

# The Tiv

An African People  
1949 to 1953



**Bohannan** ❖ **Seaman**

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**An African People  
From 1949 to 1953**

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and

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*The Tiv:*

*An African People From 1949 to 1953*

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# 1 SELECTING THE TIV

**I**N A SENSE, IT BEGAN IN FRESNO, California, during World War II. I was a junior officer assigned to Hammer Field (today that is the Fresno Air Terminal). I wanted to be an anthropologist. I decided to learn a non-Indo-European language in the evenings. Any non-Indo-European language. When I mentioned this to a friend, he told me about a missionary who lived in Fresno—an old Dane who spoke, wrote and could teach Japanese. I did not choose Japanese because they were “the enemy” at that point—I chose it because it was available.

D. G. M. Bach took me on as a student. I spent two evenings a week at his house, learning something about the Japanese language. A few months later, I was summoned to go to Japanese Language School which the army was beginning at the University of Michigan. It turned out that a colonel, now stationed in Washington, who had spent a lot of time in Japan and knew the language well, had called his old friend D. G. M. Bach, who had told him about me. The next thing I knew, I was transferred. I had known nothing about the transfer until my orders appeared to report in Ann Arbor.

I spent a semester at that Japanese language school. Then, before I was ready—but nobody was ready in those days—I was sent on to the advanced school at Camp Savage, Minnesota, just south of Minneapolis. There, for a year, we were instructed in Japanese language and, to some extent, Japanese culture. My colleagues were Japanese Americans from Hawaii, several sons of missionaries who had grown up knowing some Japanese, one of them a medical doctor. And, of course, Arthur Loesser. Arthur was a musician and a linguist from Cleveland, Ohio. He was a valued member of the conservatory in Cleveland. He was a whiz linguist. We became good friends.

Then we were pronounced “ready.” We knew we weren’t—we also knew that nobody else was either. I was told I would get orders to report to

the 38th Division in the Philippines. I prepped myself as well as I could.

But about that time, Camp Savage was visited by a colonel and a major from Washington. We met them, talked to them. I did not know that they had orders to skim anybody they wanted from Camp Savage. But a couple of weeks later, when my orders came, they told me to report to a “secret” destination in Arlington, Virginia, not to the 38th Division in the Philippines. I did as I was told. And I spent the next couple of years with the Army Security Agency, working on making sense of coded messages in Japanese.

When the war was over, and I had finished my B.A. (in German literature because I could not get all the required anthropology courses in a single year), I was making arrangements to go to Harvard to study Japanese with Reischauer (who had been my colonel during the war) and anthropology with Kluckhohn. It didn’t work out because I ended up with a Rhodes scholarship. I assumed I could do at Oxford what I had planned to do at Harvard.

But Oxford, in those days, had no instruction in Japanese. The nearest it came was an old man who taught Chinese and Chinese philosophy. He agreed to help with my Japanese, but it soon became evident that he disapproved of Japanese, for two reasons: it was not Chinese and, even more important, it was not ancient. That didn’t work out.

