, pulling, and ripping their bodies apart. Among the men, women and children were bad-tempered dogs growling and baring their teeth and fighting for scraps; others not so brave were lapping from the pools of blood.

At one time *Masuntu* ceremonies in the Namwala district were costing the Ba Ila in cattle each year more than the annual revenue in taxes of their Native Authority. Not only are the cattle of the deceased person killed but often friends or relations bring cattle for slaughter as a mark of respect or grief. In this event a live beast may be claimed from the estate.

But not all the Ba Ila ceremonies are as cruel and degrading as the *Masuntu*—indeed to be fair even *Masuntu* is only so when judged by western custom.

Towards the end of the dry season each year the drums begin to beat out across the Namwala plains sending a message which is the prelude to the most spectacular custom of any tribe in Central Africa. Iyezha! Iyezha!! Iyezha!!! It is a drum beat that every Mwila has known since childhood. It has a magical charm, a magnetic appeal for young and old. Iyezha the buffalo hunt where man meets beast on equal terms. Iyezha, the sacred plain where manhood is often claimed and lives are sometimes lost. The might of the buffalo against man and spear alone, a testing ground for young men and a place of memories for old—all this and more is Iyezha.

Each year, generally in the month of September the Ba Ila gather on the Iyezha plain where great herds of buffalo are found. The tribesmen set the long, dry grass on fire, stampede the animals and then hunt them down with spears. It is probably one of the bravest feats performed by any African tribe.

The plain is about fifteen miles from the Namwala Boma and is an area of country some six miles in length with a depth of approximately four miles. It is found on the west bank of the Kafue river. Iyezha is inundated by floods during each rainy season, but as they recede there remain numerous pools and lagoons which provide water and lush grazing for the

tremendous herds of buffalo that are attracted to the plains from the dry hinterland of forest country.

As the dry season advances and bush fires sweep through the higher belts of timber the buffalo are driven by thirst to the plain. There they find the lagoons with plenty of water and good evergreen grass surrounding them, and in the long rank grass of Iyezha itself they discover the ample cover which their nature demands. Often, by October, the floods have completely drained out, the grass covering Iyezha is tinder dry and the many separate herds congregate in one solid mass around the few remaining pools and lagoons.

It is when these conditions exist that the local greybeards and wise men of the tribe assemble to plan the annual hunt. With much deliberation and secrecy they decide on a favourable day but not before numerous oracles are consulted and meteorological omens have been observed. As soon as the day has been fixed the drums begin to beat, the *Mapeta* (hunting horn) sounds, and the word "Iyezha" spreads like fire throughout the length and breadth of the district.

A few days before the hunt is due to take place wood and water is taken by the women to various points on the plain where the tribesmen will be stationed on the great day. On the eve of the hunt men, many of them dressed only in skins and carrying their long spears and axes, take up their positions for the following day. That night the drums and the *Mapeta* resound over the plain while the Ba Ila take part in the *Kukwezha*—the dance of courage. The *Kukwenzha* is a unique festivity as no women take part and no beer is drunk and unlike the normal African dance which generally continues until dawn, it ends at an early hour.

As the sun rises on the day of the hunt the elders of the tribe gather together on the edge of the plain. The senior man who is known as the "owner" of Iyezha offers a prayer to the spirits and asks that the warriors who will soon be in action against the buffalo will have "straight spears and stout hearts". Then there is silence while the elders call on the spirits of those that have died bravely on previous Iyezha hunts to enter the bodies of those about to challenge the buffalo. As soon as this ceremony is over there is a loud beating of drums accompanied by the voices of the hundreds of Ba Ila who are stationed around the plain. Although they are not witnesses to the elders' meeting they know what is going on and as soon as they hear the drums they join together in a universal shout. As the noise of their voices dies down a burning torch is brought to the "owner" who quite alone approaches Iyezha and fires the grass. Immediately

the fire begins to spread six hunters take up other torches and from the flames of the first fire they spread the blaze. Within minutes the plain becomes an inferno, buffalo begin to stampede in all directions away from the fire, there is a continual flash of spears flying through the air, a thunder of hoofs, shouts of triumph. Iyezha has begun.

