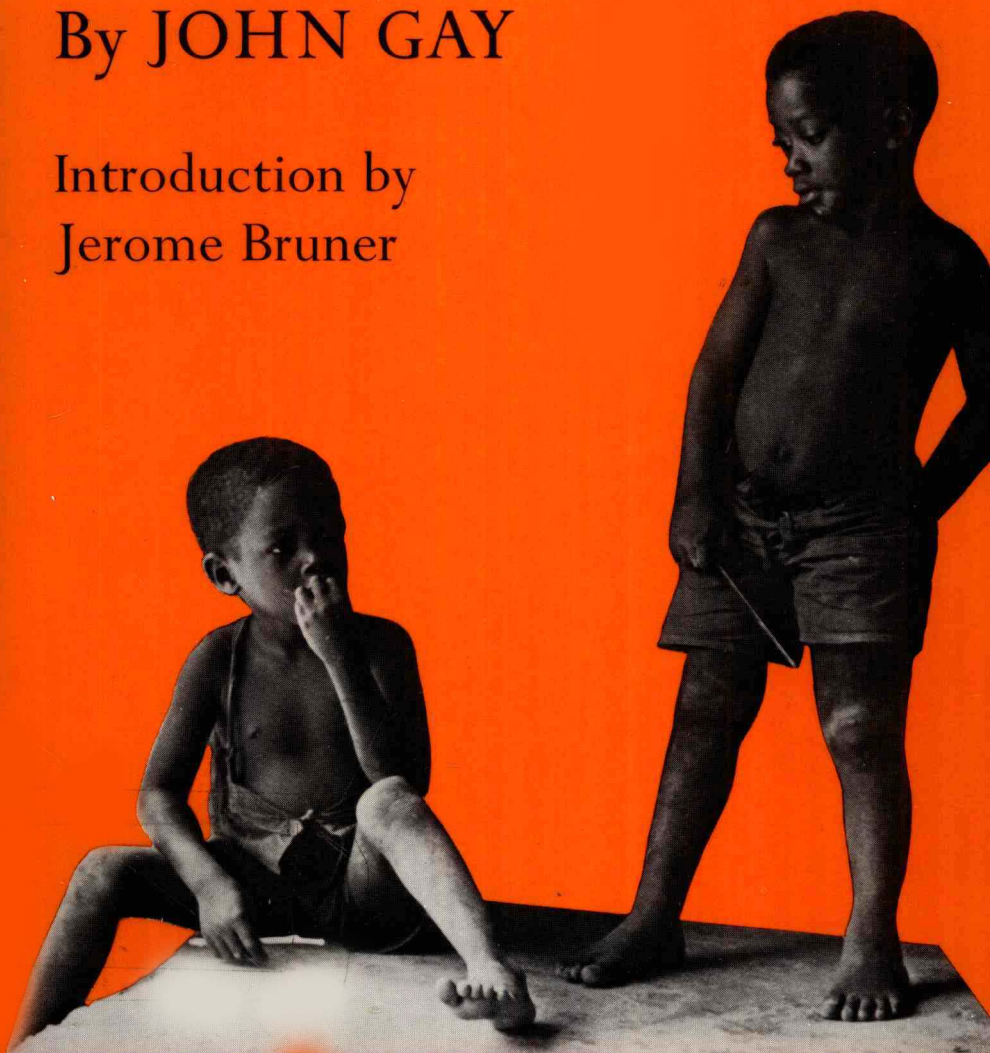


Red Dust on the Green Leaves

By JOHN GAY

Introduction by
Jerome Bruner



Photographs by Harrison Owen

*Red Dust on
the Green Leaves*

A Kpelle Twins' Childhood

BY JOHN GAY

With the editorial advice of

John Kellemu

Introduction by Jerome Bruner

*Photographs by
Harrison Owen*

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RED DUST ON THE GREEN LEAVES

A Kpelle Twins' Childhood

Go up-country, so they said,
To see the real Africa.
For whomsoever you may be,
That is where you come from.
Go for bush, inside the bush,
You will find your hidden heart.
Your mute ancestral spirit.
And so I went, dancing on my way.

