

"The Tasso Men of West Africa", original article published in "The Graphic", December 21, 1895.

## The Tasso Men of West Africa

At the recent crowning of the Sokong, or paramount chief in the Imperri Land, Sherbro, in the colony of Sierra Leone, West Africa, a curious 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 a secret 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 Imperri. The power vested in these Tasso men is immense, and gives them precedence next to the Sokong, and even entitles them to raise objections, if they see fit, to laws proposed by that chief.

In the illustration these men in their barbarous costumes are seen standing to the right and left of the new Sokong and his Speaker, or Prime Minister, who are seated in the centre of the group, the one wearing a European silk hat over a white turban being the Sokong, who has just emerged from the sacred shade of the "Poru" bush in the forest at the back, he for the first time showing himself to his 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 Tassos 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 Imperri. Tassos are practically the heads of the "Poru," or order of native Freemasons; each big chief of a town has his Tasso man, 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 to the Sokong and took a prominent part in the ceremony.

It is necessary to observe carefully the costumes worn by these men, more particularly their enormous headgear, which is about three feet in height. It is a great weight, and is consequently removed whenever the men are not actively engaged. These headpieces are erected on a foundation of plaited cane. The human skulls and the thigh bones immediately above the part fitting the head are those of defunct Tassos, which can only be renewed from other departed members of the brotherhood. The whole is surmounted 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 usually 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 iron, from which depend rings of similar metal that jingle as the men move about, making a considerable noise. The Tassos do not dance, that part of the ceremony being undertaken by the "Laga" and his followers, who are subordinate to the Tassos. It is only necessary for a single "Laga" to be present in attendance upon several Tassos. The "Laga" in this instance will be noticed standing to the right, shield in hand, having his black body bedaubed 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 "Laga," 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 interred there, but in the bush, as the law is that no woman must look upon a dead Tasso; and when one dies in a town a "Poru," or law, is immediately placed upon



BEH SHERBRO OF YONNI, SHERRRO, SUPPORTED BY TWO SUB-CHIEFS

that town compelling the women to withdraw from it until the burying is over. "Poru" 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 natural curiosity will induce a woman to secrete herself, and thereby, in disobedience to the "Poru" law, become acquainted with some of the external mysteries of the "Poru." The superstition in such cases is that sickness follows, and during her illness the lady confesses what she has done and seen; she is then carried into the "Poru" bush and initiated into the "Poru" rights, and henceforth all such women are regarded in the same light as "Poru" men, and are practically native Freemasons. At the ceremony I have described one such "Poru" woman formed part of the Royal procession and I was informed that three other "Poru" women were then located within the town.

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

## The Beethoven Celebration

THESE are the days of celebrations, and the 125th anniversary of the birth of Beethoven was, of course, not forgotten by our concert managers. Mr. Henschel has devoted the first portion of the London Symphony Concerts this season to the music of the Bonn 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. Novelties, so far as Beethoven is concerned, would, of course, be practically impossible, but Mr. Manns' programme opened with the *Prometheus Overture*, and the slow movement from the first symphony, and it likewise included the "Eroica" Symphony, very finely performed by the Crystal Palace orchestra, and the "Leonora" (No. 3) Overture. M. Soloti played the E flat Concerto, and Fri. Fullinger sang the Scena "Ah, Perfido," besides two of Beethoven's settings of Goethe's Poems.

At the Popular Concerts a Beethoven programme was given on Monday, the actual anniversary of the master's birth. It comprised the Razoumowsky Quartet in F, led by M. Wolff, and the early Pianoforte Trio in G, second of the set, Op. 1. Herr Reisenauer, who was the pianist, likewise gave a highly intelligent reading of the "Waldstein" Sonata. On Saturday, also, Beethoven's fine Quintet in C, led by M. Arbos, and the rarely performed Sonata in D, Op. 102, played by Reisenauer and Piatti, were in the programme. The chief feature of the concert, however, was Herr Reisenauer's very original reading of Schumann's *Carnaval*, to which, for an encore, he gave Mendelssohn's "Bee's Wedding."

On Tuesday at the London Symphony Concert Beethoven's Mass in D was the principal item of the programme. The "Missa Solennis" 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 therefore less interesting to general audiences than an oratorio with a programme, is not very often heard here.



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