I first saw the great plain of Iyezha in the early morning of a fine warm day in October. I had left camp just before day-break. I crossed the Kafue in a small canoe and entered the lagoons leading to the plain. At the entrance of the first lagoon two or three hippo blew plumes of spray into the air as they watched my tiny boat make its way to the grass reeds.

Having arrived on the outer edge of Iyezha my two African companions and I set off across the plain towards a good vantage point some two or three miles inland from which we were to observe the hunt.

A smoky haze lay close to the ground but after a very short time the sun peered over the horizon of tall trees heralding another blazing day. We crossed a dry lagoon and entered a tangle of long grass about eight feet high through which we had to force our way. Much of the under grass was laid in swathes by the earlier floods and this made the going extremely difficult because we had to lift our feet well off the ground at every step. Progress was exhausting in the extreme and before long the perspiration began to trickle off us as the sun gained in strength. Occasionally we broke through on to a buffalo path and if it seemed as though it would lead in the right direction we followed it. We skirted a deep lagoon of clear blue water until we could find a shallow place to cross. There were signs of buffalo everywhere. Suddenly, there was a grunt and a snort and a huge buffalo bull jumped to his feet from the grass a few yards in front of us. The noise and the sudden movement gave the three of us a momentary fright but the buffalo charged off and all we could see was his nose and the tips of his enormous horns over the top of the grass as he sped away.

After about two hours of really hard going, we reached our destination—a couple of large anthills about twelve feet high in the middle of the plain. Climbing to the top of one of them I looked across Iyezha. The scene that lay before me was one of infinite beauty. The sun was already well up in the blue, cloudless sky and all around me was a sea of long yellow grass waving gently in the first puffs of wind. Dry as a tinder it rustled with a sound similar to the far off surf on a sea-shore. To the right there was a deep lagoon which ran westwards for about a couple of miles. As I looked around I could already see the

black backs of several herds of buffalo, some many hundred strong. Here and there I could see the tell-tale white cattle egrets floating for a moment or two over the grass and then settling down again—a sure sign of more buffalo close by.

Only a short time after I had climbed to the top of the anthill and embraced the wild African scene below me I heard the drums beginning to beat and then the wild shouts of the Ba Ila tribesmen at their various stations. As though the drumming and shouts had been a signal for them to appear, sentinels took up positions on many of the anthills in and around the plain. Their tall forms silhouetted against the skyline made a most inspiring sight. As my eyes travelled the length of the plain I suddenly became aware that a slender column of smoke was rising in the west. Within seconds the column had increased in size and I could now see small tongues of flame licking the air above the sea of yellow grass. Then there was more smoke appearing to the left and right of the original column and before long a semi-circle of smoke and flames had enveloped Iyezha. It was not long before the smell of burning grass reached us and as it did I saw several black buffalo heads rise up from the grass and begin to sniff the air. With snorts of anger a few of the animals that had been hidden from our view when we first arrived began to walk past slowly but without any definite plan of direction.

The red tongues of flame were now leaping high over the grass tops and the fire was increasing and rapidly approaching the centre of the plain. Clouds of locusts and other insects were already flying over us, coming down on the wind. Seven old buffalo bulls walked quietly through the grass within ten yards of our anthill and were lost to sight once more as they entered the lagoon to our left. A few seconds later there was a loud thundering noise and a large cloud of dust rose before us as a big herd of buffalo galloped across our front. At the same time a small herd of foxy red puku (plain antelopes) came stepping daintily along the edge of the water behind the anthill.

Half-an-hour later the fire was burning fiercer than ever and racing towards us at something like six or eight miles an hour. Volumes of dense black smoke had obscured the sun and for the first time I began to feel the heat from the advancing fire. Another herd of buffalo came galloping straight towards us from the direction of the blaze. The animals stopped at the edge of the water for a moment and then they plunged into it and swam across the lagoon. They moved quickly in the water and were soon out on the other side and before many minutes

had passed they had continued their retreat into the tall grass beyond.

