

Guanya Pau:
The Legend of an African Princess

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Into The Gregree Bush

Play your mad harp, O griot, and sing to us of the Vai girl, Guanya Pau;
of her too brief life and her shining spirit
that left this world, so unjust, beneath the Stygian waters of Lake Piso.
Lead all listeners to the Gregree bush!
Vai people, let not cresting fear
extinguish your great courage!

Bold Momo,

her daring young lover, straight and strong as a palm tree,
with head held high and lightening in his blazing eyes,
their flight ended, he stands in the long boat, his warrior's
arms vainly strive to enfold his supple-waisted woman,
but she is already gone, swallowed down Piso's swampy maw.
Awash in anguish, he cries to the Gregree gods,
"How can passionate love suddenly change to nothingness?"

Pandama-Pluzhaway

A foreign people's dream of freedom birthed the image of Liberia
but this mirage poorly encompassed the many worlds of the Vai.
The eternal forces of good and evil contest there as everywhere.
When he died, old Pandama-Pluzhaway, the Devil's brother-in-law,
brazen in death as he had been in life,
found himself facing west at golden dusk beneath a Chinese sky
at the base of the long, low-slung steps of the Devil's ornate palace.
Beneath delicate crenellations,

thick dark lips twisted with disdain,

the Zoba's garish footman asked,

“What his business could be ?”

“To make a compact with your master!” came Pandama's bold reply.

Instantly, the Zoba appeared, his hideous form draped in black:

black gown; false-face mask; trailing head-dress,

black feathers standing quivering on end:

“To make a compact with me, you must be my equal!”

Throughout the gathering darkness of Hell, Zoba's

voice boomed like a death-knell but fear

found no refuge in his foe's heart.

In combat, Pandama proved the equal of Zoba

and was allowed to return to earth.

There he created the Sande School for women,
with marriage founded on bondage, not love.

Guanya Pau is Betrothed at Birth

The frail wooden fences of the Sande enclosed girls
but could not so capture the rosy blush of love's flower.

Guanya Pau, promised at birth to a rich man,
feared that her own true love might never unfold:

“I will die rather than marry one not of my choosing.”

Only in her,

the blood of warrior-kings surged through her womanly body.

Gallena was her village, on the left bank of the Marphar River.

Proudly her father, King Kai Popo, carried inscribed on his chest,

the marks of wounds received in its defense. “These,” he said, “are my greatest
possessions.”

As with a male infant,

she was coated with palm oil and left in the sun,

becoming supple, strong, and straight.

Willful and strong:

But could she keep a man's love?

In Momo, she

found her spirit's match

but she could not choose to marry him.

In youth's bloom, her betrothed came to her.

Kai Kundu, with six wives in his house,

swore that he would make Guanya his head wife.

"A greedy old man, with six wives!"

—walking out she threw her nose in the air.

Guanya Pau and Momo Elope

Enfolded in the warm embrace of night,

beneath a brilliant crescent moon,

the stars tumble down the black firmament

in their disorderly gyrations,

the two lovers left their silent village,

vanishing into the bush

with silent tread.

The Gregrees saw everything;

their lips pursed,

their eyes impassive but certain of the finish,
as the two below flaunted their forbidden love.

The Forest Elephant

Darkness released the land from its blind embrace.

The sun began its daily trek across the sky
trailing blessed light in its wake.

In the blank light of early morning,

when everything is but a shadow of itself,
in a forest glen damp with morning dew,
Guanya Pau and Momo spied a majestic bugbug.
Uncommonly large, its capacious
chambers hid them while they slept. Soon, a visionary state,
neither waking nor deep in sleep,
they beheld the king of the forest—the huge bush elephant.

As do all forest people,
they remembered the time long ago when animals spoke with humans,
and many villagers
offered themselves as subjects to King Elephant.

The lovers were shaken from this reverie

by the trumpeting blasts of an actual colossus in the jungle nearby,
then startled to their feet by the excited voices of Vai warriors, sent to
hunt them down. The men ran into the clearing, jabbering, gesticulating,
and brandishing their spears.

Then, an enormous elephant burst into the sanctuary,
ripping through the green jungle curtain.

His powerful frame shook with rage.

He raised his trunk and bellowed once again.

There was a bloody spear lodged in his side.

Ivory tusks flashing, the huge beast tossed one of the men,
all flailing arms and legs, into the bush. The others ran away,
their eyes wide open but not seeing, until their shouts could not be heard.

