The Tasso Men of West Africa

At the recent crowning of the Solong, or foremost chief, in the Imperi Land, Sherbro, in the colony of Sierra Leone, West Africa, a custom native custom was observed, one which very few, if any, Europeans had previously witnessed, as it is of great rarity and had not been performed for many years. It consisted of the appearance of certain members of society known as the "Tasso," about which a great deal of mystery exists, as they belong to a brotherhood that is regarded with a veneration amounting to awe by the community of Imperi. The power vested in these Tasso men is immense, and gives them precedence next to the Solong, and even entitles them to certain obligations, if they see fit, to laws proposed by that chief.

In the illustration these men in their fantastic costumes are seen standing to the right and left of the new Solong and his Speaker, or Prime Minister, who are seated in the center of the group, the one wearing a European silk hat over a white turban being the Solong, who has just emerged from the sacred shade of the "Poro" bush in the forest at the back, he for the first time showing himself to the subjects in public, previous to proceeding to a specially constructed barri, where the coronation ceremonies were finally concluded; but as it is only with these Tasso that I am dealing, I will endeavour to describe their peculiarities and their status in the country.

Tasso is purely a Sherbro institution, peculiar to Imperi. Tassos are practically the heads of the "Poro," or order of native Freemasons; each big chief of a town has his Tasso men, and upon very important occasions, such as the present, he attends with his chief. Here were four Tassos with their chiefs, who formed part of the bodyguard of the Solong and took a prominent part in the ceremony.

It is necessary to observe carefully the costume worn by these men, more particularly their enormous headdress, which is about three feet in height. It is a great weight, and is consequently removed whenever the men are not actively engaged. These headdresses are erected on a foundation of plaited cane. The human skulls and the thigh bones immediately above the patella forming the head are those of definite Tassos, which can only be removed from other departed members of the brotherhood. The whole is crowned by a gigantic bouquet of feathers gathered from all kinds of birds, these bouquets being quite three feet in diameter. The dress of these men is of the usual barbaric description, made up of a network over the body from which hang various skins of animals; bunches of fibre from the waist forming a short skirt, while attached to the knees are several pieces of hollowed native ivory, from which depend rings of similar metal that jingle as the men move about, making a considerable noise.

The Tassos do not dance, but that part of the ceremony being undertaken by the "Lags" and his followers, who are subordinate to the Tassos. It is only necessary for a single "Laga" to be present to attend upon several Tassos. The "Lags" in this instance will be noticed standing to the right, shield in hand, having his black body bedecked with large white spots; grouped at the back of him are his boys, to the number of about fifty, who are ready to rush madly round the town, headed by the "Lags," to notify the people of what is about to take place, to call them together or warn them to get into their houses. If a Tasso dies in a town he must not be interfered with, but in the bush, as the law is that an arrow must be shot upon a Tasso; and when one dies in a town a "Poro" law, is immediately placed upon that town compelling the women to withdraw from it until the baying is over. "Poro" law is so imperative that the inhabitants of a town can be sent into the bush in a few minutes, but it occasionally happens that nature will not allow a woman to respect herself, and thereby, in disobedience to the "Poro" law, become acquainted with some of the external mysteries of the "Poro," the suppression in such cases is that sickness follows, and during her illness the lady confesses what she has done and sees; she is then carried into the "Poro," and initiated into the "Poro" rights, and henceforth all such women are regarded in the same light as "Poro" men, and are practically native Freemasons. At the ceremony I have described one such "Poro" woman formed part of the procession and I was informed that three other "Poro" women were then located within the town.

The coronation ceremony was performed under the supervision of the Governmental Treaty Chief, Beh Sherbro of Yonnii, Sherbro, who upon this occasion wore the beautiful large and massive silver medal which had been presented to his ancestors by King George III, beating the date 1816. Beh Sherbro will be seen in the illustration, sitting in a Malende chair, supported by town chief. Our illustration and narrative are furnished by Mr. T. J. Allsop, H.M. Commissioner, Sherbro, who was present at the installation in his official capacity.

The Beethoven Celebration

There are the days of celebrations, and the 150th anniversary of the birth of Beethoven was, of course, not forgotten by our concert amateurs. Mr. Hanschel has devoted the first part of his programme to Beethoven, with aSymphony Concerts this season to the music of the famous master. At the Crystal Palace Mr. Manns held his festival on Saturday before a great audience, much larger, indeed, than at any previous concert of the present series. Fortunately, so far as Beethoven is concerned, well, of course, he performed the \"Leonora\" (No. 3) overture, and \"Fidelio\" Symphony, very finely performed by the Crystal Palace orchestra, and the \"Leonora\" (No. 3) overture. M. Soliani played the F flat Concerto, with M. Fulhaguer sang the Scena "A Perdita," besides two of Beethoven's settings of Goethe's Fauns.

At the Popular Concerts a Beethoven programme was given on Monday, the actual anniversary of the master's birth. It consisted the Eroica Quartet in F, by M. Wolf, and the early Pianoforte Trio in C, second of the set, Op. 1, Herr Reinecke, who was the pianist. Likewise gave a highly intelligent reading of the \"Waldstein\" Sonata. On Saturday, also, Beethoven's fine Quintet in C, by M. Arne, and the newly performed Sonata in D, Op. 106, played by Reinecke and Patti, were in the programme. The chief feature of the concert, however, was Herr Reinecke's very original reading of Schumann's \"Gewand\," to which, for an encore, he gave Mendelssohn's \"Reform School\" Wedding.

On Tuesday at the London Symphony Concert Beethoven's Mass in D was the principal item of the programme. The \"Mass Solon\" was at one time deemed too difficult for performance in this country. We have now, however, altered all that, although the work being a Mass, and women are regarding it as an oratorio with a programme, is not very often heard here.