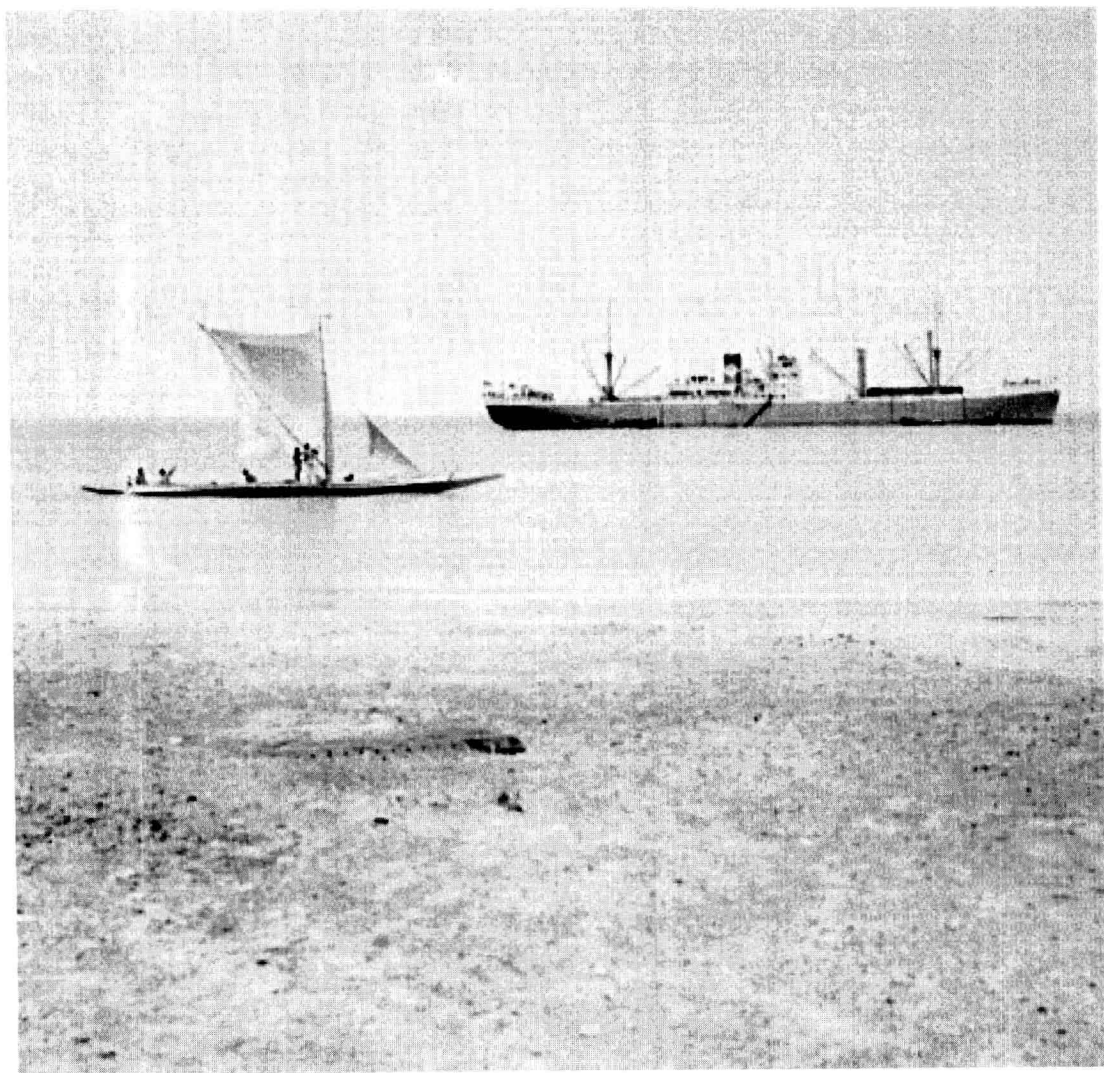
Books didn't work out either. I searched for Japanese books in the Bodleian Library. There weren't any. Years later, I discovered that there were several shelves of Japanese books in the New Bodleian that had never been catalogued because nobody on the library staff knew Japanese. They asked me to do it—without pay. I thanked them and said no. My dozen books or so were, it seemed, the best sources of Japanese social science in the kingdom. I ordered some books from Japan. They took over a year to arrive in England.

I still remember clearly the day I told myself, "I have landed in a nest of Africanists; I had better go to Africa." I have never regretted it. I decided on West Africa, and began to read systematically.

Focus came to the Ewe (pronounced *ay-way*) part of whom lived under British colonial rule in what was then called The Gold Coast, the rest of whom lived under French colonial rule in what was then known as Togoland. My problem was to be the impact of two types of administrative organization on a single "tribal" group. There was good ethnography, in German, from the turn of century when Togoland had been a German colony.

We<sup>1</sup> got permission from the British Colonial Office and the French Colonial Service to do carry out this research. We got our grants, and thought we were ready to go.

