

Father Jean Jacques Corbeil of the White Fathers mission at Serenje, in the Central Province of Zambia, is known among the Africans as 'Butala bwa maka' which might be loosely translated as 'Mr. Energy.' To watch him going about his mission work, or expertly handling a deadly puff adder, or expounding to visitors about his incomparable collection of indigenous artefacts, crafts and biological curiosities, it is hard to realize that this man is obliged to take life easy, having already suffered two severe heart attacks. But he was never really destined to take life easy.

French-Canadian Father Corbeil is the son of a former notary public in Montreal. His prowess as a youth on the ice hockey arena once prompted him to become a professional player. In his 'teens he began to take an interest in medicine and the glamour of ice hockey took a back seat. He decided to become a doctor but before long a deeper feeling within him triumphed and he chose to become a missionary priest.

His interest in medicine never wholly died but has served him well on the mission field. It has helped him win the confidence of tribal peoples and to learn much about their traditional — sometimes sacred — customs. He has witnessed ceremonies no other white man has seen. He has in fact become one of the foremost authorities on the traditional medicines of Central Africa and has written a booklet on Bemba medicines.

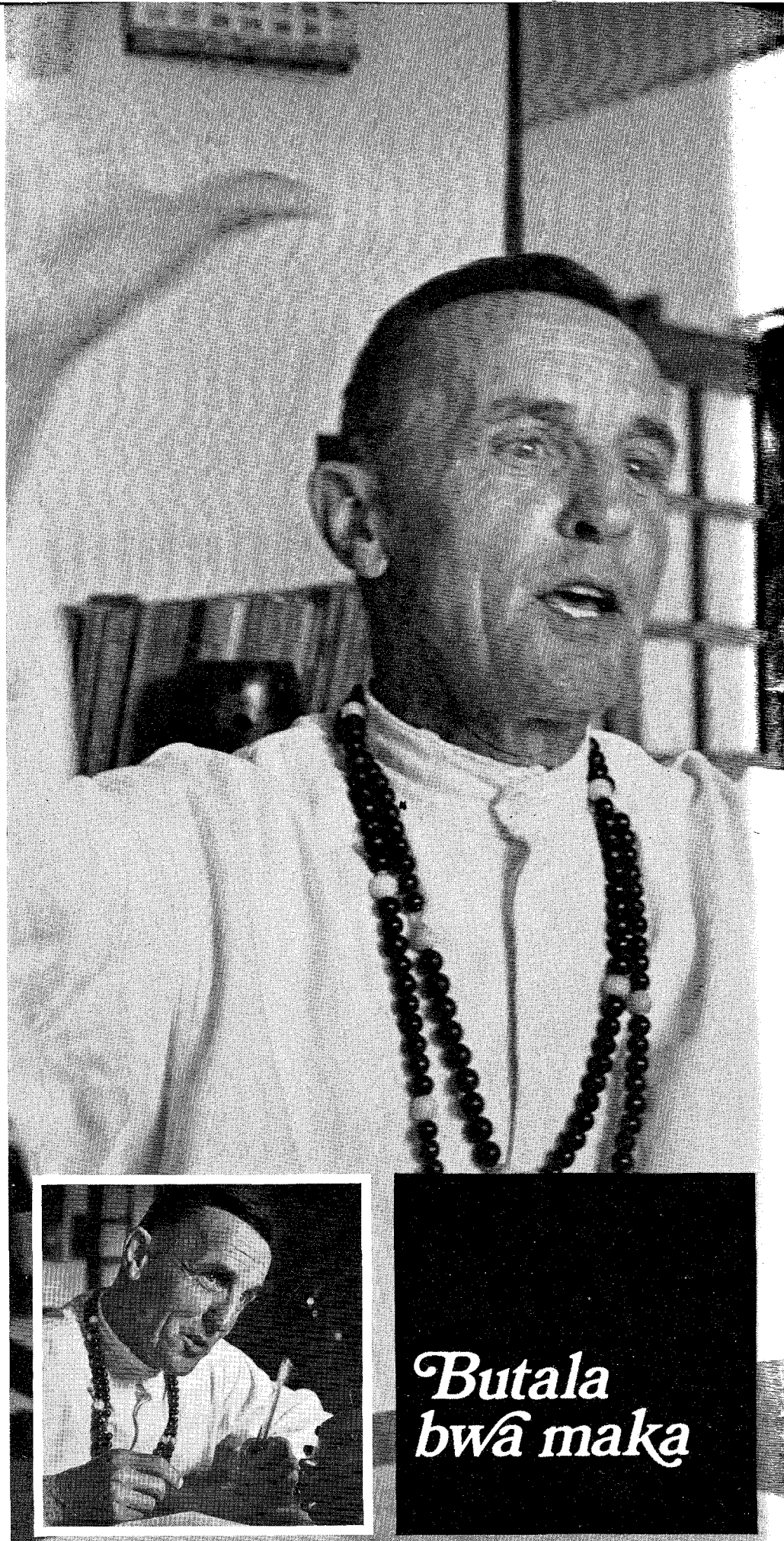
Father Corbeil joined the White Fathers in Quebec in 1937. He was ordained a priest in 1942. It was war time and he was assigned to parish work in Montreal while awaiting transport to Africa.

