

Excerpt from **EUR-AFRICAN EXILES** or, formerly,
AND THERE WAS DAVID-KANZA by Albert Russo
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I was born in the early forties in a village perched on a hill, in Kivu, Eastern Congo, about fifty kilometers away from Bukavu, the lovely provincial capital. My biological father - I learnt this after his demise - was a childhood friend of Sandro Romano-Livi from the times they lived in Rhodes (now Greece), and since, for reasons I shall explain later on, he did not recognize me as his legitimate son, Sandro decided to adopt me, assuming full responsibility for me.

After many a heated discussion under the palaver tree, and with the advice of our sages, my maternal grandparents finally decided to accept Sandro Romano-Livi as my fosterfather, admitting him within the closed circle of our clan. But there was a major condition by which he had to abide: that I remain in the village with my mother until I reached the age of my intiation - that age when every young male, according to the Bantu tradition, is to be circumcised. And to prove their good faith, they allowed my adoptive father to visit me, as well as Mama Shumani and the family, as often as he wanted, and even to take me to his home on weekends and during vacations.

Baba Sandro (*baba* means dad in Kiswahili) insisted, on the other hand, that I attend the mission school led by the Catholic fathers, a few kilometers away from the village, and that I learn French, arithmetic and science, along with my mother tongue. In the third grade, I had to add Dutch to my curriculum, which was Belgium's second official language, a compulsory subject, even in the colony. The more recalcitrant among the Congolese students remembered what they took as a chore, and even to some, as a punishment - wasn't it enough that they had to assimilate the colonialist's main language, that they also had to fill their brains with a tongue whose pronunciation was so difficult and even more alienating than French? These youngsters, barely adults now, took revenge on the poor Flemish folk who fled the country just after it earned its independence, when the tribal feuds erupted, killing thousands of Congolese and several hundred Whites, in the most savage manner seen since the Leopold II era, and before it.

We would hear on the wireless the cries for help of those settlers, unable to leave their farms or the villages of the interior, who had access to the radio waves and who were surrounded by rebels. Some of their pleas were heart-wrenching and sounded like this: "My God, they've entered my children's room ... they've killed my husband and are now looking for me ... Our little girl was murdered after having been molested ... "

There were even nuns, those wonderful beings who had spent the better part of their lives at the service of their African brethren, who were gang-raped and then

butchered like cattle. But there were also many cases of loyalty demonstrated by the Congolese folk, trying to defend Europeans against the rebels, often paying for their courageous feats with their own lives. Not that the French-speaking Belgians were trustful, but their Flemish compatriots were treated more harshly, because of the wider language barrier and the greater incomprehension that existed between the two races.

I am, I must admit, one of the few privileged half-castes of the colonial system, thanks mostly to my stepfather and to his benevolent family, not that I didn't suffer from racial discrimination. The Blacks often considered me a traitor to their cause, whilst the Europeans saw in me the fruit of sin, having, what's more, 'tainted' blood - and that put me straight away in a category apart, for, wasn't I, in their eyes, the guilty product of miscegenation?

There were quite a few adulterers among the white folk in the colony, but their 'excuse', if there was one, might be the sudden 'love' for another man or for another woman, whereas when a European went to bed with a Congolese girl, who was almost always illiterate - a 'heathen' -, he did it purely to relieve his sexual urge. And the poor lass was deemed no better than a prostitute.

In fact, Mama Shumani had, thank heavens, escaped that stigma, and there were several reasons for it. To start with, she never left the village, so that her invisibility from the European city dwellers protected her - they couldn't compare her with the women of easy virtue whom white men could pick up at the *Cité Indigène*. Then, and this is the most important aspect of their relationship, my stepfather felt for Mama Shumani genuine affection, bringing her, at each one of his visits, presents that any African woman might appreciate, whether it be a lovely piece of printed cotton cloth, a luxurious toilet set, comprising combs of various sizes, two pairs of scissors and a brush, or a large array of kitchen utensils, always welcome to a housewife, or should I say, to a family cook, for my mother usually prepared the food for my grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

And when papa Sandro came to see me, after the ritual exchange of civilities, he always took the time to sit with the elders under the mango tree that shaded the chief's hut. What made the whole thing even more pleasant was the fact that he spoke fluent Kiswahili.

