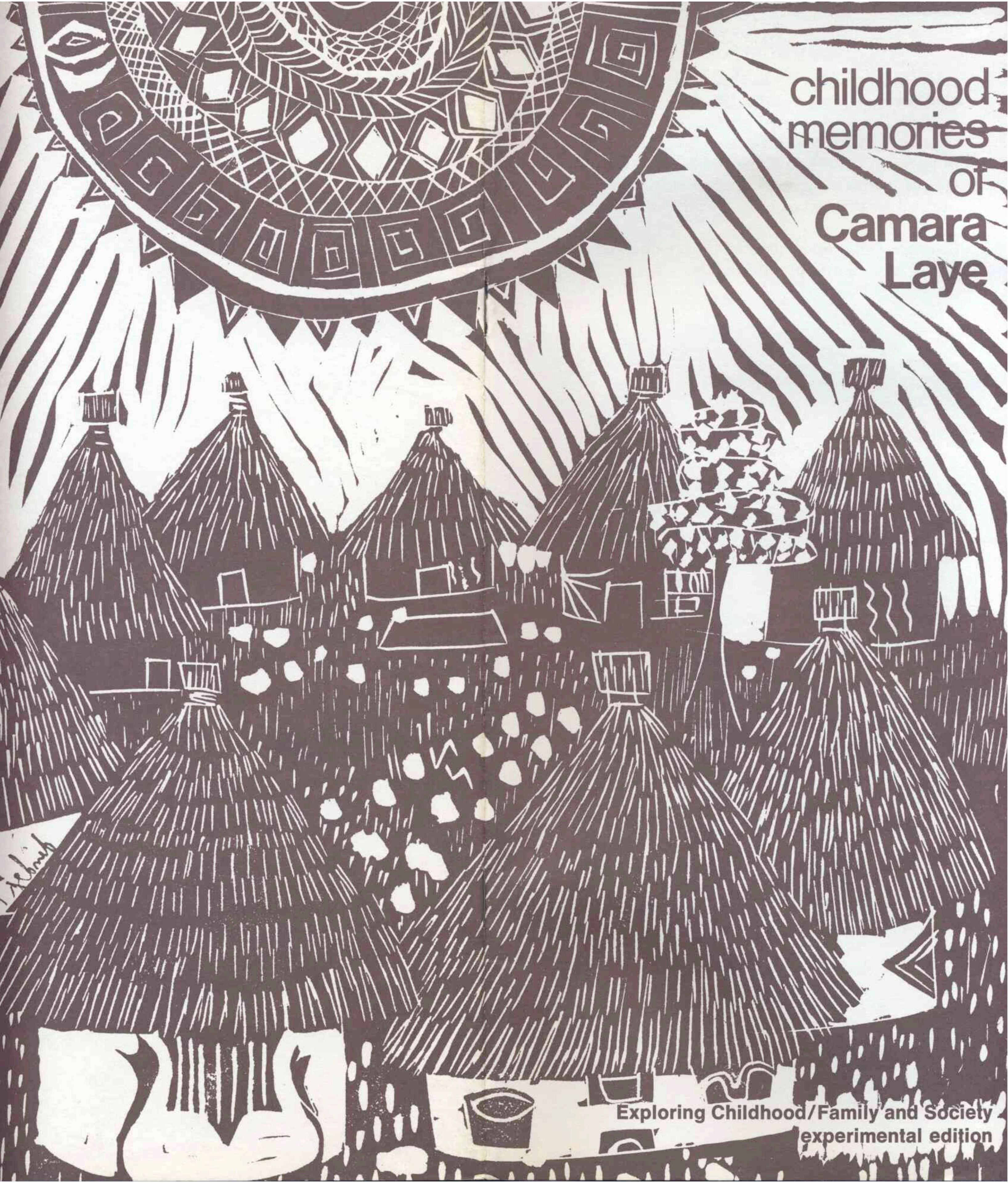
childhood
memories
of
Camara
Laye
Exploring Childhood/Family and Society
experimental edition

Each autobiography in this series presents one person's experience, lived and remembered in his or her own special way. While aspects of this person's life circumstances may be shared by others, each life is a unique combination of events, and should not be viewed as typical of any group.