Then, a few weeks before our departure, two messages came, the same day: a formal letter from

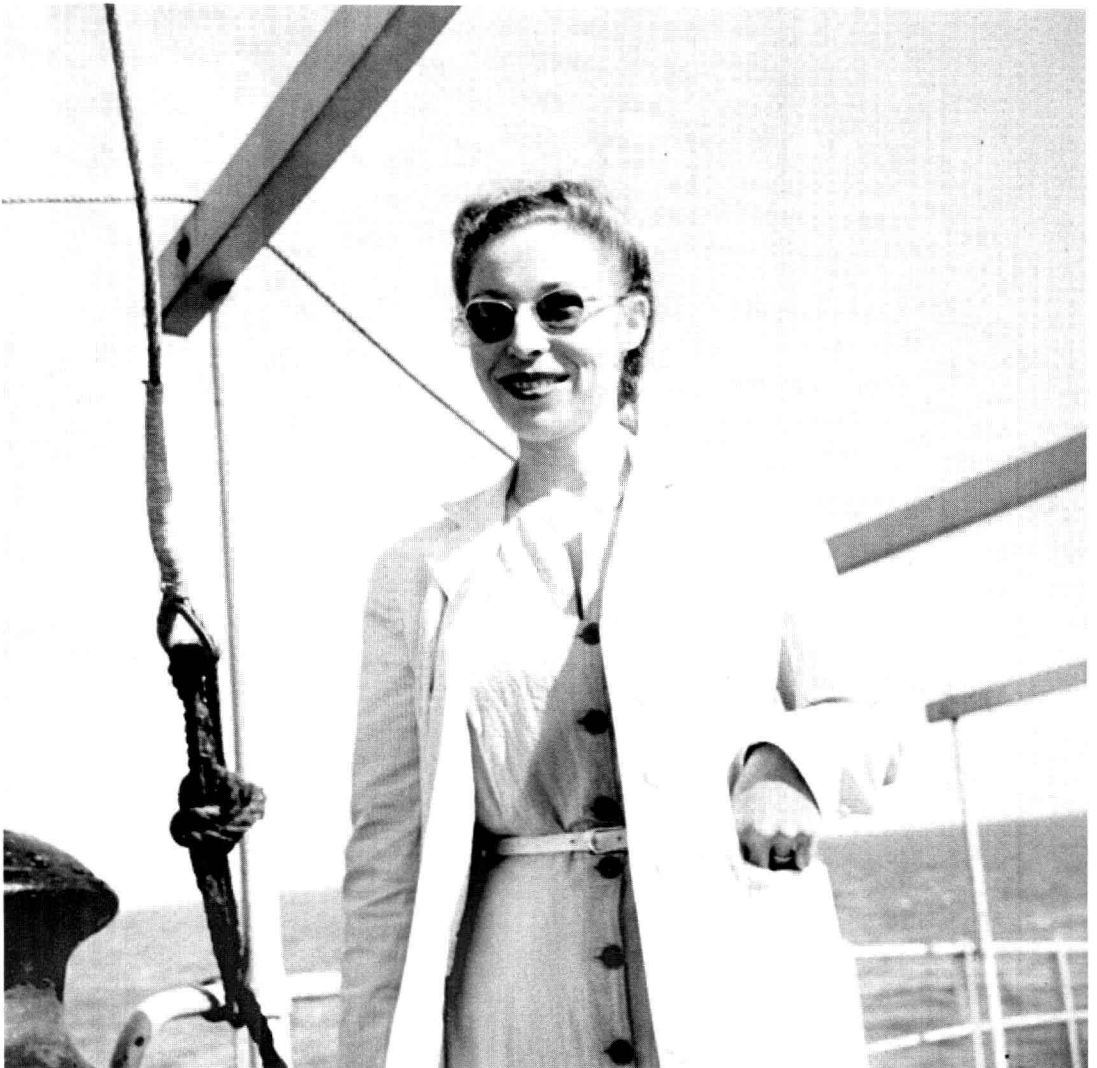


the British and a cable from the French, both cancelling our permissions. No reasons were given.<sup>2</sup>

Our contact in the British Colonial Service apologized profusely, said there was nothing he could do about our working with the Ewe, but that we could go anywhere else in British Africa and he would personally see to it that the permissions would be forthcoming. We fell back on the Tiv. Tiv lived in central Nigeria—about as far from an international boundary as you could get. There were three extant books about them: two by former District Officers (R. M. Downs, whom we later met, and R. C. Abraham, whom I never met but who ended his career teaching African languages at the School of Oriental and African Studies). The third book had been written in Tiv by “Akiga”—his full

name was Benjamin Akighirga Sai—and translated by Rupert East, who had been an education officer among the Tiv. The most notable thing about the Tiv, from those sources, was an elaborate system of exchange marriage which was obviously misunderstood by the Europeans involved in those books. Later, when I got to know Akiga, I realized that he did understand it, but had not been able to convince his translator that what he said made any sense.