Sometimes, during the rainy season, when a thunderstorm broke and the road became impassable, papa Sandro was invited to spend the night in the village. He slept in a hut with me, while Mama Shumani rejoined one of her sisters. I don't believe he ever had sex with her, out of respect.

This too is how he discovered the tales and fables that a storyteller would recite at night around a woodfire. Some of these stories, a mix of prose, poetry and lyrics, called *chantefables*, were sung in a monotone voice, and at the end of each of these, the audience would pick up the refrain in unison, which added to the festive atmosphere. These *chantefables* combined fantasy as well as anecdotes from

everyday life, their purpose being to pacify the soul after a long and strenuous workday, but they also included appeals that aimed to charm the village maidens.

Such customs were to be found in the whole region of the Great Lakes, and were

common in the Congo's Kivu province, and in both neighboring Rwanda and Burundi.

One of my favorite *chantefables*, which my mother used to sing to me as a lullaby went thus:

*Don't cry, my son,
Time heals all wounds.
Your tears will soon dry,
For the moon always follows the sun.
Eat your banana and your manioc,
And stop crying, dear one,
For, since the beginning of time,
And for the centuries to come
The moon will continue to follow the sun.*

When I stood on the threshold of adolescence, which coincided with my initiation rite, and as I began to get interested in the opposite sex, I started paying attention to the stories involving young lasses. One of them in particular, entitled, 'The song of the girls of honor', comes back to me.

*My beautiful betrothed, don't cry,
Your wedding will bring you happiness.
Take comfort, for you will have
A gentle and faithful husband.
And like your mother and your aunt, before,
You will bear many children:
Two boys, three girls, and even more ...
Resign yourself, do as the others.
Man is not a leopard,
A husband is no thunderbolt,
Remember, your mother was your father's wife;
Work will not kill you,
You will not die from milling grain,
Nor washing dishes or scrubbing kettles.
Nobody has ever died from picking wood
Or washing clothes.
We did not chase you away,
We did not wish to see you leave home;
We love you too dearly for that,
'Tis your beauty which is the cause of it,
For you are really magnificent ...*

*Do I see a smile behind your tears?
That's better!
Bid farewell to all, now!
For here comes your future husband
And see, you don't need us anymore*

When, much later on, I rejoined my second family, and Gloria told me how she lost her brother Ronald, I recited to her this 'lament':

*Death came unannounced to your door,
She kidnapped your beloved brother.
Now that you have grieved, show her your rage,
So that she may stay away
And leave your family in peace,
Your parents, your husband, your children,
Let her spread her gloom elsewhere.*

Papa Sandro's favorite story is 'The legend of the pygmies and the concubines'.

I shall tell you what happened moons and moons ago, in the time of our great great-grandparents - may such an occurrence never repeat itself! - death to the dogs and to the rats, and long live the cattle and the kingdom!

It was about a king who had numerous wives, but he had only one favorite. She, however, was loathed by her rivals, who spent their time conniving about how to get rid of her. They called on the pygmies who dwelled in the nearby forest, asking them to eliminate her, for a good fee.

Having braided a large wicker basket, along with its cover, the little men made their way to the royal court, paying their obeisance to the favorite. The king, meanwhile, had gone hunting, whereas all his children were busy in the fields watching the grazing calves.

"May we come in?" asked the pygmies, as they greeted the favorite.

"Absolutely not! You're disturbing me." shouted the queen.

"You must accompany us at once," insisted the pygmies, "for the situation is very dire indeed! All the chiefs of the neighboring villages have been killed. Even your husband has had to flee with the few men who managed to escape the massacre. The murderers are headed this way in order to catch you, so hurry up if you want to stay alive."

"I must first call my children." said the queen, frightened, "then too, I have to gather the king's calves. "

"There's no time for that. Make haste!" ordered the pygmies.

They then put her inside the large basket, placing the cover over her head and tied the whole thing sturdily with bundles of liana. Thus loaded, they carried her far

into the jungle, and once they reached the bank of a river, they let the basket slide into the water.

Upon his return, the king found his children bathed in tears and asked them the reason for their distress.

“When we came back from the fields, we didn’t find the queen. We called and called and realized that she had disappeared.” they lamented.