.

An overladen lorry speeds madly towards me
Full of produce, passengers, with driver leaning
Out into the swirling dust to pilot his
Swinging obsessed vehicle along.
Beside him on the raised seat his first-class
Passenger, clutching and timid; but he drives on
At so, so many miles per hour, peering out with
Bloodshot eyes, unshaved face and dedicated look;
His motto painted on each side: *Sunshine Transport,*
We get you there quick, quick. The Lord is my Shepherd.

The red dust settles down on the green leaves.

I know you will not make me want, Lord,
Though I have reddened your green pastures
It is only because I have wanted so much
That I have always been found wanting. . . .

From *The Meaning of Africa* by Davidson Nicol.



FOREWORD

This book is about two boys. These boys do not actually live, except in my mind, in the life of the Kpelle people as a whole, and hopefully in the minds and hearts of the readers of the book. Yet the book is not a novel, not a work of the imagination. Rather it is a careful reconstruction of Kpelle life in the 1930's and 1940's, based on extensive research. No person and no institution appears as an exact replica of any model past or present, and any resemblance is due rather to an attempt to represent Kpelle life in a single narrative.

I wish to thank John Kellemu, a graduate of Cuttington College and my research associate for many years, for helping make this book an accurate reflection of Kpelle life and culture. Mr. Kellemu read the book critically at two stages in its development, eliminating what was not true to the life of his people and adding many details I would otherwise never have known. I must take full responsibility for all errors, of course, but Mr. Kellemu must receive major credit for much that is true in the book.

This book is based on a multitude of sources, and could not have been written without extensive research by others. I cannot possibly single out the contributions of each individual, but I wish to thank by name persons who have contributed in many and varied ways. If I have omitted any, which is very likely, then to those persons, I say only—I am sorry.

My hearty and sincere thanks, for the work they have done on and for the Kpelle of Liberia, go to Christian Baker, Beryl Bellman, Jean Bissell, James Bomberger, Moses Bono, Isaac Browne, Joseph Campbell, Robert Christiansen, Thomas Ciborowski, Gregory Cleveland, Michael Cole, Jane Collier, David Crabb, Warren D'Azevedo, Yakpalo Dong, Christopher Dorweh, Philip Dorweh, Francis Dunbar, Franklin Dunbar, Richard Fulton, Judith Gay, Sulongteh Gbemeneh, James Gibbs, Joseph Glick, Harry Greaves, Daniel Gweh, Svend Holsoe, Festus Hooke, Joseph Kamara, Musa Kamara, Joseph Keller, Helen Kohler, Kiemue Kollie, John Korkoya, William Kromah, Akki Kulah, Arthur Kulah, Ronald Kurtz, Morris Kutukpu, Johnny Kwiipor, David Lancy, Charles Lave, Jean Lave, Theodore Leidenfrost, Chapman Logan, David Lukens, Eleanor Lukens, Robert McAndrews, Richard McFarland, John McKay, Kylkon Makwi, Melvin Mason, Barbara Meeker, Margaret Miller, Leonard Moody, James Mueller, Benjamin Mulbah, Paul Mulbah, John Norris, Harry Ododa, John O'Grady, Vincent Okafor, Corahann Okorodudu, Kenneth Orr, Melissa Pfeiffer, Paul Ricks, Rose Sambolah, Wilton Sankawulo, Willi Schulze, Augusta Scribner, David Scribner, Sylvia Scribner, Thomas Seavers, Dieter Seibel, George Seymour, Donald Sharp, James Sibley, Henrique Smith, Samuel Smith, Otto Spehr, William Stewart, Ruth Stone, Betty Stull, James Stull, Paul Sulongteh, Saki Suah, Albert Swingle, Gabriel Swope, John Tamba, Sylvester Tamba, Henrique Tokpa, Koli Tokpa, Zephaniah Ukatu, Jeremiah Walker, Fletcher Watson, John Wealar, Karin Weisswange, Charles Wellington, William Welmers, Dietrich Westermann, Albert Wolokolie, and Albert Wungko.