Then the elephant turned to the bugbug and said: “Momo please
remove this spear from my side.” “I have performed a salutary deed for you.”

The lovers came out quaking with fear and awe.

Momo gathered himself and pulled out the spear.

“Keep this spear. My blood has given it great power.”

Then, without another word,

or even a look back,

the bush elephant ambled off

into the forest

from where he had come.

The animals, it seems, had not lost the *ability* to speak, only the interest.

At The Sembey Court

Arm in arm, the lovers walk deeper into the bush.

The verdant canopy of trees protects them from the sun's spiky stare,
as it rose to a white hot pinnacle in the sky.

In the evening cool,

they came to a rustic farm house,

behind a small cassava field.

As in a *tableau vivant* a woman was serving her husband the evening meal.

She set before him the best of

everything: fufu made of cassava root and fresh, aromatic grilled fish;

new palm wine to quench her master's thirst.

For herself, she took his plate and made a meal of the remains.

A second wife brought her master his pipe;

another stretched his sleeping mat under a shady mango tree.

They were fortunate that this man was drifting off to

a contented sleep, as Momo and Guanya

passed, their eyes filled with disgust. The princess

said: "I will never live like that!"

Striding away from that sad scene, their attention was drawn to a beautiful grove
of stately palm and mango trees,
surrounded by a rustic fence
with curiously designed amulets made of twigs,
hanging from the trees.

At the gate was an arch of rush and reeds coarsely woven.
Just inside, on a broad stump, sat a hideous image of Zobah;
silently at its side was stooped Zingbatutu, the wizard.

--(Who could say which of them was more alive!?)--

In the midst of this sacred place, seated on a low wooden stool, was Gandanya
the witch,
holding in her hand a short horse-hair brush
to halt unhallowed feet desecrating this holy ground.

At the far end was the sanctum sanctorum,

raised a few feet,

made of bamboo and rattan,

walled in by a fence of saplings and reeds;

a second image of the devil stared balefully down from a column in the center.

Beads--blue, red, green-- of every size and shape, hung from the walls inside.

The bones and skulls of animals graced the low narrow door;

on top, two beautiful ivory tusks overlapped each other.

On four rows of elaborately woven rattan chairs sat Vai gentlemen
wearing blood red caps
and the whitest muslin pants.

In front

sat their leader in black silk trousers;

a leopard skin coat graced his shoulders;

a savage expression creased his face.

His feet were shod in tastefully carved sandals, on
which were tiny bells which jingled when he moved.

From his shoulders hung three kinds of beads, and
on his head sat a cap of leopard skin.

Together

this was the Sembey court just in session.

First heard was the case of Kai Jalley, an experienced wife-beater.

Lately, he had beaten one of his wives so badly that she died of the wounds.

The brute defended himself:

“Isn’t woman weak and effeminate? Good for nothing? Conditions which are beneath
our dignity to consider?

Nowhere is woman man’s equal; so no redress can be demanded for her treatment.

Furthermore, is she not in the same class with a goat or a cow?

If I were to kill my cow, would you raise the slightest objection?

I bought her; she is mine!

No one may interfere in a man's private business."

The Sembey concurred.

Case dismissed.

The Gregrees reclined, nodding their heads in agreement.

The Dead Nobleman

The sun bloomed another day as the lovers traveled along grassy trails until the cool of the evening, when they saw a cloud of smoke hovering over a small village cradled within a curve of the road.

As they drew closer they heard the sound of loud crying:

A nobleman had recently died. Mourners were stationed in his house; they made the village echo with their lurid lamentations.

But the saddest sight unfolded in the house next to the king's court.

The deceased during his lifetime

had been a terror to his wives, so when he died they were indisposed to shed tears over him.

From their reluctance, it was deemed that they had witched him.

The witch-hunter, an old woman, stooped over, leaning on an elaborate cane,

--fingering beads—

after a muttering engagement with the unseen, confirmed the suspicion.

She then demanded a large basin of pepper, and that the women
be made to kneel down in it. Even other women, railed against the
unfortunates for their lack of respect for their husband;
one, braver than the rest, stood up and said that she would rather die than submit.
Old Zingbatutu stepped silently behind her;
placing one hand over her mouth, and pulling her to him as though for an embrace,
he drew a knife silently across her throat with the other,
leaving a red line in its wake
that quickly lost its shape.
The outspoken woman dropped to the floor,
weltering in her blood.

