

Contents

	<i>Publisher's Note</i>	<i>ix</i>
	<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
1	<i>The Terrors of Darkness</i>	<i>9</i>
2	<i>A Tale of Three Men</i>	<i>31</i>
3	<i>The Seeds of Revolution</i>	<i>50</i>
	4 <i>Boot Camp</i>	<i>60</i>
	5 <i>Spying Out the Land</i>	<i>74</i>
6	<i>The "Man Who Called Animals"</i>	<i>86</i>
	7 <i>Engaging the Enemy</i>	<i>101</i>
	8 <i>Base Camp</i>	<i>127</i>
	9 <i>War!</i>	<i>146</i>
	10 <i>Power!</i>	<i>173</i>
	11 <i>Hunting with the Pygmies</i>	<i>188</i>
	12 <i>Risking It All</i>	<i>203</i>
13	<i>The History of the Acts of God in Gabon</i>	<i>218</i>
	<i>Epilogue: If History Ran Backward</i>	<i>226</i>

The Terrors of Darkness

*"Deep darkness is their morning; they make
friends with the terrors of darkness." Job 24:17*

No one is alive today who knows when and at whose invitation Mwiri and Bwiti came to the Great Forest, and probably few care to know how they came to rule over so vast a kingdom. To the west, the waves of the south Atlantic swept night and day over its 500 miles of shimmering beaches, hurling themselves against crumbling cliffs and tearing loose the trees from the Great Forest. For 100,000 square miles the sun's rays rarely penetrated the thick forest canopy to touch the millions of creatures living in the shadows below.

There were hundreds of varieties of trees in the Great Forest, many of them with hard,

dense woods resisting for a lifetime the wood-bores and termites that reduced softer trees to sawdust soon after they were felled. The older trees loomed in the shadows like silent giants rising on five- or six-foot trunks fifty to one hundred feet into the air before branching out. The peoples who eventually came to live in the forest gave the trees names only a few ever learned.

The Great Forest is endlessly thirsty, but to drink, it must submit to the storm. After half a day of bright cloudless sunshine the air becomes heavy with moisture. A stillness spreads over the land, until even the animals and insects stop their motion and wait for the birth of the storm they know is coming. A gentle breeze playfully stirs the trees, then stops, as though frightened. After a pause, a more serious wind blows, building in intensity until suddenly it tears dead leaves from the quivering trees and hurls their lifeless branches to the ground.

A dark cloud steals silently overhead, so gray it seems almost blue. Another gust of wind catches a tree by surprise and sends it shuddering to its grave. The wind pauses and every living thing holds its breath. A few renegade raindrops loosed by the blackening cloud free-fall onto the leaves below. Then, with a shout of thunder like an army on the rampage, the rain roars out of the sky, advancing across the verdant hills and valleys in a wall. Hours later, it

wearies of the game and slackens. But the storm is far from finished. Jagged bolts of bluish-white lightning slash down in shards of pure energy, smashing into the hapless trees, splitting and snapping the tallest and reducing the most arrogant among them to reluctant submission.

The storm eventually expends the last of its fury and subsides, having established its authority. Its rage is replaced by the pleasant sounds of the forest: water as it skips leaf by leaf to the waiting ground below; insects, reptiles, birds, animals and humans moving about once again. The drops of water melt into each other and form trickles, streams and eventually swirling rivers.

Hours later, the sun's rays pierce the thinning clouds and lighten the sky. A mist rises like incense from the trees and settles like a shroud over the land. In places it rises so thickly it distorts and finally obscures the distant mountains. Its silent whiteness makes it easy to wonder if anything at all exists—beyond the mist.

There are few forests in the world as great or as rich in wildlife, grandeur and beauty as the forest over which Mwiri and Bwiti ruled. But the gods were not the first to come.

The first people to live in the forest arrived long before. They were only about four feet tall and from the moment they arrived, the "little people," as they were referred to derisively by those who followed, loved the Great Forest. Unlike others who came later, these people

were not frightened by its dark stillness and hidden dangers. Using nets made of bark, clubs, spears—and their wits—they became its masters. Their greatest hunters learned to slip under an unsuspecting elephant bull and kill him with a single thrust of the spear into the heart. For centuries they were the only humans who knew how to live in the Great Forest.