In 1943, with nine other priests, he sailed for Mombasa on a cargo boat carrying American troops. The journey took 61 days while the boat criss-crossed the seas to avoid enemy submarines.

Travelling by train, boat and truck Father Corbeil took 28 days to reach Mpulungu on the southern shore of Lake Tanganyika, and from there went to meet his bishop at Ilondola.

There at Ilondola in the Chinsali district he studied the Chibemba language for six months and after this was sent to Katibunga in the Mpika district where he spent almost ten years on missionary parish work.

If there is one missionary assignment which he likes to recall — and he recalls it with considerable humour — it is the instruction he received once from his Bishop, the most Reverend Henry Horst, to teach dressmaking to a class of girls at Ilondola mission school, where there were no missionary



*Butala
bwa maka*



sisters. He worked the whole night before his first class, cutting out paper patterns and learning the rudiments by trial and error. He still has the sketch and note book he prepared to help him in this work.

Father Corbeil returned to Canada for his first leave in 1953, suffering from malaria, and spent 187 days in hospital in Montreal. On his return to Africa in 1954 he was sent to Mulilansolo in the Isoka district of Zambia. Here his mission work took him regularly on weeks-long bicycle tours of the bush.

And it was here at Mulilansolo towards the end of 1956 that Father Corbeil began picking up the first few items of ancient African artefacts which over the years have grown to become the most comprehensive collection of its kind in Central Africa.

Transferred to Kayambi in the Abercorn district, Father Corbeil returned one night after a bush tour and suffered a severe heart attack. 'I was unconscious and received the last rites, but I recovered sufficiently to be sent to the hospital at Kasama. After three months there I was flown to hospital in Elizabethville. I spent six months in Elizabethville and then the doctors gave me a warning that sounded worse than the death knell: "Go back home. You are not fit to stay any more in Africa." But I told my bishop, "I want to stay in Africa and to die in Africa."'

'Now suddenly everything was forbidden me — African porridge, bicycle-riding, even motor-cycling. And this meant no more touring. I sent an urgent SOS to my friends in Canada — an SOS for four wheels. They sent me the funds to buy a car.'

Back at Kayambi mission he was ordered to take things easy. But now he had a car, so he occupied himself by learning more about Africa and African traditions and intensifying his search for items to add to his, by this time, fairly extensive collection.

He was sent back to Mulilansolo in 1958 and there with another missionary priest, Father Charles Rythoven, was assigned to undertake a serious religious adaption study. This was to involve the removal of some Latin from church services and the inclusion of hymns in African languages as well as the introduction of African music with drums. During the assignment his study of African culture was to prove invaluable.

Father Corbeil returned to Canada on his second home leave in 1962 and this time spent two years there. He took with him seven boxes of museum curios with which he arranged exhibitions in Montreal and Quebec. Later he toured with the exhibition, sometimes giving as many as 20 lectures in a week.