The administrative officers among the Tiv made it known they did not want to be bothered with anthropologists. The colonial officials in London told them to be good to us whether they wanted us there or not. We were off to the Tiv. That was in the summer of 1949.







## 2 LIVERPOOL TO LAGOS TO MAKURDI

**W**E TRAVELED HEAVY. Our advise from the Colonial Office had been to take with us from England everything we would need in Nigeria. The result was several suitcases, two foot lockers, and a number of crates—26 pieces in all. We got it onto the train in Oxford. We had been assured that there would be plenty of porters to help us get it on and off the ferry across the Mersey. But when we got there, the porters and the other ferry workers were on strike. That meant that we had to pile all this stuff in two taxis and take the tunnel under the Mersey. It was expensive, but we did it. We got the crates delivered to docks of the Palm Lines. But we couldn't board the vessel—were told that it hadn't finished loading—that it might be two more days. We met the first mate, who said they had made hotel arrangements for us. He also said not go too far away from the hotel because they might not be able to give us much lead time when the ship was ready to sail. It took over a week. We toured the new red stone cathedral. We found some pretty good book shops. But Liverpool was, in those days, provincial and dingy. It is said to have changed—I have not been back

The Lagos Palm carried four passengers in two large cabins. The two of us were in the star-board cabin. The other was occupied by two young men headed to Sierra Leone to take up their jobs with the British West Africa Company there. I remember them as affable, but I no longer remember their names or what they looked like.

The dining salon, where the ship's officers and the passengers were fed, was a biggish room, amidships, that held a few square tables, each seating four people. Because we were the ranking passengers—and because my wife was a woman, and hence could claim rank in matters of dining space if no other—we were assigned to the Captain's table. We were sometimes joined by a fourth person, sometimes not. We were, in fact, the only people besides the captain who had an assigned table. The Captain was an extremely able seaman. As I watched him work during the more than 30 days we were on board, I came to appreciate his skill. The fact remains, however, that he had no conversation—he was not uninformed or dull exactly—he just didn't know how to talk. The food

was passable—I do not remember it as either good or bad. But I do remember how much we appreciated it when the captain invited one of the mates or engineers to join him and us at the “head” table.

The trip by sea on a freighter down the West coast of Africa was the best possible introduction to Africa. We sailed from Liverpool to Madeira, stopping there to deliver dried fish from Scotland, and to pick up additional cargo. I shall never forget sailing into the harbor at Funchal at dawn, as the mountain rose before us and, with the light, the gorgeous color of the bougainvillea, red, pink, white, purple, that draped its way down the mountain. After breakfast, we walked out onto the dock—and were told to be back by 3:30.

We toured a winery and were given samples; we watched as relaxed old men rocked the barrels of Madeira wine by hand. We ate a Portuguese lunch. And we walked and walked and walked through this wonderfully strange culture. I have ever since hesitated about going back to Madeira. It cannot be as beautiful, as fresh-smelling, as laid back and restful as I remember it.

The next stop was in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. The little Spanish I had once had came back very reluctantly. I remember beautiful beaches, a relaxed and open town, and the fun of talking in my terrible Spanish to a man who ran a camera shop.

Back on the ship, we played cards with the officers, and talked for hours to them and to the sailors. It was a comfortable ship.

The next stop was Bathurst, along the flat banks of the Gambia River.

The bright colored, clean Mother-Hubbard dresses and bare shoulders gave the Gambian women an incredible grace as they carried their loads on their heads. It was the first time I had

seen head-loading. It not only straightens the back, but gives the lower back an incredible litness. I remember noisy but dignified people in market places, others selling goods along the streets or in front of their houses;. Everybody seemed to be selling something. We were there about six hours.

Freetown, in Sierra Leone, was a completely different kind of place. Hilly. Loud. Crowded. Its long and involved history stayed in the present—everywhere in town. The stairs still there on which slaves were brought down to be loaded onto the ships—and which the people freed from slave ships when the British declared slavery illegal, went up. The other two passengers got off here. We were half-way to our destination.



