Christmas at Feira

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It was 1950 and my first Christmas in Central Africa. Having just arrived from England, and being completely green and unacclimatized, the only familiar thing to me about Christmas in the bush at Feira, was the date.

Mainly, I suppose, it all boiled down (or up) to a question of temperature - boiled being the operative word. Feira, lying in the valley, overlooking the confluence of the Zambezi and Luangwa rivers, is the hottest spot in Zambia, despite the counter-claims of Livingstone. It was a far cry from the frost and fur boots, the colds and the crowds and the general pattern of twenty-five Christmas seasons in England. It just didn't feel like Christmas.

Dripping in and out of warm baths which had to be run off the cold drum and left overnight to cool down, and listening to the nightly carols of baboon being chased by leopard on the Rhodesian bank, just did not fit into my mind, with that old Christmas spirit. A few spits of rain in early December had done little but increase the humidity and Christmas Eve arrived with the thermometer topping 110, no carol singers (except the baboons) and no rain for two weeks. It was blistering and the mere thought of a steaming Christmas pudding turned my stomach.

My husband and I had been invited to a Christmas Eve party at Zumbo, the Portuguese station on the other site of the confluence and at six in the evening,
we called for Jean and Nick, our only neighbours at Feira and piled into the barge to cross to the far bank. Our paddlers were recruited from relatives of the inmates of Nick's little hospital, and at sixpence a time for a three-minute trip, there was never a shortage of volunteers. Judging from the zig zag course, they steered that Christmas Eve, their celebrations had started early.

Orlando, the administrative officer in charge of Zumbo, met us with a truck at an air strip which hadn't seen a 'plane in years and within minutes we poached his house, where the Portugese community were lined up to meet us; Hollanda, his wife, Eduardo the doctor, and three visiting Portugese gentlemen with unprounceable names and a polished hand-kissing style.

Refreshments started to circulate immediately we arrived; enormous trays loaded with the most bewildering and wonderful assortment of snacks - many of mysterious origin but all quite delicious. The method of serving drinks was to place beside each guest an unbreached bottle of whatever he fancied and the only way to avoid having the glass perpetually topped up by attentive hosts, was to keep it always brimming.

Hollanda had obviously had a busy day quite apart from the grand buffet. Gay streamers and balloons festooned the ceiling and decorations gleamed everywhere. She had also found time to set up a Christmas tree, a local brand alb it which developed a depressing droop in that appalling heat and set fire to its fairy; but with a little water, lots of props and without the candles, it managed to last out the evening.

To find a common tongue when tongues were free - which wasn't often - was a little difficult, but we found
that Nyanja was a good stand-by when school French and Latin roots failed. It hardly made for an evening of ding-dong repartee but against the background of a radio commentary on what appeared to be a football match (though bearing in mind our hosts' nationality, it was probably a bull fight), nobody seemed to notice.

Nick was the hilt of the evening with the song about the 'farmer who had an old sow'. He sang it very well and tried to teach our hosts, but they found the necessary co-ordination of breathe, snort, blow and whistle a little difficult to manage - even when they could stop laughing; the general effect was that of a farmyard with a Portuguese accent. Singing, and those odd muscular exercises men love to get up to if given the chance (contorting themselves around backs of chairs and picking up matchboxes with their teeth) presented no language difficulties at all - the tonic sol-fa or a thundering crash on the floor went down quite well without an interpreter.

The evening passed pleasantly, punctuated at short intervals by those great trays of snacks which continued to circulate. Perhaps I shouldn't call them 'snacks' because the size and culinary splendour increased with each fresh tray, until I remember that quite late in the evening we were - complete with napkin bibs - tackling pieces of sucking pig rolled in a curried sauce.

As midnight drew near, our hosts - confusing Christmas and New Year - insisted that we should all sing "Auld Lang Syne". Balloons were released, seasonable wishes and presents were exchanged; it seemed to round off the evening in the manner of a grand finale. I felt that we could shortly make our adieus - and that if I
ate one more mouthful, I should burst. It was at this point that Hollanda, to my horror, announced that dinner was ready!

To give the British contingent its due, it did not by the flicker of an eyelid, betray the inward dismay this announcement produced - nor its ignorance that midnight dinner on Christmas Eve was an old Portuguese custom.

We all of us felt that we had done more than justice to Hollanda's cooking from the moment we had arrived at the party, but bracing ourselves, we sailed in to dinner as though it were the one thing needed to complete the evening; in that heat too!

With great determination and no appetite we set to and I vowed to myself as I battled through eight courses to swot up on these little customs to preserve my digestion during the time we should be neighbours of the Portuguese. I can't swear that I heard buttons and seams popping but there were certainly some odd noises around the table that night as outraged British stomachs gurgled in protest. We acquitted ourselves adequately - our hosts even seemed to enjoy their dinner!

It was a memorable evening - if a little heavy in the gastric line - and the first of many we enjoyed with these hospitable people during our two years at Feira.

Three o'clock on Christmas morning saw us back on the airstrip, following the track of an outsize in crocodiles across the sandbanks as we made our way back to the river and hailed the barge. As we paddled back across the Luangwa to the sound of the drums beating a noisy tattoo from the compound, a hippo (not a pink one!) obviously doing a little celebrating of his own, surfaced just ahead of the barge - too near
for us to avoid him and we bumped over him as he dived. I still swear that it was the weight of our dinner which kept the barge steady.

The drums were noisier than usual for what was left of the night and Christmas morning round us still dozing - but not for long: A rising crescendo of noise gradually penetrated my fitful slumbers and dragged me from my bed to see what was going on; fortunately, as it turned out as we were sleeping on a gauzed verandah - in a style eminently suited to the temperature. Up the hill and coming towards the house, streamed scores of African children from the Government schools - led by their teacher playing Pied Piper with a whistle.