In August 1964 he returned to Zambia and was sent to the mission at Serenje where he serves today. Before he left he had arranged for the vast collection of artefacts, crafts and biological specimens which he had collected between 1956 and 1962 to be moved from Mulilansolo to Abercorn. There it is still stored at the White Fathers mission.

He then started to collect from scratch again and in the years since has built up a formidable collection at Serenje. And although the two parts of his collection have not yet been brought together — and through lack of funds are unlikely to be for some years to come — the busy little missionary from French Canada who once dreamt of becoming a great ice-hockey player has the satisfaction of knowing that his collection of artefacts and crafts, cultural curios and biological specimens from Central Africa is probably the finest private collection of its kind in the world. □

We flew over the mission at Serenje to tell them of our arrival, but Father Corbeil was already on his way to the airstrip to meet us. He was waiting with his Volkswagen Kombi and his inevitable retinue of African children when our wheels touched down.

We drove along a dusty track into town and he pointed to a garage building as we passed. 'Only yesterday I was brought a most interesting piece of rusted iron picked up at the back of the garage. A neck-iron worn by a slave. It must be a couple of hundred years old. When I knocked off the rust and oiled it, the spring-lock was still operating and I was able to open it with a nail. Finds like this seem to indicate that Serenje had its origins as a stop-over point for the Arab slave traders.'

At the mission he offered us coca cola. He is a heavy smoker and admits that he 'keeps going' on cokes. 'On a hot day I'll drink a dozen cokes,' he said.

The collection, he explained, was housed behind the mission church in two slated stone blocks, each comprising three small rooms. 'But everything is cramped. Space is my problem.'

'Now, first of all you must meet my five wives,' he told us, and his eyes gleamed with amusement. 'Oh yes, I must be the only Catholic priest in the world with five wives.'

He led us to one of the blocks and threw open the door of a room that housed a vast array of musical instruments, each labelled, standing on the floor and on shelves. At his request we helped him carry out five crude wooden drums into the sunlight. 'These are my wives,' he explained, beating a tattoo first on one and then another. 'Yes, I was married to each of them according to tribal custom. Otherwise I could never have got them for my collection.'

These were no ordinary drums, but royal ancestral 'talking' drums — used traditionally for sending messages through the bush. They could be acquired only by a chief or someone of royal lineage. Father Corbeil, as a commoner and a foreigner, would have had as much chance of purchasing one as he would of purchasing the British Crown Jewels. But he was prepared to try.

It was in a village near the mission at Mulilansolo that he saw his first 'talking' drum. Immediately he wanted it for his collection. He offered K20 for it, then raised his bid to K40 — a considerable sum in that society. But the chief just laughed and shook his head. 'I am an old man,' he said. 'When I am buried I want to pass on this drum to my children and their children.'

Father Corbeil returned to that village time and again — always renewing his request to buy the drum. As time passed the people began to appreciate his sincerity. Then one day a villager brought word to him that he could have the drum provided he would follow the custom. Traditionally the drum was considered by the chief as a daughter. He would have to marry the 'daughter'.

He went to see the chief. 'Yes,' the chief told him, 'you know the language, you know the custom. If you want the drum you must marry her. Then you must never pass her to another man.'

Father Corbeil was in a quandary. He went away to think it over. Why not, he debated with himself, it is all a matter of symbolism. He returned to the village and asked to marry the 'daughter'.

The chief now had a long discussion with the elders of the village. The qualities of the drum were discussed. Father Corbeil's qualities were discussed. Finally the chief came and told him: 'Father, you are engaged.'

'If I had told my bishop,' recalls Father Corbeil with a wry smile, 'he would have thought I had sunstroke.'