The next port was Monrovia, in Liberia. Getting a ship the size of the Lagos Palm to lie up against the dock in Monrovia was a fascinating trick. It took our captain several hours of heavy backing and forthing to get the ship in the precise position that allowed him to move her into the very cramped berth. I came to admire his seamanship even more. Conversation or not, he knew how to handle a freighter.

I have returned to Monrovia several times since—indeed, a few years later, I sat in the reception room of President Tubman, waiting to call on him to get his blessing for an economic survey

being undertaken by the Economics Department of Northwestern University. His huge desk, set up on a dais, made him look smaller than he actually was. Behind him an immense blue velvet curtain; a portrait of Abraham Lincoln was nestled into the middle of its drapery. But that first time I saw Monrovia, we were warned about poisonous snakes if we dared to walk to the top of a hill near the port—we dared and saw no snakes. That hill, eleven years later, was the home of several foreign consulates, including the new American embassy. Monrovia grew fast.



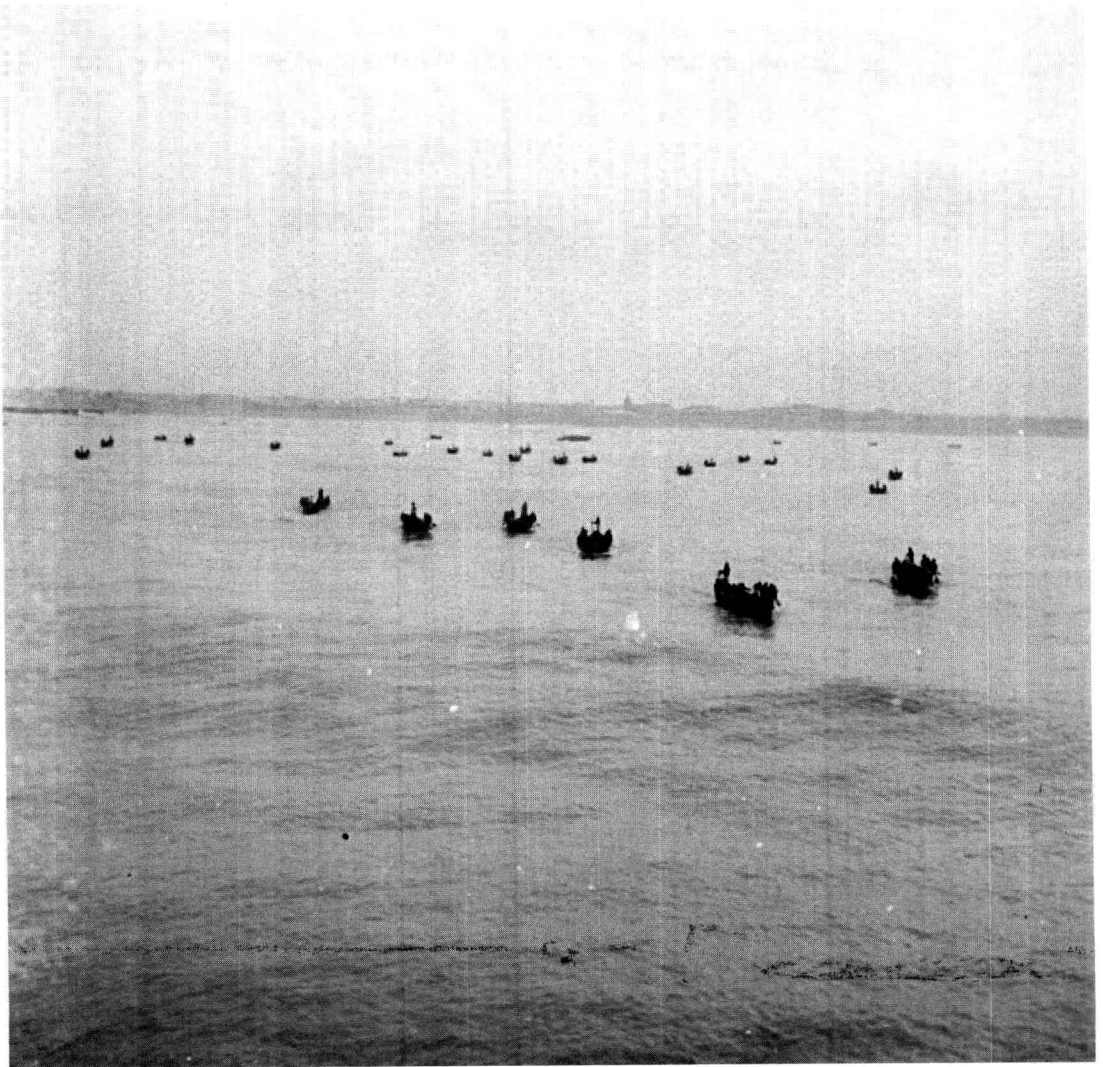


In 1949, Liberia was the only country in West Africa that was not, had never been, a European colony. The American presence was, however, as dominant as the British or French presence in their colonies. They used American money. The police wore uniforms identical with those issued to American soldiers. The music that blared into the streets from the shops that sold 78 rpm records was American—this was not only before the days of LP, it was before the days of the tape recorder. Liberia was my first realization that the culture of the occupying country could be so powerful in determining the contact cultures.

The tiered social structure of Liberia showed up vividly. The so-called Americo-Liberians walked

like Black Americans, not like the African tribal peoples who were also on the street. They dressed in American clothes. They were, in fact, descendants of freed slaves from the United States who had elected to return to Africa and become the elite of Liberia. The “natives,” on the other hand, were members of the Liberian tribes. The Americo-Liberians talked about them in much the same way that colonial officials from Europe talked in those days about their colonial charges: they were called “child-like,” proving that the people who said that not only knew nothing of the natives, they knew nothing of children.

The rubber plantations in Liberia were still going strong in those days. We met some white





Americans who were running the Firestone plantations—in 1960, I met some of them again, just as they were getting ready to close up the plantations and return to the States for good.

In Liberia we picked up a crew of some 30 Kra sailors—tribal Liberians who had been sea people for generations and who, for generations, had provided African crews for the European ships that plied those coasts. They would be dropped off on the return voyage. The noise level picked up considerably. More important, neglected maintenance work on the ship began to be done. The Kra sailors were effective—they worked hard.