In time, war, drought and famine forced other peoples out of pleasanter lands to the north and the east to take refuge in the Great Forest. Calling themselves the Bapounou, Banzebi, Mitsogo, Massangou, Eshira, Bateke, Bavoumbou, Fang and other names, they came in successive waves, battling for territory. Deeply suspicious of each other, over centuries of intermittent warfare they eventually carved out territorial boundaries.

Although they disdained the little people, the invading tribes soon learned that the little people who appeared and disappeared in the forest like the silent mists could kill even the most powerful warrior with their tiny, poison-tipped arrows. So the invaders left them free to roam through any part of the forest they chose, regardless of the tribes' territorial claims.

The waves of migrants from the north and east brought with them the practice of ancestor worship. The high priests were called medicine men or *ngangas*, because in their roles as priests they had learned by trial and error the effects of a large variety of plants, barks and

roots. They believed that if they preserved and carried the skulls and bones of their ancestors with them and appeased them, the spirits of their dead ancestors would follow them and help them.

All of the tribes believed in a continuous stream of life, that all souls remain alive and that their old life flows into the present and continues on into the future. They believed that the spirit of a dead ancestor could be reincarnated in the life of a newborn baby and live another life. They also believed in a god called Nzembi, a great, benign Creator-God. Unfortunately, he was impossible to contact and was completely silent.

Life in the Great Forest could be brutal. As the tribes penetrated deeper and deeper into the shadows, they encountered herds of easily angered elephants, wild buffalo that charged on sight and enormous herds of wild pigs. They surprised hulking, black gorillas that moved in eerie and confident silence. They found the treetops alive with bands of chimpanzees and monkeys of every description. They trembled at deadly snakes waiting high in the branches to prey on the birds in the forest canopy. When they were careless, they trod with disastrous results on others that slept or waited in the underbrush. Along the network of streams and rivers they discovered giant pythons. The successive tribes learned the hard way that the rivers and swamps teemed not only with fish, but

also with crocodiles drifting invisibly in the still water with only their eyes and the tips of their snouts breaking the surface. Even more than the crocodiles, they learned to fear the silent hippopotamus who without warning overturned their canoes and crushed those thrashing in the water in powerful jaws. Where there were no snakes, there were columns of blind army ants a billion strong weaving their way voraciously along the forest floor in lines that stretched for miles.

But the most terrifying animal of all was the leopard. The largest species, with four or five brown spots grouped on his fur like pawprints, grew to a length of eight or nine feet and sometimes weighed more than 300 pounds. The savagery of the leopard's attack was in shocking contrast to the silence of his approach. His razor-sharp claws were able to reduce a man or a woman to ribbons in seconds. In the dark of night, the leopards hunted alone or in pairs and were afraid of nothing. They disdained man-made traps, climbed trees, swam rivers and outran every animal of the forest. The greatest warrior caught alone by the leopard was virtually helpless even if armed with a steel-tipped spear.

The people needed help to live in a land so forbidding, so their *ngangas* called upon their ancestors and upon the gods they knew to come to their aid. They also called on those they did not know. One who responded to

their call was a spirit who identified himself to the people as "Mwiri, the Guardian of the Great Forest." Was he a god they brought from another land or was he a new spirit responding to their invitation? It did not matter. Mwiri, the Guardian of the Great Forest, answered their summons.

In time, the worship of Mwiri became more or less standardized. Knowledge was power and the older men used that knowledge to maintain their power over the younger men. The knowledge of Mwiri could only be obtained after initiation into a secret society, usually at puberty. During the initiation, the young men were required to learn and vow to obey a long list of rules and taboos. When this was complete, they were instructed to call upon Mwiri to come to take possession of their minds and their bodies. They were then taken to the forest at night and blindfolded.

In absolute silence, they waited for the dreaded Mwiri to come. They were told that when he came, he would bite them on the upper arm, drawing blood and leaving a scar that would mark them for life. While the young men waited in silent fear, the *nganga* donned a Mwiri mask. The older men chanted and sang to the pounding of the drums while the man who represented Mwiri called on the spirit to physically come into his body. When the drumming and the dance reached a crescendo, the *nganga* "became" the physical incarnation of

Mwiri. As the drums continued to pound, the incarnation of Mwiri slipped into the forest and, after finding the waiting initiates, "bit" them by slashing each one twice on the upper arm with a razor-sharp knife before fading back into the forest.