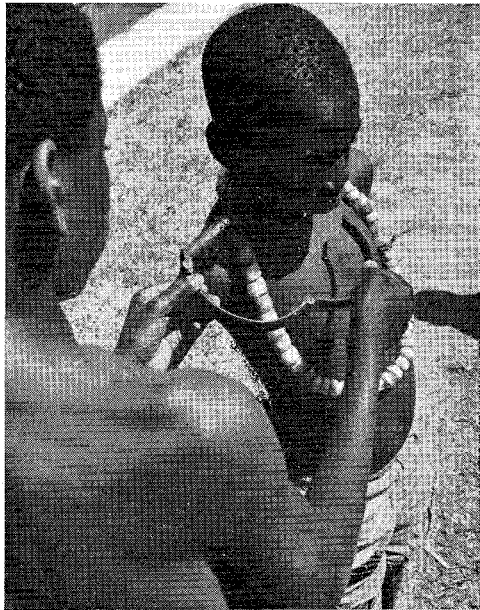
Eventually he returned to the chief with a 'dowry' of K10 and was married to the drum. By keeping the drum he established his integrity as far as the local people were concerned. They had some apprehensions that he might send it overseas. In the next few years he acquired his four other 'wives' by following the same traditional marriage customs.

The complete collection of musical instruments is impressive. There are more than 140 in all — wind and string instruments, a dozen or so hand pianos of varying sizes, crude but effective xylophones, bull roarers, disc buzzers, horns and a wide variety of drums among which the five 'wives' take pride of place, no doubt because of all that was involved in acquiring them.

'When I started my collection,' Father Corbeil told us, 'the bush travelling which was part of my everyday missionary work provided the ideal opportunity for gathering

Father Corbeil's Collection

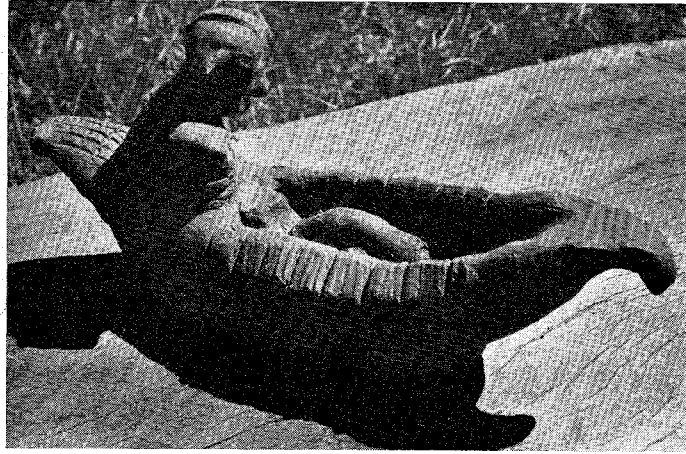
of indigenous artefacts and crafts




This iron collar, once used by Arab slave traders, was recently found at Serenje. The boy is wearing a string of slave beads (matombo) from the collection. Right: Father Corbeil with his five 'wives' — royal drums which he acquired only by following traditional marriage customs.



The collection features some 200 items associated with initiation ceremonies of young girls in preparation for marriage. Shown here are three initiation ceremony symbols. Top: 'Bwato' — the boat — illustrates a message which says 'life is often as difficult as crossing a river in a dug-out canoe.' Centre: A conventional symbol relating to domestic duties. Below: 'Nacimsungu' — clay representation of initiated maiden.





curios. Normally I used to cover on foot some 90 miles in a fortnight's tour, visiting the people of the villages surrounding a mission outstation. During my first ten years of this I observed the surface of the African way of life, and I was also told a lot — second hand — about African traditions. But much of what I was told didn't conform, to my mind, with what I had observed. I now wanted to study the Africans closer and began questioning them about their customs. At the beginning they were very suspicious, seeing me as a potential informer. They told me a little but not everything.

'You see, for 50 years many Europeans had been laughing at their customs. But I didn't laugh at them, and gradually the Africans began to realize that I was genuinely interested in their culture. Then they began to bring me artefacts and other items used as symbols in their secret ceremonies. As I gained a deeper understanding of their way of life I found a lot of intrinsic values in it. I became more interested in their artefacts and crafts and began to collect more.'

