culture

Africa after dark

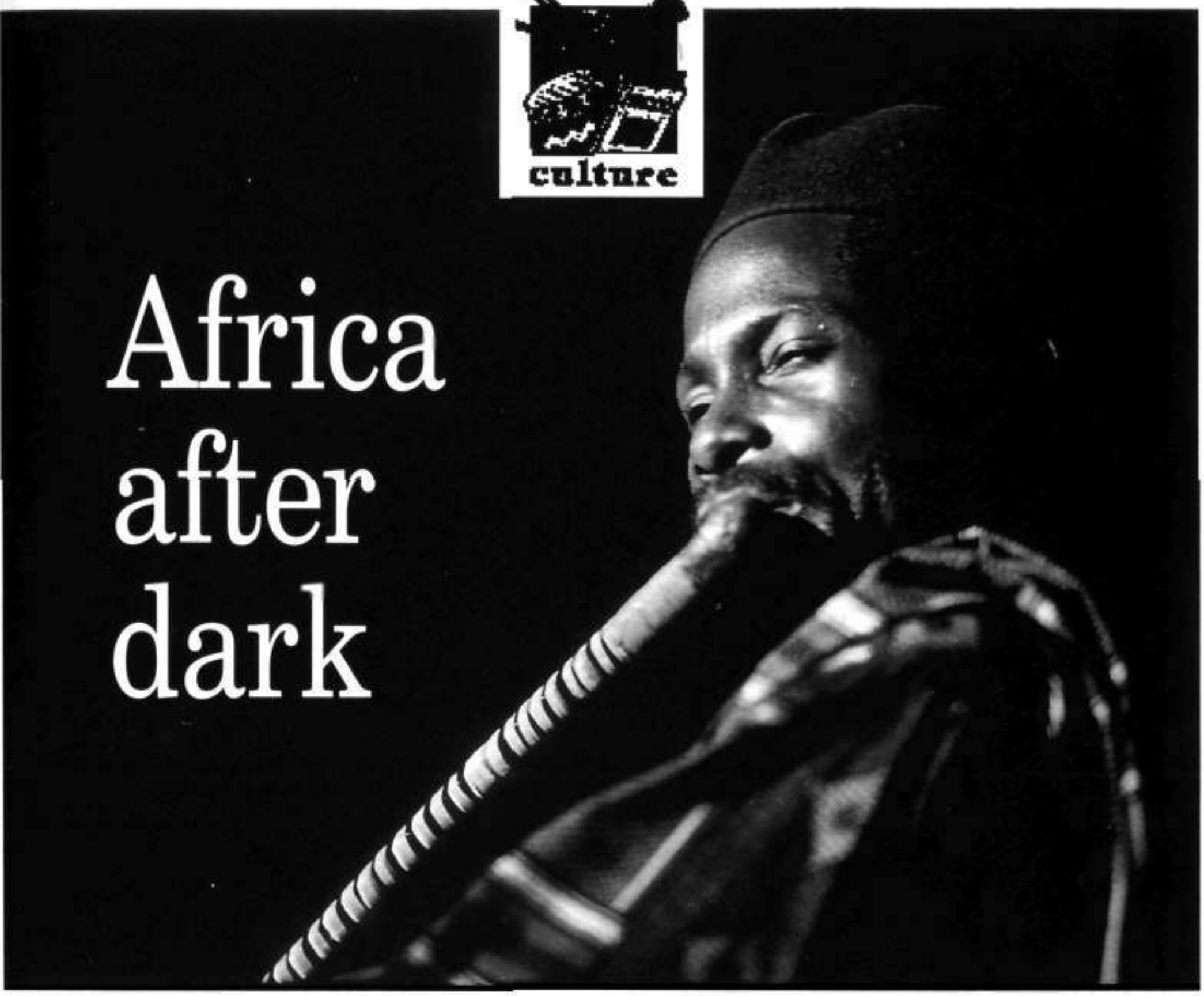

PHOTO: RASHID LOMBART

'We Africans know the night must be shared with our ancestors,' says Prince Ado, a Nigerian spiritualist who intertwines religion with fashion. 'You see, surviving the night is a whole other matter than surviving the day.' **TM SIMONE** and **D HECHT** try their luck...

EVERY NIGHT, IN AFRICAN CITIES like Lagos, Ouagadougou, Luanda, Nairobi, people are searching for a life that transcends mere survival.

Clubs and discos are sometimes proud structures that ignore the surrounding poverty, referring instead to a world of musical heroes like Salif Keita, Papa Wemba and King Sunny Ade.

Or they can be shacks in a sleepy little village, to hang out in, dance a little, and listen to a traditional or a modern African song, to Bruce Springsteen or Ice-T.

Addis Abbaba, Ethiopia

At the Blue Nile Bowling Club a local band called Tekere Zenawi is warming up for a set. The party will go all night long.

The music, with its origins in ancient Ethiopian tradition, has come to sound like a mix of apocalyptic Las Vegas show tunes, free jazz and Arab-style pop. A female voice wails over baritone saxophones, creating a sense of foreboding that resonates well with this crowd of rich and poor.

Most of the lyrics are about throwing one's body at the feet of a wayward lover. "I can't get enough of him," the vocalist sings, "I've made up my mind to die for him/To love him is to lose him/I wish I was his sister."