The medicine-man, suddenly nimble, stepped over her writhing body,
passed into the next adjoining room
attended by two little boys, one of whom carried his bag of amulets.
To invoke the spirit of the dead man,
he twice prostrated himself on the ground, muttering and fingering his beads.
He motioned the two boys to stand
before him, and then he picked up his mat, washed his face and hands,
and exited to make this announcement:

“Behold my countrymen who have regard for the ancestral Gregrees. I have been asked among these women, who of them are guilty of witching this nobleman. The spirits were angry with us; it was difficult to get their ears. When they deigned to speak, they said that the women must be given cups of the sassa wood tea. She who does not die of this lethal draft is innocent.”

At random two were chosen to drink from the cup. With great cruelty the villagers dance around the victims, making faces, committing small acts of cruelty on their bodies. Then the command came to strip them of their cloths, and to lead them into the medicine grove. Drums beat, horns blow, cymbals clash, the string instruments sound forth their harsh strains. Yells and whoops join in the crashing together of discordant sounds; dancing reaches a frenzied high point.

Then, everything stops.

The victims are made to stand. The younger one begins to cry and beg for mercy. Momo reaches for his spear

but Guanya stills his arm: “There are too many of them.”

Tears stream down the still smooth brown skin
of the girl’s face but her cry for mercy is spurned.

The older woman says:

“My friends, we are helpless and in your hands. We do not merit
this cup which is being prepared for us!

Had our husband loved us our tears would have come spontaneously.

He treated this young wife with cruelty,
even when she was sick. Any man who can have the heart to
abuse his sickly wife is worse than a dog!”

The sound of outraged voices fills the grove. The red liquid is then brought out.

The older woman drinks it down and dies without a struggle.

The younger girl continues to cry and protest; she drinks down some
but cannot finish it all.

Finally, in her death throes, she speaks tender words of caress
to the one whose cradle
is his grave, then dies.

Leaning on each other,
the lovers slowly turn from this transfixing scene of horror
and walk away towards the black jungle rampart.

The silver moonlight rests briefly on their shoulders;
then, they are engulfed by darkness.

The Gregrees suck their teeth.

The Pond of the Ancestors' Spirits

Through sun blasted days and black nights, Momo and Guanya Pau wandered,

--lost in the jungle.

For that time, they knew the happiness that love brings. They swam in rivers
and streams; they exchanged turns fishing;

at night, they embraced each other and made love. For that time they lived as in a
melancholy paradise the end of which would soon come.

This knowledge briefly diminished their joy,
as a passing cloud dims the sun's light and warmth, then drifts away.

One day,

after torrential rains the night before,

the river was swollen out of its banks and no fishing could be had there.

From beneath a large rock, the crystal water of a stream
filled a pond before emptying into the Marphar River.

Partly protected by a rock parapet
and an over-arching pavilion of trees,

this sacred pond sat.

Still.

Pads of water lilies graced its glassy surface.

Beneath, languorously swam beautiful and various species of fish.

Vivid hues of cerulean, vermillion, golden-sided with flecks of

obsidian, diaphanous tails undulated slowly, side to side,

propelling them gracefully forward through the clear cool water

without haste.

These dazzling creatures are the property of the dead.

It is forbidden that foot or hand should disturb their tranquil realm.

Such sacrilege the spirits would avenge!

With night upon its banks, the spirits of the departed hold meeting,

and vote to take vengeance for affronts against their holy pond.

Every night at a certain hour,

translucent globes of light can be seen on the banks, when,

it is said,

that the spirits are in council.

In ignorance, Guanya Pau, absorbed in her own thoughts, waded in to cross.

No sooner had the splash of her entry sounded, than she and Momo

heard the wail of a group of village women behind them:

“Oh child, what have you done? Have you no reverence for the dead?”

“Can it be that you have cursed both yourself and us?”

The women screamed loudly, piteously, lamenting their nearness to sacrilege.

Suddenly, the clear day changed:

A black disc appeared to eat the sun, creating night at midday;

the earth shook three times;

then dark clouds appeared—“Surely nature is angry at this misdeed; the sun itself covers its face so as not to see,” said one woman.

Then, gray rain pours out of the black clouds; the local women, overcome with fear, curse Guanya Pau’s plunge into the sacred pond.

Shortly the sun returns as before,

the rain ceases,

and the women tamp down their crying and cease wringing their hands.