'After independence when I was sent here to Serenje, as I had arranged for the storing of my entire collection at Abercorn in 1962, I began collecting again — getting a second collection together as it were. As this grew people came in increasing numbers to see it. I realized then that Europeans were growing more appreciative of African customs, and the Africans themselves, who had acquired doubts from their association with the Europeans, were coming to realize that their culture had its values.

'Now I have at least moral support from every quarter. The exhibition here is a big attraction. Although Serenje is way off the beaten track about 400 to 500 visitors come each year to see the collection. Most of them are professors and scholars, teachers and students, and come in the holiday season. And I have to be able to discuss my collection in depth with them.'

One can only begin to appreciate the extent of Father Corbeil's collection when one begins to go over it item by item, section by section, and even then its sectional categories cannot always be easily defined.

In the Stone Age section we saw axe-heads, scrapers, arrowheads, harpoons and drilled weight-stones. 'The Stone Age in Africa goes back 50,000 years,' he explained. 'Most Stone Age implements which I have here were found at Kalambo Falls and Kasaba Bay.'

We moved to the Iron Age section. 'Here in Zambia the Iron Age dates back 2,000 years,' the missionary continued. 'And it all began with a bellows. By forcing air, using a bellows, into a furnace containing iron ore and charcoal the African began to extract crude iron. Having achieved this he gradually replaced his stone implements with iron ones.' The collection here included samples of the primitive bellows used for this purpose as well as more than 250 implements and artefacts. Among these were hammers, tongs, pliers, hoes, axes, trowels, a variety of spears, arrows, knives, razors, needles, chisels, bells and wire for making bracelets and anklets.

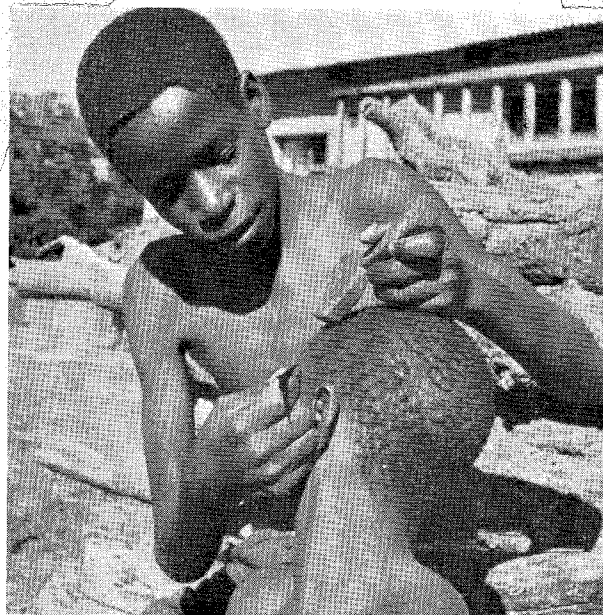
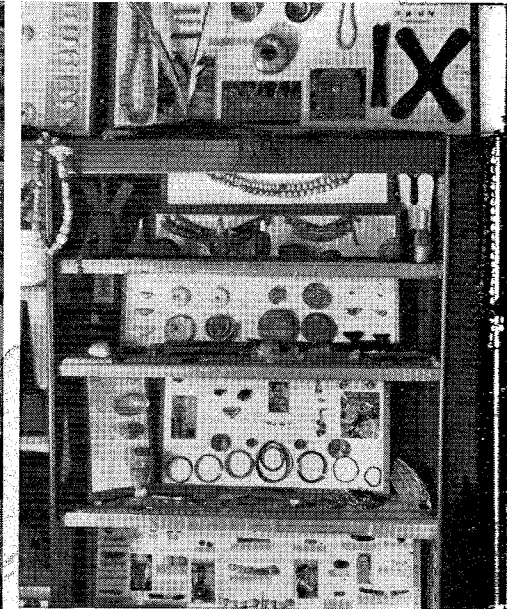
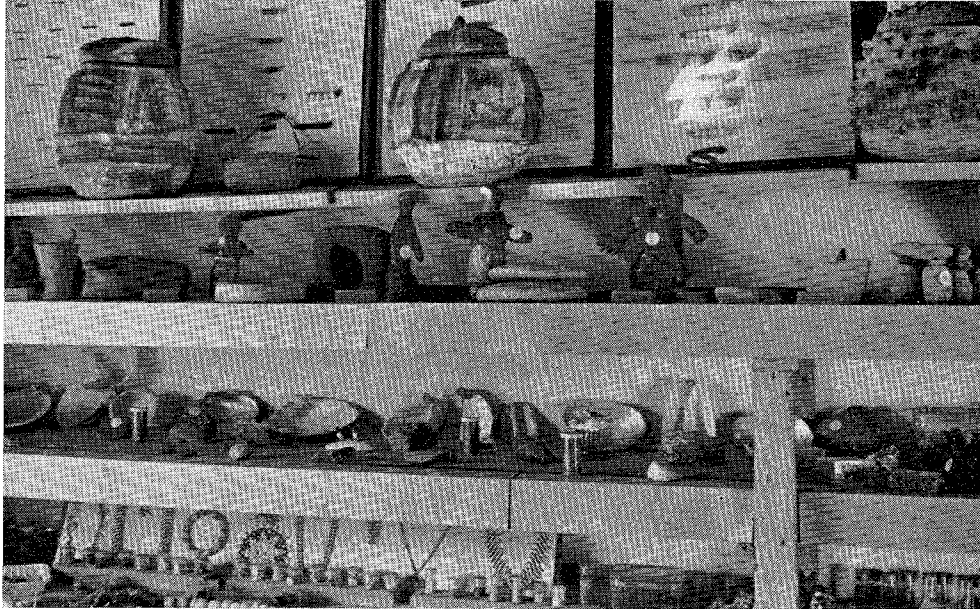
The next section featured string, ropes, boxes, cloth and bags all made of bark. String and rope, Father Corbeil explained, were made by rolling the strips of bark along the thigh much as is still done in the bush today. For making boxes the bark had to be softened by passing over a fire. Bark cloth, formerly used in the bush for clothing and blankets, was beaten out with a grooved mallet called the nsalo or cipamba. He produced one of these mallets and demonstrated its use.