Under soft neon lights, strange scenes are underway. A group of neatly-dressed female university students fraternise with a group of "toughboys" from the slums.

Another group of young women is clad in flashier cocktail dresses made from bright polyester. They are poor market girls sent by their parents to find husbands. The boys showing interest in them are not the same "toughboys" going for the educated women, but the sons of well-to-do civil servants. They wear hooded gowns made from tired sackcloth, and look like monks from the Middle Ages.

The dancing style is like the mating ritual of a strange species of bird. Men and women face each other, eagerly and vigorously moving their shoulders up and down, often with hips and feet completely still. They gaze into each others' eyes as if they are insane with love. But by the next song, the partners have changed.

As the night wears on and the music heats up, the crowd becomes more animated, forming a sea of bodies which jumps up and down like convulsive pistons. Noses are bloodied, feet are broken.

The music pounds and the bodies slam. "Tonight", a man comments, "this dance is a carnival, a parody in which the poor pretend to be rich, and

the rich, poor. And all they want to do is fight and fuck each other."

Exim, Ghana

One day a year, young and old spend the night on the beach in this small coastal town in western Ghana. The all-night festival maintains a tradition that dates back hundreds of years, celebrating a time when the goddess of the ocean first carried white people to their shores. Today, the goddess appears in the guise of a mermaid, specifically Daryl Hannah as she appeared in the movie *Splash*.

A poster of the blond American movie star hangs on a wall in Exim's Mami Wata (Mother Water) shrine, surrounded by blood sacrifices. During the festival, there is a ban on all African music — even drumming. Instead, a sound system plays Russian polkas, Madonna, Indian religious music, Beethoven and Michael Jackson. On this night everything must be non-African, including peoples' style of dress and dance.

Brazzaville, Congo and Kinshasha, Zaire

The intersection of Boulevard Djoue and Rue Mere Marie in Brazzaville, Congo, is a crossroads for the world-beat soukous music scene. A constant stream of nocturnal merrymakers flow from the more than 50 clubs in the neighbourhood.

Here, and on the Zaire side of the Congo river, in Kinshasha, crowds of late-night scenesters look more like they are going to a cocktail reception or a yachting party than a sweaty night-club in a squalid stretch of town.

A particular mix of French high fashion with BaCongo tradition has created *le Societe des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Elegantes* or "le Sape". This is a society for those who wish to create ambience and elegance — a society where poverty does not mean you can't look like a million dollars.

Amid the poverty and despair, many people desire not just a good meal and some clean clothes but such non-essentials as natural fibre (never polyester) and correct colour coordination. They may live in one-room hovels, shared with 10 or more people, but as long as they can lay hands on a fashionable three-piece suit or elegant

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— Cheri Mallet, no fixed address, but owner of an Yves Saint Laurent suit

dress, they see themselves as more fortunate; at least they have the *appearance* of a better life.

For "le Sape", names like Jean-Paul Gaultier, Giorgio Armani, and Chanel are invocations to a spirit which crosses ethnic and class boundaries. It's more than just imitation of Western taste: Sape is bound-up in the BaCongo tradition which venerates fine cloth, eleborate hairdos, manner and the general refinement of one's appearance.

A local saying is: "To look bad is to be wrong." Yet the "Sapeuses" (those who practice Sape) know that there is more to being chic than designer labels. There is the sacred BaCongo concept of *tsala*, of looking good no matter what you wear.

"A true master can stand in his underpants and completely demolish a rival," says Cheri Mallet, who has no fixed address, but owns an Yves Saint Laurent suit.

Khartoum, Sudan

Happy Land may be the only disco in Sudan's sprawling capital, a city far from happiness. Poverty and the nation's oppressive Islamic laws combine to make life almost unbearable. The worst conditions are reserved for non-Muslim Africans who have fled the famine and war of their native south and found a horrible refuge of make-shift, mud and cardboard shacks in the desert surrounding the city.

With no sanitation or running water, the squatters' primary source of income is the illegal brewing of alcohol, for which they risk being flogged and imprisoned by the authorities. The government has also been cracking down on music and dancing. Yet for some inexplicable reason they allow Happy Land to stay open for two hours twice a week.

One evening we go there. It is empty. Then a few sweaty European expatriates from embassies and aid missions amble in. A little later a group of Chinese construction workers enter. Still the place is pretty empty. There are almost no African clients except for a couple of agents from the state security branch. On an ancient sound system, the DJ plays '70s disco. He doesn't want officials to get the idea that he has been smuggling in any Western music since it became illegal to do so.

It's only 40 minutes before the club has to close. The night looks like it's going to be a dud. Suddenly, one after the other, young African men come streaming in. All southerners, they have walked five and a half hours across the desert to get here.

None sit around and just talk. They are there to dance. The music becomes harder to hear, drowned by a frenzy of whooping and shouting. The expatriates try to leave, but they have to pass the dance floor to get to the exit and it's too crazy. So they retreat. For 30 minutes the crowd goes off the wall. Then the police arrive, the music stops and everyone quickly leaves the club.

Standing outside, they prepare for the long walk back across the desert. "You think this walk is something?" asks Asem Deng, one of the young southern Sudanese. "Most of us have come to this city of Khartoum from our traditional regions — at least a four-week journey — dead bodies leading the way." ■

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