Continuing on their way but casting nervous glances at the sky, the women take Guanya and Momo along with them, in front where they can keep their eyes on them.

Soon they took advantage of a well-stocked fishing pond;

Guanya’s basket became the fullest of all.

Certainly the Gregrees had no control over water or the girl would not have succeeded so well.

All went along the river bank towards their village.

Guanya and Momo were accepted.

King Crocodile the War God

Another holy scene came before them (Or was it a hellish scene?):

a deity—a war god—

appeared in the form of

a large and scaly crocodile, resting near the river bank.

Its huge mouth gaped open, as though ready to accept the sacrifice

of a sheep, a goat--or a child!

The people could not pass; they could only push forward or back up.

The crocodile moved to the center of the path, turned towards them,

gave a terrible roar, then spoke: “You must give me a blood sacrifice

or you must defeat me in single combat!”

The villagers carried no animals

to satisfy the giant war god.

They looked around and one terrified face saw its mirror image in another.

Then they looked down at the children;

the crocodile closed his jaws and appeared to smile

...waiting...waiting.

The jungle grew still and quiet.

No breeze stirred; no bird flew; no sound of yapping monkeys.

The heat baked the leavening out of the air.

Shallow breathing...

Sweat poured down the black faces of the people;

streaming down their bodies, under their clothes, as they ceased any movement.

Then, a child began to whimper. It was a girl.

“Give me that one!” the war god commanded,
then snapped his horrible jaws shut.

“Give her to him,” they said to each other.

“She is only a slave girl.”

“She will only become some man’s property when she is grown,
worth no more than a goat or a cow.”

“If we do not return soon, our husbands will beat us!”

Guanya Pau stepped boldly forward then spoke:

“I am Guanya Pau, only daughter of King Kai Popo,
a fearless defender of his people.

Not just of men and boys but of girls and women too.

He wore no gold jewelry; no silk draped his royal body.

Instead, he bared his chest to show the scars that he had acquired in defense of his
subjects.

In these inscriptions one reads of the love that he bore his people.

Now it is my turn. I will contest with the god of war,
who now—as always!—asks us to sacrifice our blood to him.”

Then, brave Momo

spoke these words:

“I shall be the one to engage in combat with brother crocodile.

I am a man, a warrior!

I will kill him with the spear that I took from the forest elephant’s side.”

Then, turning to face the god of war, he said:

“Tonight you will return to your river bed,
unable to sleep for the hunger that you will feel!”

The war god seemed to smile, then said,

“Whereas humans are easily turned against each other,
you cannot face an enemy such as me!”

Again he roared from deep within the hollow of his fibrous stomach:

“Tonight your soul will cross that wide, dark river, deep in the jungle,
to the town where the pale shadows of the dead slowly walk about.

With my hunger sated by your flesh,

I will sleep a contented sleep.”

War god and man faced each other in the middle of the trail,

while the women and children backed into the bush along side,

holding their baskets in front of them, a feeble source of protection.

They had nowhere to hide, and could not turn away from the expected carnage.

“To!”

And the crocodile said, "Come to me. I will grind your bones!"

He squatted on four firmly planted legs,
mouth open, his thick, scaly tail swung heavily from side to side
rustling the foliage alongside the trail.

Momo bent his legs; he held his spear, fashioned in the shape of a fish,
drawn back in throwing position.

He knew that he would only have one chance before the beast would be upon him.

Then,

"To!"

the crocodile leapt at him, moving more quickly than any mortal of its race;
Momo hurled his single spear overhand, his body a powerful whip;
it flew straight and true with great force
into the reptile's open mouth, past the deadly forest of teeth,
entering the soft top of its throat and the spearhead punched through the crocodile's
skull behind the eyes.

And!

"To!"

the great beast crashed to earth, dead at his feet!

As the jungle resumed its sounds and movement, Momo gently took his lover's arm,
and the women and children hurried past towards the village.

The warrior and the princess turned to follow them.

The Gregrees looked at each other in amazement!

Guanya Pau's Two Dreams

The two lovers retired to sleep that evening
in a round house
under its thatched roof,
each comfortably stretched out on a sleeping mat.

Guanya Pau began to dream but not of Momo.

Alone she walked in the dark forest,
until she returned to the sacred pond.

Golden globes of light hung suspended in the dark.

A pale full moon lit the sky with blue light, and the rolling cloud caps in silver.

One of the Gregrees had taken the form of the war god
whom Momo had slain that afternoon.