Pride of place in a section marked 'royalty' goes to a royal axe and a royal hoe. The axe was carried and used only by the chief or somebody of royal blood. 'With it the chief performed such duties as severing the fingers of a subject found guilty of theft. Only nine fingers were severed. The thumb was left on the right hand to enable the offender to feed himself.' The royal hoe was carried by the chief's wife, as a symbol of the woman's responsibility for agriculture.

Prominent in this section were three decorative stones cut from ivory. One, the cifo, was cone-shaped with a half globular base. The other two, the cituntulu and the mpande, were obviously derived from cross-cuttings of the cifo. Father Corbeil came forward again with his inevitable but valued elaboration: 'Chiefs from areas north of Serenje used ivory from coral shells found in the Indian ocean. Their crowns were decorated with cituntulu and glass beads. The Lala chiefs from this district used ivory from elephant tusks to make royal stones. And instead of crowns their royal emblems were suspended around their necks and rested on their chests.'

To many visitors the most intriguing section of his collection is that to which he has given the quaint title 'Beauty of Formerly.' It comprises cosmetics, jewellery and various

Right: Spearhead, known as 'cisumpi', used in elephant trap. Released from tree it sank in the neck of the elephant, eventually killing him. Below: Sections of the display shelves behind the mission at Serenje where collection is housed.



Shaving the hair using indigenous one-piece razor of iron. Also brush. Both items from the collection.

Only one section of this unique collection now remained to be seen — that featuring snakes and insects. Here no less than 300 snakes are preserved in formulin in glass bottles and jars. These comprise more than 20 different varieties, front-fanged, back-fanged and harmless. Some 500 preserved insects, mainly butterflies, scorpions and spiders, are also displayed.