Although the people called on Mwiri often, even he seemed to have little power over the leopard. Sometimes a leopard who had acquired a taste for humans would wait until the middle of the night before entering a sleeping village. Silently, it circled the houses, smelling its prey, searching for a weak spot in the thin bark walls. It then smashed through the flimsy bark and with a roar dragged its screaming prey off to the forest to devour. Clearly, something more powerful than Mwiri was needed to protect the people from the leopard.

Legend has it that Bwiti first came to someone from either the Mitsogo or Bapingi tribe, although others dispute this. The truth is, no one knows anymore who invited him. In any case, the worship of Bwiti became inextricably linked to a drug extracted from a plant the people called *iboga*. The use of this mind-altering drug opened a door from the dark spiritual world through which Bwiti and his minions entered.

Those who used the *iboga* root soon discovered that when they chewed it they were invigorated and powerful for hours. Perhaps a medicine man experimenting to find useful herbs and plants first discovered the plant. Once

discovered, it would not have taken him long to figure out that if he pounded the root he could extract its juice and drink a stupefying dose producing euphoria and mild hallucinations. As his experience with the plant grew, so would his confidence have grown, until the day he swallowed a dose so large that he fell into a coma and was carried on a tide of terrifying dreams.

Almost all of the peoples that migrated into the Great Forest believed that dreams were real experiences of the soul during sleep. To *iboga's* discoverer, the plant opened a secret door that allowed him and those with whom he shared his secret to travel into a mysterious and hidden world. It was in that hidden world of nightmares that the spirit who called himself Bwiti made himself known to the people of the Great Forest.

In one of the most vivid and consistent dreams experienced under the influence of *iboga*, initiates saw the spirits of their dead ancestors walking in a long line. The spirits seemed somehow dazed, as though in a trance. The long line of the dead stretched to an entrance where stood a creature so fearsome that one could not bear to look at it for more than a moment. The initiates described the creature they saw as emaciated, almost decaying. Its flat, pale face had horizontal slits for eyes and a nondescript hole for a mouth. The creature directed the line of dead spirits through a door that led into blackness.

The guardian to the place of the dead revealed to the travelers that he was called Bwiti. For centuries, the *ngangas* had known how to call familiar spirits to appear and when they called on Bwiti by name, he appeared. They soon discovered that the spirit they had called was more powerful than any spirit they had ever known.

The first man to discover the effects of the *iboga* plant and to successfully invoke Bwiti held great power in his hands. Unless he was cut from a different cloth than all of the *ngangas* who followed, he did not share his knowledge until he was secure in his power and then only to those he trusted or could control.

Discovery led to experimentation and experimentation led to more discovery. Bwiti's worshipers learned that their god would materialize at their gatherings if they danced to the pounding of the drums. They learned that Bwiti was pleased when they sang or chanted songs praising his power and greatness over and over until their minds were numb. These dances became known as "Bwiti dances" that only men were allowed to attend. A woman or a child who was caught watching would be instantly put to death. The dances were held in the forest or in an enclosed "Bwiti house." Because Bwiti made it known that he hated the light, the dances could only be held at night. Dancing frenetically to the beat of drums for hours at a time without stopping, the men fortified themselves peri-

odically with *iboga*. Entranced, spinning and jerking, they danced until they resembled the spirit they worshiped, their shadows flitting grotesquely on the walls of trees and plants surrounding them.

When the *ngangas* and their followers submitted their minds and bodies to Bwiti and drank moderate quantities of *iboga*, the spirit enabled them to perform unbelievable acrobatic feats, sometimes leaping five, even six feet straight up into the air from a standing position. Men almost routinely walked on live coals without burning their feet. There were other bizarre demonstrations of superhuman power involving the reproductive organs best left undescribed. During these séances, it became commonplace for Bwiti to appear as a shimmering, pale form. When Bwiti was pleased, he gave the *ngangas* the power to perform public miracles, such as causing it to rain on only one house at a time or making tongues of fire appear in the air.