Camara Laye describes his early childhood in West Africa during the 1930s.

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These early memories are included in an autobiography written by an African student while he was in France, where he had been sent by his tribe, the Malinké, to study engineering.

He tells of an early life rich in tribal learnings — ancient rituals, beliefs, and customs — and further enriched by the influences of Islam and of Western educational institutions.

A Lot To Learn

I was a little boy playing around my father's hut [individual dwelling unit]. How old would I have been at that time? I can not remember exactly. I must still have been very young: five, maybe six years old. My mother was in the workshop with my father, and I could just hear their familiar voices above the noise of the anvil and the conversation of the customers.

Suddenly I stopped playing, my whole attention fixed on a snake that was creeping around the hut. After a moment I went over to him. I had taken in my hand a reed that was lying in the yard—there were always some lying around; they used to get broken off the fence of plaited reeds that marked the boundary of our concession [the enclosed area where the family lived]—and I thrust it into his mouth. The snake did not try to get away: he was beginning to enjoy our little game; he was slowly swallowing the reed; he was devouring it, I thought, as if it were some delicious prey, his eyes glittering with voluptuous bliss; and inch by inch his head was drawing nearer to my hand. At last the reed was almost entirely swallowed, and the snake's jaws were terribly close to my fingers.

I was laughing. I had not the slightest fear, and I feel sure that the snake would not have hesitated much longer before burying his

fangs in my fingers if, at that moment, Damany, one of the apprentices, had not come out of the workshop. He called my father, and almost at once I felt myself lifted off my feet: I was safe in the arms of one of my father's friends.

Around me there was a great commotion. My mother was shouting hardest of all, and she gave me a few sharp slaps. I wept, more upset by the sudden uproar than by the blows. A little later, when I was somewhat calmer and the shouting had ceased, my mother solemnly warned me never to play that game again. I promised, although the game still didn't seem dangerous to me.

My father's hut was near the workshop, and I often played beneath the veranda that ran around the outside. It was his private hut, and like all our huts built of mud bricks that had been pounded and moulded with water; it was round, and proudly helmeted with thatch. It was entered by a rectangular doorway. Inside, a tiny window let in a thin shaft of daylight. On the right was the bed, made of beaten earth like the bricks, and spread with a simple wicker-work mat on which lay a pillow stuffed with kapok. At the rear, right under the window where the light was strongest, were the tool-boxes. On the left were the *boubous* and the prayer-rugs. At the head of the bed, hanging over the pillow and watching over my father's slumber, stood a row of pots that contained extracts from plants and the bark of trees. These pots all had metal lids and were profusely and curiously garlanded with chaplets of cowry shells; it did not take me long to discover that they were the most important things in the hut; they contained magic charms—those mysterious liquids that keep the evil spirits at bay, and, if smeared on the body, make it invulnerable to every kind of black magic. My father, before going to bed, never failed to smear his body with a little of each liquid, first one, then another, for each

charm had its own particular property: but exactly *what* property I did not know: I had left my father's house too soon.

From the veranda under which I played I could keep an eye on the workshop opposite, and the adults for their part could keep an eye on me. This workshop was the main building in our concession, and my father was generally to be found there, looking after the work, forging the most important items himself, or repairing delicate mechanisms; there he received his friends and his customers, and the place resounded with noise from morning to night. Moreover, everyone who entered or left our concession had to cross the workshop. There was a perpetual coming and going, though no one seemed to be in any particular hurry; each had his bit of gossip; each lingered at the forge to watch. Sometimes I came near the door, but I rarely went in; everyone there frightened me, and I would run away as soon as anyone tried to touch me. It was not until very much later that I got into the habit of crouching in a corner of the workshop to watch the fire blazing in the forge.

My private domain at that time was the veranda that encircled my father's hut, my mother's hut, and the orange tree that grew in the middle of the concession.