It was at this stage that my African companions decided that it would be necessary to burn a strip of land to retire on to if we were not to be caught up in the roaring furnace which was advancing in our direction. With quick deft movements they put a line of fire a hundred yards behind the anthill and down to the water's edge. The heat and the smoke had become almost unbearable but we waited until the fire which my companions had made had roared away from us down wind in an ever-widening path. When it was safe we left the anthill and moved to the freshly burnt ground while the oncoming fire from the east raged around us. The blackened ground was red hot under foot; sparks and stems of burning grass fell about us. We began to choke in the clouds of smoke that poured down on us, our eyes ran in streams and for a quarter of an hour or so we were completely helpless in a burning vortex until the smoke and flames had swept on and we were once again able to get back to our anthill which had been burned to a cinder.

When we retook our position I noticed an immediate transformation. In every direction there were stretches of blackened desert, clouds of ash and smoke were driven into our faces by the raging wind which followed the fire.

Small herds of buffalo which had run back through the blaze or had taken shelter in the water and reeds of the lagoons were standing about everywhere on the blackened landscape. In the distance I could see the hunters closing in shouting their long drawn cries of "Uuuluuu Uuluuu Uluuu . . ." as they spotted the buffalo.

The Ba Ila had worked themselves into a frenzy of excitement. They looked like fiends from another world as they ran through the dust and smoke, their spears glinting in the sun which had once again penetrated the haze. The tribesmen drove the buffalo before them towards a lagoon. As the animals got within twenty yards of the water a dozen or so hunters who had been crouched in the shallows suddenly jumped up and hurled their spears. Some of the buffalo stopped dead in their tracks as they received the shafts, others ran on and the spears fell from their massive bodies. As this happened the hunters ran forward, picked up the spears and continued the hunt. Other Ba Ila coming up from the rear gathered around the badly wounded beasts and finished them off with well-aimed thrusts.

This picture was being repeated in a dozen different places across the wide expanse of the blackened plain. All the while the smoke columns continued to whirl up to the sky. Buffalo were

charging in all directions, hunters were hurling spear after spear, and small fires were still burning in isolated patches of dry grass. It was a savage but unforgettable scene.

Having been harried for some considerable time the buffalo were obviously becoming very ferocious. Whereas at first they were only too pleased to run away from both man and fire they were now charging anyone on sight. I saw a herd of about twenty bulls standing defiantly, refusing to run any further, while they were surrounded by about the same number of Africans armed with two or three spears each. Without any warning the leader of the herd made a wild dash at one particular man and when he had tossed him he was chased back to the rest of the buffalo by the other hunters. From then on every moment or so one or other of the bulls made a charge and scattered the tribesmen in all directions.

Then to the left I saw a huge buffalo bull with tremendous black horns being stalked by a Mwila youth no more than twenty-five years old. The young man closed in on his quarry and with a quick bold move he lunged his spear into the beast's side. Immediately the animal turned on his assailant and in a split second had tossed him high into the air. While all this was happening three more hunters appeared and just as the buffalo was about to gore the youngster they took up the challenge by yelling at the enraged bull and waving their spears at him. He snorted wildly and thrashed the air with his great head. The hunters closed in and with supreme skill and daring they struck out with their spears. For a moment the bull stood still and then with the spears still sticking in his massive body he made his last charge. The hunter at whom the rush was made moved quickly and narrowly missed being hit. The buffalo continued on for a few yards and then collapsed.

While this scene had been enacted another large herd of buffalo had been attacked and in all directions man was chasing beast and beast chasing man. As the fires gradually petered out buffalo could be seen on every part of the plain that had not yet been burned. Hunters were closing in on them from all sides. One of the most impressive moments came when a herd of about one hundred buffalo charged out of the burning grass in line abreast. Strung out in line ahead position and running at a colossal speed were Ba Ila hunters waiting for a signal from their leader in front to close in for the kill. Never did African tribesmen look more majestic than these tall nilotic featured men with their animal skin skirts and lion-mane collars ruffled by the wind as they kept pace with the buffalo.

Suddenly I heard my African companions begin to laugh and

when I looked in the direction of their gaze I saw the reason why. From the east of Iyezha there were a number of hunters running with all their might across the now scorched and blackened plain. Their spears spent they had no protection from a large and very angry bull that was chasing them with all the energy it could muster. There must have been at least sixteen men and as they came towards us with the lone buffalo snorting furiously at their flank we could hear them laughing and shouting to each other. They seemed to appreciate the humour of their situation that they, the hunters, were now the hunted.