As a result of Bwiti's spectacular demonstrations of power, more and more villages entered his embrace. Neighboring chiefs and *ngangas* feared what Bwiti might be induced to do to them. They quickly sent envoys bearing gifts to find out who Bwiti was and how they could become part of the Secret Society of Bwiti.

As with the worship of Mwiri, in time the worship of Bwiti became organized to assure the ascendancy of the men who knew its se-

crets. The knowledge of Bwiti and of *iboga* could only be learned if one was initiated into the secret society.

After most or all of the full-grown men were inducted into the society, the initiation rites were incorporated into the rites of puberty, separate from, but not replacing, the rites of Mwiri, who remained the guardian of the forest. Once a year the organizers built a hut of leaves large enough to accommodate the candidates from several neighboring villages at a secret place in the forest.

On a day chosen by the most powerful *nganga*, or Bwitist, as he became known, the initiates were taken to the initiation house and circumcised. They were then instructed to drink three full bowls of *iboga* brew. The brew was bitter and, if the initiate vomited, he was required to retake the dose. Soon after drinking the *iboga*, the initiates lapsed into a coma that lasted for two to three days. Most of the young men emerged weak and exhausted, but occasionally one or two awakened in a state of mental imbalance that persisted for the rest of their lives. When this happened, they and their parents were looked upon with scorn.

After regaining their strength and healing from their circumcision, the young men were interviewed by the mature Bwitists to determine if they had seen Bwiti, either in the Place of the Dead or elsewhere. If not, they had to

repeat the process or remain excluded from the Bwiti secret society.

The worship of Bwiti spread from village to village and finally from tribe to tribe, until virtually all of the tribes of Gabon had embraced this new god. As decades passed, more and more men came to know Bwiti only too intimately. In fulfilling his increasingly bizarre demands, they advanced in power, success and prestige in their communities. All the while, they believed that they were the manipulators of a great spiritual power that would render them virtually invincible.

Bwiti's first demand was relatively simple: to be worshiped in dance and song, preferably under the influence of *iboga* to the point that for brief periods of time he completely controlled the people's thoughts, emotions and bodies. The second demand was that he be given free access to his followers' minds. The third was that the worship leader dress and paint himself to emulate Bwiti's ghastly appearance. This required the leader to make and wear a mask that resembled Bwiti. To simulate the shimmering undulations of the spirit, the medicine man wore a costume made with long, dried grass. To complete the effect, he smeared his arms and legs with a white clay. These were the rituals that became necessary to invoke Bwiti and to obtain his supernatural power and protection.

Few men can resist the opportunity to receive undeserved power and prestige. It was only a

matter of time before the Bwitists came to the belief that the wisdom and power of another man resided in the organs of his body, such as his heart or liver, and that the other man's attributes of power could be assimilated by whoever ate the dead man's organs. Ritual autopsy to determine if a person had died from the sorcery practiced by an enemy was already widely practiced. The most conclusive evidence that a death was caused by sorcery was thought to be the presence of a thin white tissue starting behind the stomach and running along the esophagus. It most certainly represented a normal anatomical structure, but since preconceptions determine the outcome of human reasoning, the presence of this white line became irrefutable evidence that murder by sorcery had been committed. Since anybody could use sorcery against an enemy, most deaths were considered to be the result of murder by sorcery.

When a Bwitist died, however, the ritual autopsy was performed with a different twist. The *nganga* took the dead Bwitist's body into the forest as soon as it grew dark and, with the help of the leading village Bwitists, sliced the cadaver open in the flickering light of a torch. Witnesses to this practice described a gruesome ritual. Cutting out the heart and liver of their fallen comrade, the Bwitists devoured the organs raw. That was only a precursor of what was to come.