As soon as you crossed the workshop and went through the door at the back, you would see the orange tree. Compared with the giants of our native forests, the tree was not very big, but its mass of glossy leaves cast a dense shade that kept the heat at bay. When it was in flower a heady perfume pervaded the entire concession. When the fruit first appeared we were only allowed to look: we had to wait patiently until it was ripe. Then my father, who as head of the family—and a very large family it was—governed the concession, gave the order to pick the fruit. The men who did the picking brought their baskets one by one to my father, who portioned

them out among the people who lived in the concession and among his neighbors and customers. After that we were permitted to help ourselves from the baskets and we were allowed as much as we liked! My father was open-handed; in fact, a lavish giver. Any visitor, no matter who he was, shared our meals; since I could never keep up with the speed at which such guests ate I might have remained forever hungry if my mother had not taken the precaution of putting my share aside.

"Sit here," she would say, "and eat, for your father's mad."

She did not look upon such guests with a kindly eye. There were too many for her liking, all bent on filling their bellies at her expense. My father, for his part, ate very little; he was an extremely temperate man.

We lived beside a railroad. The trains skirted the reed fence of the concession so closely that sparks thrown off from the locomotive set fire to it every now and then which had to be quickly extinguished so that the whole concession would not go up in smoke. These alarms, frightening yet exciting, made me aware of the passing trains. And even where there were no trains—for in those days the railroad was dependent on a most irregular water traffic—much of my time was spent watching the iron rails. They glistened cruelly in a light which nothing in that place could relieve. Baking since dawn, the roadbed was so hot that oil which dropped from the locomotives evaporated immediately, leaving no trace. Was it the oven-like heat or the smell of oil—for the smell remained in spite of everything—which attracted the snakes? I do not know. But often I came upon them crawling in that hot roadbed. It would have been fatal if they had gotten into the concession.

Ever since the day when I had been forbidden by my mother to play with snakes I ran to her as soon as I saw one.

"There's a snake!" I would cry.

"What? Another?"

And she would come running to see what sort of snake it was. If it was just a snake like any other snake—actually they were all quite different—she would immediately beat it to death; and, like all the women of our country, she would work herself into a frenzy, beating the snake to a pulp. The men contented themselves with a single hard blow, neatly struck.

One day, however, I noticed a little black snake with a strikingly marked body. He was proceeding slowly in the direction of the workshop. I ran to warn my mother, as usual. But as soon as she saw the black snake she said to me gravely:

"My son, this one must not be killed: he is not like other snakes, and he will not harm you; you must never interfere with him."

Everyone in our concession knew that this snake must not be killed—everyone except myself, and, I suppose, my little playmates, who were still ignorant children.

"This snake," my mother added, "is your father's guiding spirit."

I gazed dumbfounded at the little snake. He was proceeding calmly toward the workshop, gracefully, very sure of himself, and almost as if conscious of his immunity; his body, black and brilliant, glittered in the harsh light of the sun. When we reached the workshop, I noticed for the first time a small hole in the wall, cut out level with the ground. The snake disappeared through this hole.

"Look," said my mother, "the snake is going to pay your father a visit."

Although I was familiar with the supernatural, this sight filled me with such astonishment that I was struck dumb. What business

would a snake have with my father? And why this particular snake? No one was to kill him because he was my father's guiding spirit! At any rate, that was the explanation my mother had given me. But what exactly *was* a "guiding spirit"? What were these guiding spirits that I encountered almost everywhere, forbidding one thing, commanding another to be done? I could not understand it at all, though their presences surrounded me as I grew to manhood. . . .

Living Together

At Kouroussa I lived in my mother's hut. But, since the huts were so small, my brothers and sisters, all of whom were younger than I, slept in my father's mother's hut. My mother kept my brothers and sisters in her hut while nursing them. But as soon as they were weaned—among my people children are weaned very late—she turned them over to my grandmother. I was the only one of her children who lived with her. But I did not have the second bed to myself: I shared it with my father's youngest apprentices.

My father always had lots of apprentices in his workshop; they came from far and near, often from very remote districts, mainly, I think, because he treated them well, but above all because his skill as a craftsman was widely acknowledged, and also, I imagine, because there was always plenty of work at his forge. But these apprentices had to have somewhere to sleep.