Finally I must acknowledge my immense debt to the Kpelle people who have been gracious hosts during my 14 years in Kpelle-land. It is to the Kpelle people, and particularly to the children among them, that I dedicate this book.

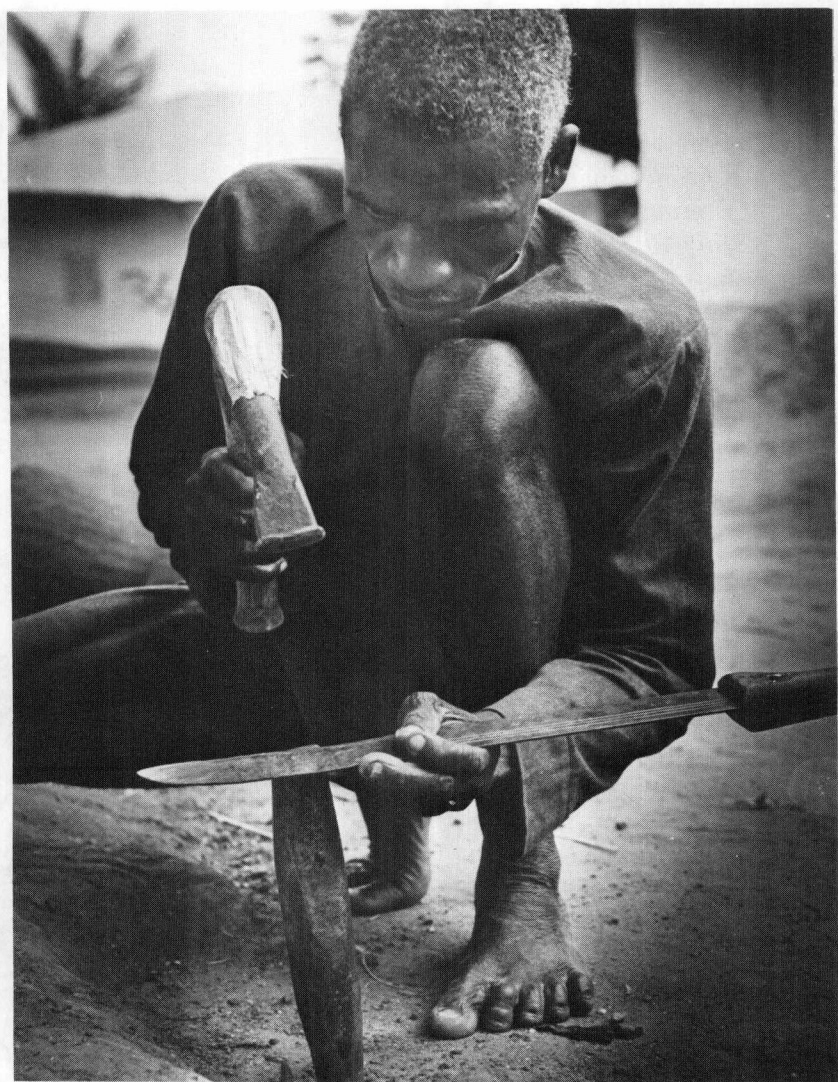
John Gay



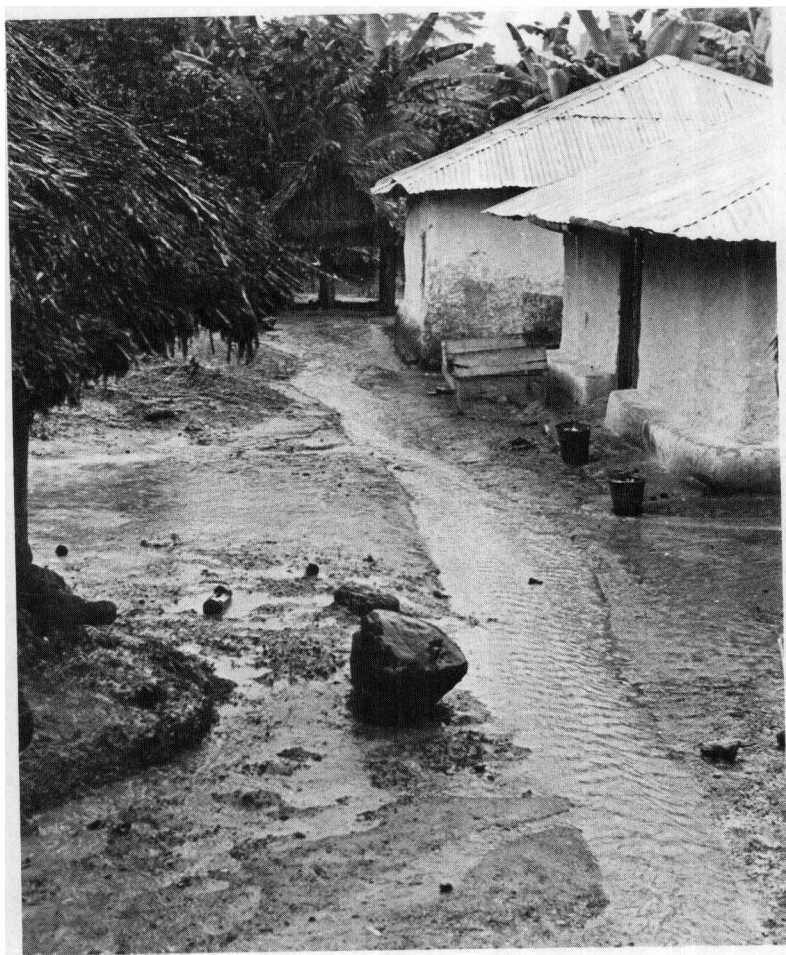
CHRONOLOGY

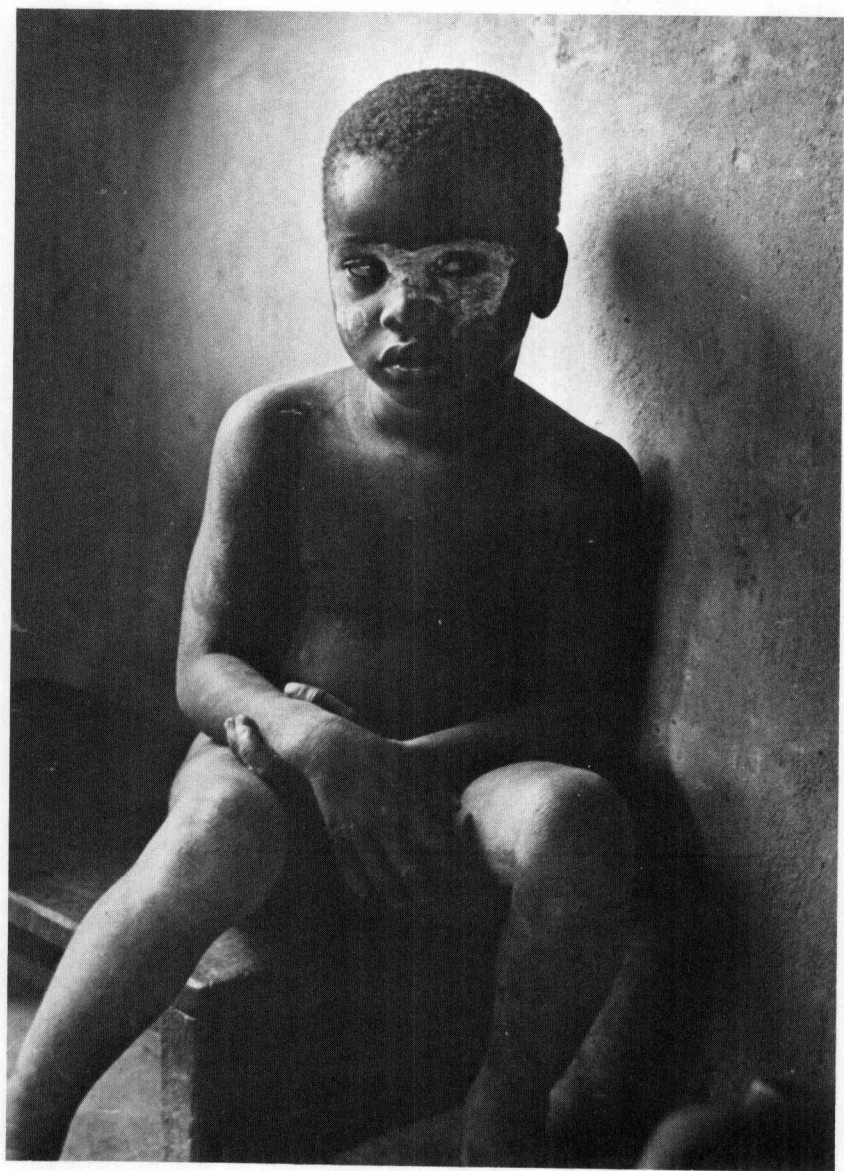
- about 1500 Arrival of the Kpelle in what is now Liberia, where they sought a home safe from the wars in the western Sudanese Kingdom
- 1822 Arrival of the settlers from America in Liberia
- 1855 Establishment of the first mission station in Jorkwelle Kpelle country
- about 1915 Arrival of first Mandingo in Jorkwelle Kpelle country
- about 1920 Establishment of Liberian authority in Jorkwelle Kpelle country
- about 1925 First government-sponsored conference of chiefs in Kpelle country
- 1931 Birth of Kona and Zena
- 1940 Entry of Kona and Zena into Poro Society Bush School
- 1944 Graduation of Koli and Sumo from Poro Society Bush School
- 1944 Completion of motor road to Salala
- 1944 Entry of Koli into Salala mission school
- 1946 Completion of motor road to Gbarnga
- 1950 Graduation of Koli from sixth grade