Shortly after this we saw another party of men who were worked up to such a pitch of frenzy that they were driving the buffalo along like cattle through the heat and confusion. The animals were exhausted yet still had a lot of life in them, but when they tried to get out of the herd and escape from the hunters they were chivvied by the Ba Ila with sticks and spear shafts. The tribesmen drove the buffalo to one of the lagoons and then when the beasts were in the water they were speared to death.

And so it went on—Iyezha, a battlefield, an olympia, an arena of courage and strength on the part of man and wild beast.

Gradually, towards afternoon the fires had burned themselves out and the air had cleared although a thick pall remained overhead. By four o'clock there were very few buffalo to be seen. The many hundreds that had escaped had fled into the thick bush west of the plain. Here and there a few truculent bulls were standing about defying anyone rash enough to come near them. But most of the Ba Ila hunters were now in small groups watching others cutting up the animals they had killed. Those who had been wounded by the buffalo in the hunt were now being cared for. Shortly they would be carried to Namwala, from where, if it was necessary, they would be sent on to the Choma hospital. Above there was an umbrella of wheeling vultures circling the sky waiting for the scraps that would eventually be left. Peace and tranquillity were slowly returning to Iyezha. Soon the rains would come and the burnt plain would be covered in a brilliant green carpet of new grass shoots. In the ensuing months the grass would again grow until once more the elders of the tribe would come together and make their plans for the traditional hunt.

The walk back to the river was much easier than had been our journey earlier that morning. Even so, however, we took great care in passing the odd clump of reeds or tall grass which

had been left unburnt near the edges of the lagoons as we felt there was sure to be buffalo hiding nearby. For all we knew they probably were there but we continued our journey to the canoe unmolested.

As we tramped towards the Kafue the sun was low in the sky and already the air was becoming cool. I walked behind my African guides and began to reflect on the day's events. I had witnessed the Ba Ila at their best and I had watched a test of virility, courage and endurance which few Europeans have been fortunate to see. Between forty and fifty buffalo had been killed by the tribesmen and this was a small enough number considering that there were probably about two thousand buffalo involved in the hunt. Although there had been quite a number of young men taking part I had noticed that the majority of the hunters were elderly and middle-aged. I mentioned this to one of my guides, an elderly man himself whom I had observed living every part of the hunt that we had witnessed earlier. When I had finished speaking he stopped and turned towards me. He was shaking his head and his eyes looked sad.

"Bwana," he began, "the Iyezha that you saw today is but a small hunt. It was very different to the ones we Ba Ila saw when we were young. Even though there were some young men fighting the buffalo today, in the hunts of long ago the men were all young and there was no room for old ones."

He straightened himself as he spoke and for a second or two I saw a proud glint in his eyes. "When I was a young man," he continued, "the spirits of Iyezha looked well at the hunt. The hunters were men amongst men and no one ever ran away from a buffalo as we saw today."

As I began to protest and say that I had just seen many acts of bravery the old man chuckled. "If you think these men were brave you would have been surprised to see the Ba Ila when they were real men," he added. "Today our young people prefer to live in the towns strutting about like the crested guinea fowl, trying to be Europeans. To them it is better to own a bicycle or a guitar than it is to own a spear. These stupid youngsters have no knowledge of their own people's customs and they don't want to know anything about them. Even those that were on the hunt today did not take part as their fathers did because to fight the buffalo at Iyezha was an honour. No, they did so because they wanted the meat of the buffalo not only to eat but to sell at high prices in the villages. Soon, bwana, Iyezha as we old ones knew it will be but a memory."

The old fellow's remarks had a depressing effect and we

continued our journey in silence. What he said about the young Ba Ila was true of most tribes but watching the buffalo hunt earlier that day had given me hope that here at least there was a custom and tradition which was not being subjugated by western civilization and so-called development.

Whether or not the African's pessimism was warranted I did not know, but surprisingly significant was the fact that he had clearly indicated that the actions of the tribe's young men were a source of worry to their elders. It was hard to reconcile it all with what I had just seen.



Ba Ila hunters pulling their spears from one of the buffalo killed at Iyesha. In the background, wearing a cap, is Micky Chittenden, the District Commissioner of Namwala