During several days, and even in the dark of night, they searched and searched. But it was all in vain.

The children didn’t stop weeping and lamenting, whilst the king, heartbroken, was wasting away; he didn’t have the heart to swallow the tiniest morsel of food or to drink.

One day, as he was hunting in the forest, the king approached the river and saw a large basket floating near the bank; he then heard someone humming: “The pygmies threw me in here, curse on them!” Then the whole story unravelled, in the same hushed singsong.

“This sounds like the voice of a woman.” exclaimed one of the king’s accompanying hunters.

“Never!” retorted another, “it’s that of a bird.”

“I would say,” asserted a third hunter, “it’s the growl of a baby lion.”

But the voice became more insistent and shriller, so that the king ordered one of his men to lift the cover. To his dismay he found his favorite all shriveled up and quite dead. He then appealed to the best medicine men he could find in the region and promised the one who would be able to revive his favorite glory and opulence, but woe betide him who failed in this task.

And one after the other, the *mugangas* tried to bring the favorite back to life, but their efforts were unsuccessful, and of course, they all got punished.

Then came a very young man whom the elders had mocked, calling him a braggart and a scatterbrain, and he made the miracle happen.

With tears of joy in his eyes, the king saw his favorite regain her colours; he found her even more beautiful and radiant than before. He then hid her inside his royal hut, called upon the children who, recognising their mother, danced around her, full of laughter and cries of happiness. After this show of affection, the king summoned his dozens of concubines, along with the pygmies, to the courtyard. And he asked: “Can anyone tell me where the queen is?”

Wide-eyed, they pretended they knew nothing about her. That is when the king turned towards the entrance of the royal hut and called out to the favorite:

“Come out, my beloved, and tell these good people what has happened to you.”

Before what looked like an apparition, the assembly uttered cries of dismay and you could hear the rattling of teeth.

The next day, everybody was invited to attend the feast which the king gave in honor of the favorite. He also extended that invitation to the inhabitants of the neighboring villages. Then, after having eaten to their heart’s desire, every one of the concubines and the pygmies who had taken part in the plot to kill the favorite, were hacked to death with machetes.

Whereas Gloria and her two daughters welcomed me amongst them with open arms and genuine concern, Mama Shumani saw me leave the village with a heavy weight in her bosom. I was, of course, of two minds, terribly sad to 'abandon' my mother and the people I grew up with, our ancestral traditions, our tight knit clan, where the community, not the individual, is the pivot of one's life, and yet happy to rejoin my father's family, with all its modern privileges and future prospects.

At first, the big town that was Usumbura - everything is relative: then, it appeared enormous to my eyes, compared with the hamlet I came from, and much later on, when I discovered Milan, it looked so pathetically small - disturbed me as much as it fascinated me.

It took me a good year to find my bearings, as I settled into the lovely new house on the hill that papa Sandro had bought, and whose avant-garde style reminded one of a Frank Lloyd Wright villa, double-storied as it was, with a flat roof running along the two aisles of the building, like a huge pair of white wings. He had consulted an Italian architect on its design and Gloria did all the interior decorating, selecting its custom-made Flemish furniture and its modern (abstract art) as well as African paintings she had ordered from local artists.

For the first time in my life I had a room all of my own, it gave out onto a majestic landscape: Lake Tanganyika, framed by a range of imposing mountains, which swung from velvet blue to mauve and then to scarlet, as soon as the sun glided behind them, after having set the sky ablaze in vivid reds, oranges and yellows, a palette of colors Van Gogh would have absorbed like as many elixirs, lighting up the plain, that stretched from the city's main commercial center, the Asian quarter and its lovely turquoise mosque and Hindu temple, girded with dozens of flaming statues, down to the modern harbor where goods shipped from Europe, America and Asia, transiting through Kigoma (located in today's Tanzania), on the opposite shore of the lake, were unloaded. And farther to the east you could see, unrolling in gentle waves, the coffee plantations and rice paddies, all the way to the small Congolese town of Uvira. Uvira: how I enjoyed our weekend escapades there, as we picnicked on the beach and waded among the lake's high breakers, that is, before the tragic occurrences which plunged our neighboring giant into the chaos I have described earlier.