RED DUST ON THE GREEN LEAVES





INTRODUCTION

BY

JEROME BRUNER

This is a book about a culture, about the Kpelle people and their way of life and thought. It is told through the medium of two brothers, Sumo and Koli, growing up as Kpelle in the heart of Liberia. It follows them from birth into adulthood, through crises of great and often heart-rending intimacy. One sees them becoming not only members of their own society, but strikingly different human beings, almost opposite sides of the same coin. The one becomes a cosmopolitan, interested in the new and the foreign, the other a traditionalist, steeped in the ways of his culture. By their different directions, they come to stand for the deep split that develops within Kpelle culture, looking as must all tribal societies in Africa, to the new for opportunity and excitement, and to the old for reassurance and ballast.

Yet it is more than a documentary, the recounting of the "lives of two brothers." These pages depict the "real," to be sure, but they evoke a sense of the human side of being a Kpelle to a degree that is extraordinary. Mr. Gay writes with a distinction and a compassion that surely reflects his fourteen years of deep involvement with the people he is

describing, or evoking. For there runs through the book not only the structure of daily life as lived, with its cadence and intricacy, but also the emotional subtleties and the ambivalences that surround the day-to-day actualities. There is hunger for power in these accounts, the shame and the compromises of adultery, the humiliations of being put down — the universals of the human plight that can be recognized in any culture so long as one looks with care and with humanity. The author helps us to do that.

But there is one thing beyond all others that I treasure in this book. I have never visited the Kpelle, but I have always heard from friends and students who worked with them, either as teachers or as anthropologists, of the extraordinary use of proverbs and of formulaic ways of dealing with human difficulties. These were their means of putting things into the perspective of the traditional. Here one finds it in the concrete: the poetic and linguistic subtlety of the well-chosen proverb, the consensus that exists about what needs saying and what should be unsaid. These are a delight.

