

BETTY'S BIRTHDAY

My friends Richard and Rama Kimball held the baptism for their son Keefer at our house. Richard is American, Rama is Guinean. As part of the ceremony they sacrificed a sheep, as is the custom at Guinean baptisms. The sacrifice reminded me of when I was a young Peace Corps Volunteer, around the time of the Warren Harding administration. I worked in a school in Côte d'Ivoire, teaching English as a foreign language, in French.

Our English books came from France, so I was in the interesting position of being an American trying to communicate a French view of British culture to African children. I coped with this situation by being extraordinarily enthusiastic about my work, even when I had no idea why I was there. The textbooks had a lot of pictures of British kids doing incomprehensible things, and my job was to encourage the students to talk about the pictures in English. I often had to relax my rule about not speaking French in class, since otherwise no one would have said anything.

One memorable day, the lesson was called "Betty's Birthday", and the book contained a picture of an English girl blowing out the candles on her cake.

Me: Who knows what Betty is doing?
Class: [silence]
Me: What is in front of Betty?
Class: [silence]
Me: Well, she's got a cake in front of her, hasn't she? And what is on her cake?
Student: *Bougies?*
Me: That's right! Or, *candles*, as we say in English. Do you know why Betty has candles on her cake?
Class: [silence]
Me: Let's look again, shall we? Why has Betty got candles on her cake?
Student: I do not know... how say the English.
Me: That's okay! You can say it in French.
Student: "*Sacrifice*"?

The student was pretty close, because a sacrifice in African cultures is different from what I think of as a sacrifice. Where I come from, a sacrifice has an element of doing without, like not eating meat on Friday. But in Africa a sacrifice is a feast where whatever is sacrificed is quickly and enthusiastically eaten. The animal has to give something up, all right, but the people at the party are supposed to have a good time, like when the bull was sacrificed in honor of Mouminy Barry's brother's return from his pilgrimage.

Mouminy works with me, and it was an honor to be invited to this particular party: by going to Mecca, his brother had satisfied one of the requirements of the Koran, and now he got to use the title *El Hadj*. His brother met Mouminy and me at the gate, dressed in a beautiful white boubou, and told us there was bad news: just as the butcher began to slit the bull's throat, the bull escaped and was at that very moment running around El Hadj Barry's yard. The other guests were cowering in the living room. We caught a glimpse of the bull as we sprinted for safety in the house, and while he wasn't mortally wounded, it was clear he hadn't just nicked himself shaving that morning, either. The experience of having a stranger start to slit his throat had irritated the bull, understandably, and what is normally a fairly routine

operation – slaughtering a cow – turned into the Three Stooges-at-the-Abattoir, as a succession of people tried to blow out the candles on the bull's cake, in a manner of speaking.

The first was a neighbor who came with a homemade shotgun. He aimed at the bull from about eight feet away and missed, an extraordinary feat of non-marks-personship. However, I won't take anything away from his courage, because while he was down in the yard shooting at the bull, who by now was really mad, Mouminy and I were watching from a sort of balcony on the roof of his brother's house, and I was glancing around to make sure there was no way the bull could get up there with us, which was a ridiculous thought, but after years in Guinea you learn to be ready for the unexpected.

Next we watched a second would-be assassin, the butcher's helper, who tried to ensnare the bull by climbing one of the trees in the yard and dangling a lasso made from El Hadj's extension cords, no doubt thinking that if they couldn't get him with a knife, and they couldn't get him with a gun, then – by golly – he'd hang the critter. The bull just sneered.

By then, I was secretly on the bull's side and seriously considering vegetarianism. It was the losing side, though. Another neighbor came over who had a real gun, and I won't go into details except to say that I left before the kabob course, wishing I were back at Betty's birthday.

But not really. You learn something by seeing an animal killed that you can't learn buying meat wrapped in cellophane. Keefer will know something that Betty doesn't, and I'm glad for him, for my own children, and for everyone who has a chance to grow up where life is unpredictable and death is explicit.

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