The belief that the knowledge and power of

another could be had by eating his flesh led to the practice of ritual cannibalism. Hungering for more power, the Bwitists conspired to murder and eat the most powerful and knowledgeable people of their neighboring communities. When they had eaten the heart, liver and other organs, they took the skull and long bones of their victims and buried them under their beds, thus ensuring that they would retain control over the soul of the man or woman they had murdered. That soul then became the murderer's "soul slave." All of the intelligence, wisdom and knowledge of the victim now belonged to his murderer. The Bwitists believed that the souls they enslaved in this manner could be sent "out of body" to eavesdrop or even kill an enemy through a wild animal. Within a short period of time, the belief that animal attacks on people were caused by a Bwitist's soul slave became prevalent. To demonstrate that they had killed and eaten others and were willing to do it whenever it pleased them, the Bwitists filed their front teeth to sharp points. Each time they smiled, they struck fear into the hearts of their enemies.

In the late 1920s a French colonial governor tried to collect taxes in the villages of the Mitsogo people. The Mitsogo chiefs responded by giving the governor the gifts he asked for. In the culture of Central Africa, it is customary to give a gift in return after receiving one. The governor unwisely chose to

ignore this custom. When he forced the chiefs to pay taxes a second time, they became angry and refused. The governor arrested several of the chiefs and led them away in chains. The Bwitists responded by surrounding the administrator's house one night and setting it on fire. When he ran out of the house to escape the fire, the men killed him with spears, carried his body into the forest and ate it. French troops searched in vain for his remains, unaware that his bones were buried under numerous Mitsogo beds.

The requirement for receiving the greatest power in Bwiti's secret society was the most terrible: A man had to kill a member of his own family as a human sacrifice. Parts from the body could then be dried and made into powerful fetishes that the murderer could wear in a secret leather pouch. Because murdering a member of the village or of the clan was considered by all to be a crime punishable by death, it took considerable skill and forethought. Someone finally came up with the idea to kill his victim and blame a leopard. Wearing iron claws fashioned in village kilns, "leopard-men" began to prey on lone women and children, usually at night. The victims' bodies were found slashed and horribly mutilated with claw marks. Death could now come from one's own family.

Perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of the Bwiti's power occurred when a great Bwi-

tist died. It was accepted by all that Bwiti's and Mwiri's power did not extend over death. Neither had ever succeeded in bringing someone back to life from the dead. Bwiti obscured that failure by staging a spectacular miracle during a Bwitist's funeral. When a great Bwitist lay dying, he could request to be carried to his grave, not by his fellowmen, but by Bwiti himself.

After the grisly ritual autopsy in the forest on the night that followed his death, what remained of the dead man's body was sewn shut with bark twine and returned to the village. Instead of taking the body back to the customary mourning place in the kitchen, the village Bwitists placed the body on a mat or low bed in front of the house. The women and children were shut inside their houses. The drummers were called, the dancing and singing began, and *iboga* and palm wine were liberally passed around. Eyewitnesses described the following scene.

As the tempo of the drums increases, the men dance, encircling the body. They sing and chant in unison, calling on Bwiti to come and carry the body to the grave. The singing and dancing last for hours, but the men show no signs of fatigue. Suddenly, the pitch of the drums changes and the air becomes electric. As though on cue, the dancers turn toward the lifeless body and without touching it, extend their hands. The body stirs, then stiffly rises, lifted by an invisible power that seems to emanate from the dancers'

hands. Holding their fingers inches from the body, the men move trancelike down the torchlit path leading to the cemetery some fifty yards from the village. Supported by nothing visible, the body moves through the village and down the path between the two rows of men, floating in the air until the group stands at the foot of the open grave.

What follows is impossible to attribute to anything but the supernatural. The drums pound with new intensity. Waving their hands rhythmically toward the dead man's head, the Bwitists stand the body upright. With every change in position the drums renew their intensity. Still suspended in the air, the body turns until its back is to the grave. With one final, almost unbearable paroxysm of the drums, the Bwitists lower the body until it hovers parallel to the ground. Hands still extended, the men at last lower the body into the grave until it settles firmly on the bottom. When it is over, the exhausted pallbearers barely manage to stagger back to the village before falling onto their mats. It will take days for them to recover.

Did it not occur to the Bwitists that they and their enemies worshiped the same Bwiti? Could Bwiti not just as well inspire their enemy to kill and eat them instead of the other way around? If it occurred to them, it was by this time too late. To protect themselves from what they feared the most, they had invited a strange god to inhabit their minds and bodies.