Those who had reached manhood had their own hut. The youngest, those who, like me, were still uncircumcised, slept in my mother's hut. My father certainly thought they could have no better lodging. My mother was very kind, very correct. She also had great authority, and kept an eye on everything we did; so that her kindness was not altogether untempered by severity. But how could it

have been otherwise, when there were at that time, apart from the apprentices, a dozen children running about the concession, children who were not good all the time, but always so full of life that they must often have sorely tried their mother's patience—and my mother was not a very patient woman.

I see now that she was more patient with the apprentices than she was with her own children. She put herself out for them more than she did for us. These apprentices were far from home, and both my mother and father were very affectionate with them, coddling them like babies, and indulging them more than they did their own children. My mother's chief concern I certainly was, but she did not show it. The apprentices were encouraged to believe themselves on an equal footing with the master's children. I thought of them as elder brothers.

I remember one of them particularly: Sidafa. He was a little older than myself, very lively, thin but vigorous, hot-blooded, always full of projects and ideas of every kind. As my days were spent at school, and his in the workshop, the only time we had for chattering was when we went to bed. The air in the hut was warm, and the oil lamps at the side of the bed cast a dim light. I would repeat to Sidafa what I had been learning at school: and he for his part would recount in detail all that had gone on in the workshop. My mother, whose bed was separated from ours only by the width of the hearth, had of necessity to listen to our chatter. At least she listened for a while but soon wearied of it.

"Have you gone to bed to chatter or to sleep?" she would say. "Go to sleep!"

"Just a minute. I haven't finished my story," I would plead.

Or I would get up and take a drink of water to the canary who had gone dry as he perched over his bed of gravel. But the reprieve I

asked for was not always granted, and, when it was, we took such advantage of it that my mother would interrupt us sharply:

"Now that's enough!" she would say. "I don't want to hear another word! You'll neither of you be able to get up in the morning."

Which was true: if we were never in any great hurry to go to sleep, neither were we ever in any great hurry to get up. We would stop chattering. The beds were too near to my mother's sharp ears for us to be able to talk in whispers. And, then, as soon as we were quiet, we very quickly felt our eyes grow weary; the cozy crackling of the fire and the warmth of the bedclothes did the rest: we gradually drifted into sleep.

In the morning when, after some persuasion, we rose, we found the breakfast ready. My mother awoke at dawn to prepare it. We all sat around the great steaming dishes: my parents, sisters, brothers, and the apprentices, those who shared my bed as well as those who had their own hut. There was one dish for the men, and another for my mother and my sisters.

It would not be exactly right for me to say that my mother presided over the meal: my father presided over it. Nevertheless, it was the presence of my mother that made itself felt first of all. Was that because she had prepared the food, because meals are things which are mainly a woman's business? Maybe. But there was something more: my mother, by the mere fact of her presence, and even though she was not seated directly in front of the men's dish, saw to it that everything was done according to her own rules; and those rules were strict.

Thus it was forbidden to cast my gaze upon guests older than myself, and I was also forbidden to talk: my whole attention had to be fixed on the food before me. In fact, it would

have been most impolite to chatter at that moment. Even my younger brothers knew that this was no time to jabber: this was the hour to pay honor to the food. Older people observed more or less the same silence. This was not the only rule: those concerning cleanliness were no less important. Finally, if there was meat on the dish, I was not allowed to take it from the centre of the dish, but only from the part directly in front of me, and my father would put more within my reach if he saw I needed it. Any other behavior would have been frowned upon and quickly reprimanded. In any case, my portion was always so plentiful that I should never have been tempted to take more than I was given.

When the meal was over, I would say: "Thank you, Father."

The apprentices would say: "Thank you, master."

Then I would bow to my mother and say: "The meal was good, Mother."

My brothers, my sisters, the apprentices did likewise. My parents replied, "Thank you," to each one of them. Such was the rule. My father would certainly have been offended to see it broken, but it was my mother, with her quicker temper, who rebuked any transgression. My father's mind was with his work, and he left these prerogatives to her.