The next stop was Takoradi in the Gold Coast. There was then no harbor at Takoradi. Rather, the

ship anchors off-shore in the “swell,” a constant and perpetual series of waves that form off the shore. The “boat boys” paddle huge canoes out to meet the ship. All the goods to be unloaded go over the side in a sling into the canoes, which are then paddled to shore through a high surf. Passengers go over the side in a sort of open-top box with two benches facing one another, giving you barely room for your knees.

Controlling the pulleys to regulate the descent of that box of passengers is a fine art: the canoe is heaving in the swell. If the pulley man doesn't get it right, the box hits the bottom of the canoe as the canoe surges upward. Or else the canoe descends with the swell before the box can be unhooked



from the pulley, leaving you hanging in the air. The boat boys watch carefully, ready to dive over the side into the sea if the pulley-man blows it. It seems even more treacherous on the way back, when you have to watch that box descend tentatively, wondering if you will have to go over the side with the boat boys to save your neck. And you aren't dressed for it—they were naked. Besides—you had your passport in your pocket; how could you travel without it?

We disembarked in Lagos and got to a hotel—the captain had made the reservation when he knew the schedule. The railroad was on strike;

nobody knew how long it would take. We followed colonial etiquette: you first “sign the book” of the colonial governor, then you sign the book at your own embassy. A few hours after we signed the book at the American embassy, we got a call from the American consul asking us over for drinks. I remember him only as a nice man who was eager to share his newly imported cheese with us. Cheese wasn't the point for us: he had *peanuts*! There were no peanuts in England in those days, but there *was* cheese. We ate peanuts and left him most of his cheese.



A few days after our arrival, Peter Lloyd of the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research in Ibadan sent a lorry for us. We spent a couple of weeks in the temporary campus of what was to become University College Ibadan and ultimately the University of Nigeria. We walked the new campus of that institution before any ground had been broken.

When the trains started running, we were glad to get on. Again, an instructive trip. We crossed the Niger at Jedda, among the Nupe where our friend S. F. Nadel had worked. I knew his ethno-

graphic studies intimately. I would like to have seen more. The train took us north to Kaduna, then south again to cross the great railway bridge across the Benue River at Makurdi. We were tired when we got there. But we had made it.

Great Railway Bridge at Makurdi  
OVERLEAF

Houseboat on the Benue River near Makurdi  
BELOW