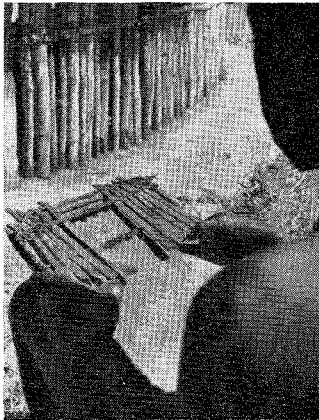
Once again Father Corbeil invited us out into the sunlight and showed us two live snakes he had caught that morning. These were in timber boxes under sheets of glass and he released each in turn for our benefit. One was a puff-adder, sluggish in its movements but deadly poisonous. The other, a slim olive grass snake, moved with alarming speed once released. But Father Corbeil was alert and confident. Using a stick he kept it under control until finally returning it to the box. He then milked the puff-adder, draining the venom into a glass. 'They'll be glad to have this at the hospital,' he said, holding up the poisonous liquid, 'it provides the basis for an antidote.'

We wondered if these two discomfoting specimens would join the others in the jars of formulin. But no: he was sending these to the Monkey Fountain Zoo in Ndola. Perhaps, he suggested, we would take them back to Ndola for him. To this we agreed — having assured ourselves they would be securely boxed.

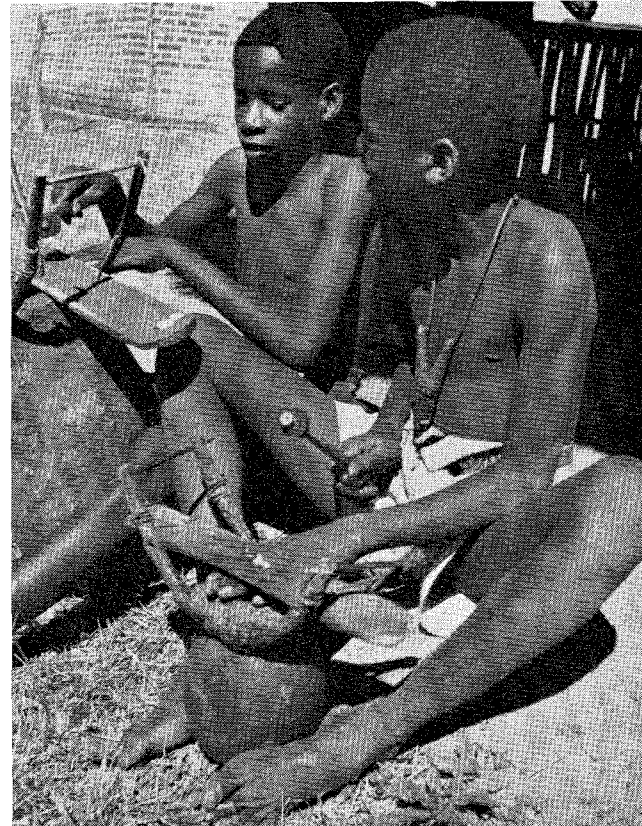
Since more than 90 per cent of the material in this collection has had to be purchased we asked Father Corbeil how it was financed.

'Because I lecture and show items from my collection at many different exhibitions throughout the country, people think the collection is financed or subsidized by the Government. Others think it is financed by the White Fathers. None of this is correct. I have had to finance it myself from the beginning and it grows more difficult each year. Artefacts which I could buy for a Kwacha or two a couple of years ago now cost me triple the amount. Were it not for the financial assistance of some personal friends in Canada to whom I send circulars from time to time, and occasional donations from visitors who come here to Serenje to view the collection, I could hardly continue. And as the collection grows the financing of it becomes more problematical.'

Then what of the future? He shrugged his shoulders. 'The greater part of the collection is still stored at Abercorn. Perhaps Bishop Furstenburg would like me to establish a permanent museum there some day. We must wait and see.' □



Story by R. P. Furniss Photographs by Christopher Mills



Top: Hand piano. Above: War-trumpet made from kudu horn. Right: 'Lala malimba' — a type of primitive xylophone. Opposite page: The lemba-lamba trumpet made from 'nsupa' or calabash.