Visting My Mother's Family

I often spent a few days at Tindican, a tiny village west of Kouroussa where my mother had been born, and where her mother and brothers still lived. Since they were very fond of me, I was always delighted to visit them. They pampered me, especially my grandmother who made a festive occasion of my arrival. As for me, I loved her with all my heart.

She was a large woman, slender, erect, and robust. Her hair remained black as long as I knew her. Actually she was still young and had not given up farming although her sons, who were able-bodied men, tried to dissuade her from it. She disliked idleness and the secret of her youth no doubt lay in constant activity. Her husband had died young, far too young. I never saw him. Sometimes she would talk to me about him, but never for very long. Tears soon interrupted her account, and I never learned anything about my grandfather, anything which might have given me a sense of the sort of person he had been—for my mother and my uncles did not talk about him either. In my country, the dead who have been much loved are hardly mentioned at all; we are too distressed when evoking such memories.

When I went to Tindican, my youngest uncle came to fetch me. Younger than my mother, he seemed nearer to my age than hers. He was good by nature, and there was no need for her to remind him to keep an eye on me; he did so of his own accord. Since I was only a child, he would shorten his steps to suit my pace. He did this so effectively that we made the usual two hours' walk to Tindican in four. But I was hardly aware of the length of the road, for all sorts of marvels lay along it.

I say "marvels," for Kouroussa is actually a city and hasn't any of those country sights which a city child always finds marvelous. As we walked along we were likely to dislodge a hare or a wild boar; birds flew away at our approach, with a great beating of wings; sometimes we would meet a crowd of monkeys. Every time something like this happened I felt a small thrill of excitement, for I was more startled than the game which had been suddenly alerted. Observing my pleasure, my uncle would throw a fistful of pebbles a long way ahead; or he would beat the tall grass with a dead branch, to dislodge birds and animals. I would imitate him, but never for very long. The afternoon sun beat fiercely on the savannah, and I would return to slip my hand into his. Once again we would go along quietly.

"Aren't you getting too tired?" he would ask.

"No."

"We could rest a bit if you like."

He would choose a kapok tree whose shade he thought sufficiently dense, and we would sit down. He would tell me the most recent news from the farm: which cow had calved, and which had just been bought; which field had been plowed and what damage the wild boars had done. The newborn calves interested me the most.

"We have a new calf," he would say.

"Whose?" I would ask, for I knew each beast in the herd.

"The white cow's."

"The one with horns like a crescent moon?"

"Yes."

"Ah! And the calf. How is it?"

"Beautiful! Beautiful! It has a white star on its forehead."

"A star?"

"Yes. A star."

I would daydream a bit over this star. A calf with a star. It should become the leader of the herd.

"It must be very beautiful."

"You couldn't dream of anything more beautiful. Its ears are so rosy you'd think they

were transparent."

"I want to see it. Will we, when we get there?"

"Of course."

"You'll come with me to see it?"

"Of course. Chicken-heart!"

For I was afraid of the great horned beasts. My playmates at Tindican were perfectly at ease with them in all sorts of ways. These children were not afraid to jump on the backs or hang from the horns of the animals. When I drove the cattle into the bush, I would watch them graze from a distance, but never came too close. I liked them, but their horns frightened me. To be sure, the calves did not have horns, but their movements were abrupt and unexpected, and one could not depend on them to stay in one place.

"Let's go on," I would say. "We've rested enough."

I was always in a hurry to get there. If the calf was in the corral I could pet it, for there the animals were quiet. I would put a little salt on the palm of my hand for the calf to lick. Its tongue gently grated on my hand.

"Let's go," I would say again.

But my legs were too short for speed; my pace would slacken, and we would saunter along. Then it was that my uncle told me how the monkey had tricked the panther who was all ready to eat him, how the palm tree rat had kept the hyena waiting all night for nothing. These were stories I had already heard a hundred times, but I always enjoyed them and laughed so loudly that the wild fowl ahead of us took flight.