The crocodile slid noiselessly out of the water,
and leapt at her, its mouth wide open.

Her screams awaken Momo; then he manages
to bring her to consciousness.

She would not tell him what the matter was
returning to sleep.

In a second dream,

Guanya Pau stood in a verdant meadow,
on a sunny day,
under a limpid blue sky.

Flittering among the trees birds sang cheerful tunes.

The girl walked towards a peaceful town, not a Vai town.

All the houses were of wood, painted pastel colors.

In the center stood a white house grander than the others.

From a tower on top,

 a bell sweetly rang out,

 calling the people to come.

Inside was a large hall filled with Vai
dressed in European clothes.

They were seated on benches facing a raised platform,
where stood one man behind a narrow stand
with a cross on the front.

He spoke passionately from an open book; everyone listened intently.

Then, a young man rose from the front row of seats.

He joined the man who had been speaking, and together
they went to one side to a basin of water.

The pastor sprinkled a few drops of water
on the forehead of the young man,
saying words as he did so.

The crowd of people became joyful as the young man turned to face them!

Full of surprise, Guanya saw that it was Momo!

He came to her and took her into his arms and said:

“Guanya Pau, join us here as Christians. We can marry and live in this town,
where men have only one wife, and men and women marry for love.”

Just as joy and wonder
infused her body, she suddenly woke up in the hut in which she had gone to sleep.
Was there such a place and people?

In a panic, the Gregrees leapt from their seats!

At Last

Guanya Pau and Momo decided to leave the village
deep in the interior and travel to the coast,
where a new settlement,
with houses made of wood
was being erected.
This could be the town that the girl dreamt of.

They thanked their hosts, then went down to the river's edge
to await passage in the chief's large canoe.

At wharf-side the lovers saw a Vai man,
of noble birth, with sandaled feet and calico breeches;
falling gracefully over this was a white shirt bordered with red tape,
opened in front half way down the breast.

A red cap sat atop his head.

He reclined quietly

in a beautiful rattan chair, smoking his pipe and drinking from a flask of palm wine.
Across his shoulders was a string of glass beads made in a white man's town called
Venice.

He eyed the new-comers suspiciously, then turned his head away to look out
over the river, continuing tranquilly to smoke and drink.

As the canoe set off down the river, the lovers held hands
their bodies tingling with expectation.

They dared to let themselves think that they might marry and find happiness
after all.

The canoe picked up speed, slicing through the cool, calm water.

As the king's rowers sang their traditional songs, Guanya Pau and her Momo
enjoyed the rush of the cool morning air on their faces.

After the passage of some time, the canoe entered Lake Piso from the river.

Then, the man in the red cap moved to their side of the boat and said to Guanya:

“I have been sent by your husband, Kai Kundu, to return you to him at your town.”

Looking at Momo he said, “Do not try to fight me,

there are many men waiting for us on the wharf at Marphar. “

Momo sat frozen. A groan followed by sobs, came from Guanya Pau’s throat.

Looking first at the man, then at her Momo, she said,

“I cannot live if I cannot marry you.”

With that, she stood, and, after a moment’s pause but without another word,

went over the side of the canoe,

disappearing beneath the water.

Momo reached for her but he was too late.

He stands in the long boat; his warrior’s arms strive in vain to enfold

his supple-waisted woman.

But she is already gone,

swallowed down Piso’s swampy maw.

Awash in anguish, he cries to the Gregree gods,

“How can passionate love suddenly be changed to nothingness!”

His arms fall limply to his sides

then he too goes into the water.

The king's oarsmen

stopped their paddling and stared open-mouthed at the spot where the lovers went under.

The nobleman stood transfixed, like a graven image of himself.

Then the water's surface began to roil and a shaft of water shot high into the air.

A clap of thunder sounded, and the water shaft collapsed.

Guanya Pau and Momo stood side by side on the lake surface.

Water streamed down their bodies,

out of every fold and crease, leaving black skin beaded with droplets of water.

The nobleman fell back into his seat in shock;

his pipe dropped from his open mouth, clattering on the floor of the long boat;

the rowers let their paddles fall and leaned away from the canoe's sides,

their hands thrown up in front of them.

Guanya Pau opened her eyes, then spoke in a spectral voice,

“We would rather die together at the bottom of this lake than agree
to live apart!”

And with that, they slowly descended one final time below the water's surface,
to lay, and rise again at the last day, when the seas, and the rivers, and the lakes
shall give up their dead.

Finis