In so doing, the people and their leaders had opened wide the gate to a creature infinitely more terrifying than the leopard. In all of the Great Forest there were now no greater powers than Bwiti and Mwiri.

As more tribes invited Bwiti into their midst, his power over the Great Forest grew. And the more powerful he grew, the more he drew his subjects into a net of depravity and evil. The people looked to Bwiti to explain to them the causes of illness and misfortune.

When in a short period of time illness visited several members of a family, the leader of the family consulted the *nganga*. He came to the house, and after asking a series of mysterious questions, searched the house for places where an evil spirit could enter. He invariably found an opening where a wall joined the roof or where there was a crack in the bark through which the offending spirit had entered.

The *nganga* then consulted the spirits to find who had sent the spirit that had eaten or destroyed the sick person's soul. It was always the same: The culprit was a close friend or family member. A father, grandfather, aunt or uncle had "eaten" part of the victim's spirit during the night in a voluntary or involuntary out-of-body experience. Since a person's soul was thought to travel during his dreams, this did not seem unreasonable.

Protestations of innocence by the accused

were useless. If the family member was loved and respected, it was considered an involuntary offense and, after being paid his fee, the *nganga* would make a collection of odds and ends from animal parts, plants of the forest and other significant objects and wrap them in a piece of animal skin or a gourd. This was called "protection" or a "fetish" and was placed either in the house at the opening where the offending spirit had entered or buried in a bedroom.

If, however, a prized child or someone important had died, it was a more serious matter. After the ritual autopsy, the family or the *nganga* could demand a trial by divination, followed by a public execution of the one who had allegedly committed murder. To protect himself from accusations of partiality if the ritual autopsy was not considered sufficiently decisive, the *nganga* often performed a long and mysterious ceremony that ended when he pointed out one or two possible perpetrators.

In reality, one or both of the accused were selected because they were unpopular or had offended the chief, the *nganga* or the village elders in some unrelated way. Sometimes a *nganga* would accuse a man and dispose of him simply because he wanted the man's wife for himself.

The *ngangas* knew how to mix various herbal potions and, when an execution was called for, would prepare a deadly poison. At the last minute it was easy to slip into one of the bowls of

poison a pinch of something that provoked vomiting. The person who vomited the poison lived, while the one who did not vomit went into a coma and died. In this way the cleverest *ngangas* appeared to be impartial and made it seem like Bwiti had executed the guilty person and allowed the innocent person to live.

Some *ngangas* befriended the secretive Pygmies and learned from them how to make the deadliest poison of all from the seeds of the strophanthus plant.

When the *nganga* wanted to use the strophanthus poison in a trial, everyone in the village was called to witness the event and the accused person was given all the palm wine he wanted. The *nganga* then prepared a harmless brew and told the people that it would only kill someone if he were guilty as charged. When the accused was feeling relaxed from the palm wine, the *nganga* led him into the darkened Bwiti house and, after rubbing strophanthus on his palms, took a sharp knife and made several long, mysterious incisions over the forearms of the accused. He then rubbed his palms over the bleeding cuts. Next, the *nganga* led the accused out of the Bwiti house and into the center of the crowd.

In full view of the entire village he poured into two bowls the harmless brew he had prepared, drank the contents of one bowl and gave the other bowl to the accused. Confident of his innocence and of the fairness of the trial, the

accused drained the contents of his bowl. Within a few minutes, the poison that had been rubbed into the cuts on his forearms took effect and the accused fell to the ground. He would be dead within minutes, confirming to even his dearest friends that he was indeed guilty of killing another by devouring his spirit.

Within several decades, Bwiti had succeeded in destroying love and trust between spouses, between parents and their children, between grandparents and their grandchildren and between close friends. Families, clans, even whole villages were divided in fear and bitterness over mostly false accusations. Bwiti did more to destroy the sense of community than did any other factor or combination of factors. Bwiti held the people of the Great Forest in an increasingly cruel and tightening grip.

As the years under Bwiti blurred into centuries, a single word came to describe the day-to-day existence of the several hundred thousand people enslaved in the Great Forest: fear. They were surrounded by a hostile environment, preyed upon by terrifying animals and through sorcery stalked by the members of their own families. Some began to secretly wonder if their gods had deceived them. Most of them would never know until it was too late.