Before we had actually arrived at Tindican we would meet my grandmother who always

came to greet us. I would slip my hand out of my uncle's and run toward her, shouting. She would pick me up and embrace me and I embraced her in return, overcome with joy.

"How is my little husband getting on?" she would ask.

"Fine. Fine."

"Is that really so?"

And she would look at me and touch me to see if my cheeks were full and if I had anything but skin on my bones. If the examination satisfied her she congratulated me. If not—for growing had made me thin—she wept!

"See that. Don't they eat in the city? You're not to go back there until you've been decently fitted out with new feathers. You know what I mean?"

"Yes, grandmother."

"And your mother? And your father? They're all well at home?"

She waited for me to give her news of each one of them before she would set me down again.

"The journey hasn't overtired him?" she would ask my uncle.

"Not at all. We moved like tortoises, and here he is, ready to run as fast as a hare."

Then, only half-convinced, she would take me by the hand, and we would set out toward the village. I entered between my grandmother and my uncle, holding each by the hand. When we reached the first huts, my grandmother would shout:

"Good people! My little husband has arrived!"

The women would come out of their huts and run toward us, crying joyfully:

"But he's a regular little man. That's actually a little husband you have there."

They kept picking me up to embrace me. They examined my face closely, and not only my face but my city clothes which, they said, were quite splendid. They said that my grandmother was very lucky to have a little husband like me. They rushed up from all sides as if the chief of the canton in person were making his entrance into Tindican. And my grandmother smiled with pleasure.

I was greeted in this way at each hut and I returned the greeting of the women with an exuberance equaling theirs. Then, as it was my turn, I gave news about my parents. It used to take us two hours to cover the one hundred metres between my grandmother's hut and the first huts we had passed on the outskirts of the village. And when these excellent women *did* leave us, they went to oversee the cooking of enormous dishes of rice and fowl which they must bring us in time for the evening's feast.

My [Uncle Lansana's] concession was enormous. If there was fewer inhabitants and it was less important than ours, it spread out nonetheless over an extensive countryside. There were corrals for the cows and goats, and granaries for rice and millet, for manioc, earth-nuts, and gombo. The granaries were like so many little huts built on stone foundations to keep out the dampness. Except for them, and for the corrals, my uncle's concession was much like ours, but the wooden fence which protected it was stronger. In place of woven reeds, they had used heavy stakes which had been cut in the neighboring forest. The huts, though built like ours, were more primitive. . . .

Lansana had two brothers, one of whom had

recently been married. The younger, the one who came to fetch me from Kouroussa, was engaged but still too young to marry. Thus it happened that two small families, those of each married uncle, also lived in the concession in addition to my grandmother and my youngest uncle.

Usually when I arrived in the afternoon, my uncle Lansana was still in the fields, and I went immediately to my grandmother's hut where I was to stay while at Tindican.

The inside of this hut resembled the one I shared at Kouroussa with my mother. There was even a calabash like my mother's for storing milk, covered like ours to keep out the soot, and hung in exactly the same way from the roof by three ropes, so that the farm animals could not get at it. What made this hut remarkable, so far as I was concerned, were the ears of corn hung high in innumerable garlands, so arranged that they grew smaller and smaller as they reached the roof-top. The fire smoked the corn and protected it from termites and mosquitoes. These garlands could have been used as a rustic calendar: as harvest-time approached, their number decreased, and finally they disappeared entirely.

On these visits I only entered the hut to leave my clothes there. My grandmother thought that since I had traveled from Kouroussa to Tindican, it was first necessary for her to wash me. She wanted me clean, though she had no illusions I would remain that way. At least, she wanted me to begin my visit clean. She took me immediately to the bathing place, a small enclosed space near her hut, fenced in with reeds and paved with large stones. Then she went back to her hut, removed the pot from the fire, and poured the hot water into a calabash. When it had cooled to the right temperature, she brought it out, soaped me from head to foot with black soap, and rubbed me vigorously with a hempen

sponge. The blood coursed through my veins, my face shone, and my hair was very black (for the dust had been washed out of it) as I left the hut and ran to dry myself in front of the fire.

My playmates would be there waiting for me.

"You have come back."

"I have come back."