We barely had time enough to get both eyes open and appear in comparative decency before they were swarming round the house, with their families for two or three generations back forming a noisy rearguard to the invasion. The great-grandmothers, without a tooth in the heads between them, made as much, if not more noise than the children and an hour passed in singing and dancing before we decided to bring things to a close with boxes of sweets. Polite speeches were exchanged all round and off they went down the hill to rouse the unsuspecting Jean and Nick from their late slumbers.

To atone for our gastric excesses at Zumbo on the previous evening, we decided to skip breakfast and, lunch, and at one o'clock we set off for Katondwe Mission to open the District School sports. We had promised to be there if heavy rains had not washed away the road and although messengers reported that north of the station, the road, was bad - that signified nothing, because the road was seldom good. I hear that the present road to Feira is quite passable
but in 1950, it was always said and spelt with a capital letter. Once the rains set in, parts of it just went missing and even at the best of times it reminded me of a switchback. When first travelling on it, I had asked my husband when the work on the road would be started. "Don't be silly, he said, "It's finished!"

A mile or so from Feira on that Christmas Day, the engine coughed and died. Roy sweated, pushed, mopped and pulled without producing a squeak of life.

I inclined to regard the breakdown as an omen, but then as Roy said — I was always seeing an omen in something or other, so we walked back to Feira in the blazing sun, collected the vanette and set off once more. Even with the road at its best, Katondwe Mission was thirty five miles and one hour away; it took us two and a half hours that day to reach it. At depressingly-frequent intervals, the road had been cut through by deep ravines several yards wide and using the vanette in the manner of a bull-dozer, we had to plough round through the bush. After leaving the wet-weather road, used only when the Luangwa had flooded, we sprayed, splashed and skidded the rest of the journey through a sea of mud — and arrived at the Mission looking like a couple of mudlarks, and as far as I was concerned, exhausted.

There we were met by Father Walligora, a delightful old man with a long, crinkly, white beard, an impish sense of humour and the greenest gardening fingers I've ever known; and as at each visit, I was surprised afresh to see, set in the heart of the bush, the lovely church built by Father Walligora over six long years of patient collection of funds and materials for the work. Late as we were, the sports had of course already started but we were in time to see one amusing
event that reminded me of the pig race in Ireland - except that at Katondwe a chicken was released instead of a pig, and was kept by the one who caught it. Quite involuntarily, this was me; it flew straight under the grass shelter and landed on my lap!

In view of the state of the road, time at the Mission was limited and we were unable to stay to see the end of the sports. Having watched the main events and, swallowed a hasty cup of tea, we set off on the homeward skid, hoping to get the worst of it over before complete darkness set in. Everything went well - or at least, without major mishap - for the first part of the journey, end by eight o'clock we had reached what we thought was the comparative safety of the wet-weather road. At the point where I began to breathe a little more freely and pull my feet out of the floorboards, we came to a big mud drift which we had treated very catiously on the way down. It was the only tricky spot on the wet-weather road and there was no means of by-passing it by crashing round through the bush.

Now, I fully realise that I am the world's worst back-seat driver, but every time my husband mutters, "Am I driving or are you?", I remember going through that mud-drift on the Feira road, because he was saying just that as we sank to the mudguards. And that was that!

We had two African lads in the back of the vanette and off they went to the nearest village in search of a bicycle and armed with an S.O.S. to Nick.

We crawled back into the vanette to wait - along with a million mosquitoes. It was too hot to shut the windows and anyway, too late. To improve matters we found that the water sack had leaked dry, we had no
cigarettes or matches and the only torch had gone with the boys. As one battalion of mosquitoes moved out, fully gorged, another moved in and by ten o'clock we were just beginning to feel the effect of the dancing hours of the previous night and our day of fasting. We found an old mackintosh in the back of the vanette and tried to cover vulnerable parts to reduce the battleground for our attackers but it became a question of being boiled or bitten and the mosquitoes won.

When the moon came up, we climbed out to stretch our legs and passed the time in finding stones to toss into the mud drift. The bush was alive with fireflies and queer distorted shapes in the moonlight but every lion that crept up on me turned out to be a shadow of a small bush on closer inspection. As midnight passed, I felt that even a lion would be welcome, did he but come bearing a water sack slung from his neck. The mosquitoes hung around us in clouds; it wasn't uncomfortable, it was unbearable!

Finding the vanette comparatively free of them, we wound up the windows, left the doors open and moved to a discreet distance, taking (we hoped) all the mosquitoes with us. Giving them sufficient time to concentrate around us again, on an agreed signal, we made a smart dive through the mud towards the vanette and slammed the doors as though the Furies were after us - which they were. A few with a high I.Q. managed to smuggle themselves in with us, but we dozed and swatted, too hot and too tired to care very much.

It was passing three in the morning, when Roy nudged me out of a stupor, to announce the arrival of the rescue truck. The sight of the lights coming over the nearest rise, was to me in a mild sort of way, what the skirl of the pipes must have boon to the besieged
people in Lucknow.

We threw open the doors and cleaved a path through clouds of frustrated and furious insects, towards the oncoming lights, with what blessed foresight had Nick set out to fetch us; beer pocked in ice, sandwiches and cigarettes.

The towing started when the beer was finished - a record swallow, I would hazard - and on the tenth attempt, we pulled the vanette free, only escaping by a hair's breadth having to pull Nick's truck out of our mud drift.

Fifteen hours after we had set out, saw us back on the home stretch to Feira - to plasters of bicarbonate for our bites - and what was left of a Merry Christmas.

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