Life as the Wife of an Anthropologist
by Barbara Merriam

I feel like the morning after, not surprising, as it is the morning after the entire village of Lupupa came to dinner. Whose idea was this anyway? Must have been Alan's. It was Christmas Eve when the villagers brought their chairs and tables and lanterns and set them up in our backyard. One way or another, we had bought enough food for a possible 240 guests, the number of Basongye tribal people who lived in this village in the savannah country of southcentral Belgian Congo. Inviting that many people to dinner was enough to daunt any hostess.

The invitation went out via the leathery voice of the town crier, an elderly gentleman who shouted out the news anytime something unusual was about to happen. Believe me, a couple of wazungus inviting an entire village to dinner and actually eating with them was big news.

The first thing on our list of preparations was to buy a pig. We had heard that the village of Sankia, some 20 miles from "our" village had a pig they might be willing to sell. All five of us got into our station wagon, Alan and I in front and our two daughters, Ginny and Paige, on either side of Arthur, our French speaking interpreter. This was our usual travel arrangement since the roads were usually so bumpy that someone had to hold down the children. Besides, the girls, ages five and three, liked Arthur and he liked children, as all the villagers did.

We arrived at Sankia in midmorning and were immediately assailed by a typical Congolese welcome. The talking drum had no doubt told these people we were coming and they were ready. The women keened in descending "eee, eee, eees"; it was shrill and loud. And as Ginny remarked later," It was kind of everlasting."

Chairs were brought out for us and I sat down, but Alan, with a daughter at each side, walked the length of Sankia's one long street and back to show respect. After the women's shrieking subsided, the village chief made a long speech about what fine people we were and Arthur translated it into French. Then Alan gave a shorter speech in French about what a fine village Sankia was and Arthur
translated that into Kisongye. At this point we were given several pineapples, two chickens and a half dozen eggs. Each chicken had been laid on its back along the rib of a palm frond, then the fringe was used to lace it snugly up the front. The poor things could hardly move a muscle.

The pig was finally brought out without our having to mention it (talking drum again). It was a black male so big that I wondered how we were going to be able to fit it into our car. After a friendly spate of bargaining, a price was settled on and the pig was hoisted into the space behind the back seat. It was well behaved, probably stunned, never having ridden in an automobile. When we arrived home in Lupupa, village men helped to lift the pig out and they tethered him to a stake near the cookhouse. For the next two days, our children visited him often, saying mournfully "Poor pig." I don't think they realized what his grisly fate was to be, just that he looked so helpless.

We checked "PIG" off our list. From then on, the dinner plan was mostly in Arthur's hands. At 21, he already had a work history, six years working at the post office in Tshofa, a tiny town 25 miles from Lupupa. That is where we went every Wednesday to pick up the groceries I had ordered 10 days earlier from Kabinda, 160 miles away and which arrived chez the doctor's house to be kept refrigerated by the doctor's wife. (I digress to let you know one of the difficulties of living in the bush.) We felt fortunate to have access to a doctor even though we had to cross two bridges so rickety that we held our breath every time we hurried across. The trip took an hour each way.

Back to Arthur, Lupupa was his home; he was related to half the people in it. He was honest and conscientious and he had inadvertently done me the great favor of teaching his 15-year-old brother, Constantine, a lot of very useful French. Constantine became our houseboy and interpreter in my dealings with the cook, who understood about as much French as I knew of the local lingua franca, Kiswahili. Arthur was not only intelligent but also resourceful and diplomatic. He took on the job of organizing two groups of women to prepare the food for our big dinner. Five women were to prepare the maize-manioc bread and another five were to cook the meat. The latter was by far the more demanding task.
As the meat cooks began their chore of cooking behind our cookhouse over open fires on the ground, we chatted whenever Arthur was there to interpret. After a while the women said, "Now that we're friends, why don't you give us a gift? Are we to do all this work and go home with nothing but black eyes?" I thought this might be considered legitimate and decided, on Arthur's advice, to give each of them 10 francs (20 cents). My friends in the back yard grumbled ungraciously but I ignored it as best I could.

The crowd of dinner guests began to arrive just as the equatorial sun was disappearing behind the role palm trees at the edge of our dirt lawn. There were not 240 people but a sizable number; I'm sure many of the women had to stay home with their children so it was primarily men who came. They were dressed in their best. My friend, Kipa, wore the dress she chose when I photographed her. Mulenda, the town drunkard, wore his white shirt and better trousers and our night watchman, Mwepu wore the new shorts I had given him since his only shorts have begun to reveal too much of him. The grandest of all was the village capita, who appeared in a tan tropical weight suit. Unfortunately, he had no shoes. The suit had probably been part of a shipment of bailed clothing sent by an American charity. I am not making fun of these people; they were poor farmers who may not have been as aware of their poverty as we were.

The dinner went by in a blur for me. We had also bought a goat which was cooked along with the pig. The light was so poor that I wasn't sure what I was eating. Mankonde, the village chief, was worried that it might rain on our party so he made special magic. It did rain, but only as the guests were on their way home. Kasambwe was worried that people would get drunk on the palm wine they had brought so he made magic against that. Sure enough, everyone stayed sober.

Next morning the meat cooks were back after breakfast saying they hadn't eaten anything at the party, that Arthur had promised them a Bako (coke). They hadn't gotten it and they still wanted the gift.

I had been trying to cultivate the women, not only as future informants, but because I really wanted to get to know them for themselves. But their behavior
seemed so crass that I couldn't let it go. I told them that they have been invited to the party; if they didn't eat, it wasn't my fault. If Arthur had promised them a Bako, they should ask him. Tired and feeling hung over, I wound up by getting so angry that I asked them what they wanted, my house and everything in it? Then, I'm ashamed to say, I turned my back and walked away, feeling as though I was turning into one of those Belgian women I had seen lose their temper with Africans. This incident pains and embarrasses me even after all these years.

Alan and I agreed that we badly needed a vacation from the villagers and they probably needed a vacation from us, too. But wasn't it a grand party?