"For long?"

"For a while."

Then, depending on whether I was thin or plump—for they too considered looks most important—but I was usually thin—I would hear:

"You're looking well."

"Yes."

Or:

"But you aren't plump!"

"I'm growing. When you're growing you can't be plump."

"That's so. But you aren't plump enough."

And they would fall silent for a while as they considered this growing period which makes city children thinner than country children. Then one of them would shout:

"Look at the birds in the fields!"

This happened every year. There were always great flocks of birds attacking the crops and it was our chief task to drive them away.

"I have my slingshot," I would say.

I had brought it with me, never letting it out of my sight all the way, nor did I while I was

at Tindican—not even when I was grazing the cattle or watching the crops from the top of the lookout posts.

These posts played a very important part in my visits: they were platforms mounted on forked stakes, and looked as if they were borne up by the rising tide of the harvest. They were everywhere. My playmates and I would mount the ladder to one of them and aim with our slingshots at the birds and sometimes at the monkeys which were destroying the crops. At least that was what we were supposed to do, and we did so without grumbling, either because it pleased us, or because we felt it was our duty. Occasionally, we became absorbed in other games, and forgot why we were there. If I did not suffer for this forgetfulness, my playmates did; their parents were not slow to discover that the crops were not being watched, and then—depending on how much damage had been done—a sharp scolding or whipping summoned the neglectful watchmen back to vigilance. Duly instructed in this way, we managed to keep an eye on the crops, even if we were forever gossiping about matters hidden from our parents—usually our childish misdeeds. But our cries and songs often sufficed to drive off the birds—all except the millet-eaters who descended upon the fields in dense flocks.

My playmates were extremely kind. They were excellent companions though stronger than I and, indeed, rather tough. In deference to the city boy sharing their country games, they gladly kept their high spirits in control. Furthermore, they were full of admiration for my school clothes.

As soon as I had dried myself in front of the fire, I dressed. Filled with envy, my playmates watched me put on my short-sleeved khaki shirt, shorts of the same color, and sandals. I also had a beret, which I hardly ever wore. The other clothes made enough of an impression. These splendors dazzled country

boys whose sole article of clothing was a short pair of drawers. I envied them their freedom of movement. My city clothes, of which I had to be careful, were a great nuisance, for they might become dirty or torn. When we climbed to the lookout posts, I had to keep from getting caught on the rungs of the ladders. Once on top I had to stay away from the freshly cut ears of corn which were stored there, safe from the termites, and which would later be used as seed. And if we lighted a fire to cook the lizards or fieldmice we had killed, I dared not go too close lest the blood stain my clothes or the ashes dirty them. I could only look on as our catch was cleaned and the insides salted, preparatory to being placed on the live coals. And I had to take all sorts of precautions when I ate.

How I would have liked to have rid myself of those school clothes fit only for city wear; and I most certainly would have, had I had anything else to wear. I had come to the country to run about, to play, to scale the lookout posts, and to lose myself in the tall grass with the herds of cattle, and of course I could not do any of these things without spoiling my precious clothes. . . .

When we were all together at mealtimes, I often stared at [my Uncle Lansana]. Usually after a time I was able to catch his eye. This pleased me, for my uncle was goodness itself, and, beside that, he loved me. I think he loved me as much as my grandmother did. I would return his shy smile and sometimes—I always ate very slowly—I would forget to eat.

"You aren't eating," my grandmother would say.

"I am too eating."

"Good. You must eat everything here."

But it would have been impossible to eat all the servings of meat and rice which had been

cooked to celebrate my happy arrival. Not that my playmates were unwilling to help. They had been invited and came eagerly, bringing with them the appetites of young wolves. But there was too much food. It could never be consumed.

"Look how round my belly is!" I would hear myself saying.

Our bellies *were* round, and, seated close to the fire as we were, and stuffed with food, we would have fallen asleep had we been less full of energy. But we wanted to have a palaver like our elders. We hadn't seen one another for weeks, perhaps months. We had many things, many new stories to tell one another, and this was the time for them.

In this fashion my first day in the country would end. . . .