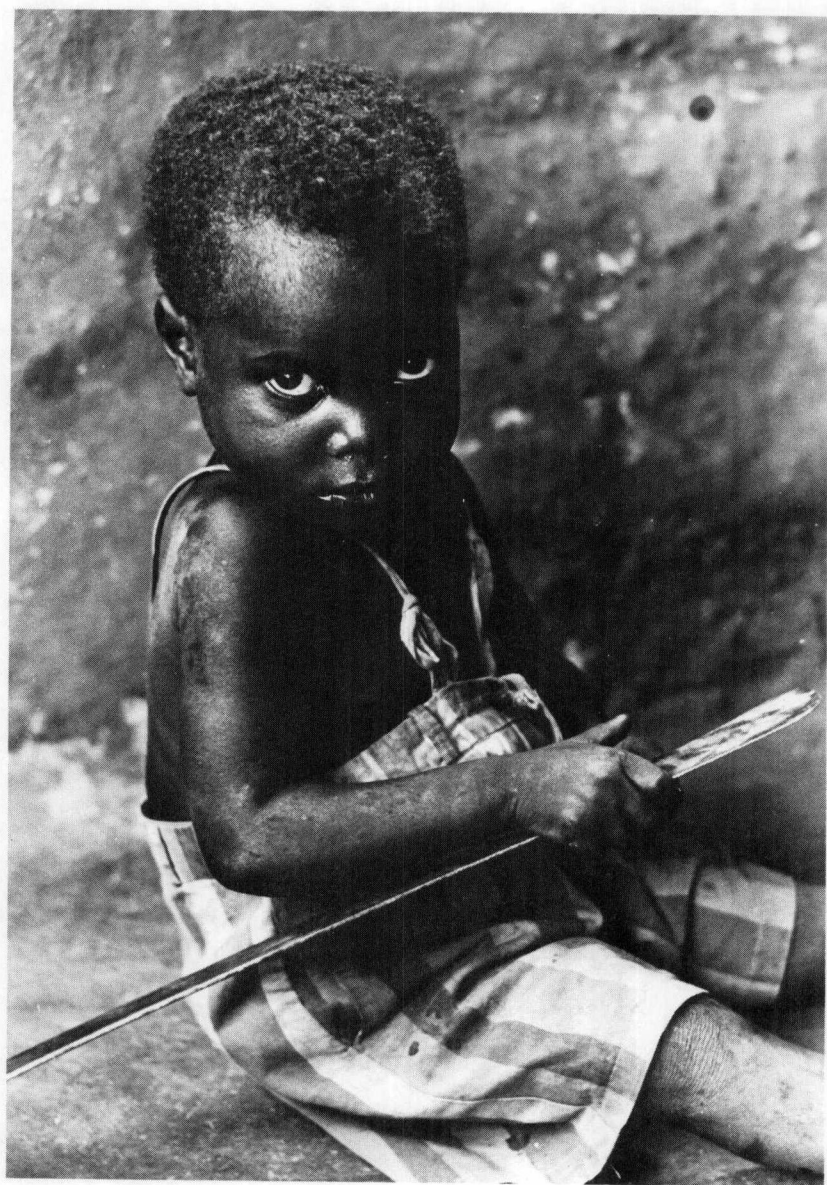
I have commented on the separate ways of Koli and Sumo, one toward the white man's world, the other toward the traditional way of ritual, secret society, village life. John Gay happens to be one of a small band of world-recognized experts on the subject of the Westernization of traditional societies, particularly the impact of this Westernization on the thought processes. It is not surprising then that his account of the two different ways rings so true. But his expertise never intrudes, one does not feel him to be lecturing. Rather, one feels that it is Sumo and then Koli who

are telling their story and making it possible for us all to understand better – without losing sympathy for either.

In the past, anthropologists like Radin and LaFarge have used the device of the well-told life history to describe the subjective side of a culture. *Crashing Thunder* and *Laughing Boy* have been in my imagination ever since I read those finely-wrought biographies. Sumo and Koli join them there now, and I am in John Gay's debt. I think the reader will share this pleasure with me, whether he is expert in exotic cultures or making his first venture. John Gay teaches as he delights.

Oxford

May, 1973





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