

LOOK, MAO, I'M DANCING!

by Bruce Jay Friedman

An inquiry into a curious incident at the U.N.

Will historians of the future report that the entire course of American foreign policy was once altered by a pair of exuberant East African dancing feet? It's not that outrageous a speculation. The way New York Times correspondent Tad Szulc saw it, when the U.N. General Assembly tallied up its famous China vote and decided to toss out Taiwan, Salim Ahmed Salim, the chief delegate from Tanzania, "jumped to his feet and led his colleagues in a victory jig." *Newsweek's* man said that while other diplomats laughed, cheered, and shouted, Salim "whipped his burly body into a brief victory dance." Shortly thereafter, President Nixon let it be known that he was absolutely bowled over at the "shocking demonstration" of "undisguised glee" on the part of "certain delegates." Few members of the U.N. had any doubt as to the identity of those "certain delegates." Several days later, "an angry Congress" threw out its entire Foreign Aid bill.

What about this rascally twinklet-toed thirty-year-old diplomatic hooper whose high-stepping antics may very well have plunged America into isolationism? After assuring his secretary that I was not a political fellow and (thinking quickly) that *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* was first published in *Esquire*, I wangled an interview with the ambassador and got to dig into the terpsichorean episode firsthand. So as not to appear a complete boob on East African affairs, I did a quick study in the ambassador's outer office, riffling through some brochures and learning that Tanzania had the world's largest game preserves, exported shark fins, barbed wire, bicycle spokes, sanitary

pads and cashew-nut kernels and had as its motto "Tanzania Makes It. . . Tanzania Delivers the Goods." Sweeping me into his office, Ambassador Salim turned out to be a scholarly looking fellow who seemed spry enough to kick up his heels but by no stretch of the imagination brought to mind Bobby Van, Dan Dailey or the great Bolger at his light-footed peak in the delightful *By Jupiter*. On the other hand, I had seen reserved New York University physics majors, cut from the same academic cloth as Salim, suddenly whip off their specs at parties and do the wildest, most nimble-footed movements in the room. So there was no telling. Salim said that he had been his country's head delegate for two years, that he had two children whose ages he could not remember, that he commuted to Mount Vernon and moonlighted as Tanzania's Ambassador to Guiana, Trinidad, Tobago, Barbados and Cuba. Then, taking a no-nonsense approach, he plunged into the issue.

"Our feet never left the ground," said the youthful ambassador. "We've been made a whipping boy out of this, perhaps because we're a mini-nation and have been in on the Taiwan expulsion business for a long time. At first we took this good-naturedly, but now other delegations are asking us for dancing lessons. It's gone a bit too far."

Then how did Salim account for the august New York Times report that he was jiggling in the aisles?

"Now look," said Salim, whipping out a news photo of the Tanzanian U.N. booth. "All seven of us are crowded into this small space. I ask you, is there any room for dancing in here?"

My knowledge of African dancing is

sketchy, based primarily on an old Cornel Wilde jungle thriller, but I seemed to recall the movements take up quite a bit of space. I had to admit, after studying the photo, it would have been a tight squeeze to do any steps in the floor area allotted to the Tanzanians.

"I'm not saying that we're not dancers," said the ambassador. "We've got a hundred and one different varieties of dance in our country. Tanzanians are friendly, open, much on the style of Americans, and will dance at the drop of a hat. Mrs. Salim and I dance quite often on social occasions. We just didn't happen to be dancing at that particular time. Clapping? Yes. Happy? Absolutely. Shouting *furaha*?* A distinct possibility. Dancing? No sir."

Taking up the Tanzanian case for a moment, I wondered what all the fuss was about. Let's say the Tanzanians were dancing. Whose business was it anyway?

"Now you're talking," said Salim. "If we want to dance, it's our affair. We're nobody's client-state. Our freedom is not for sale. We just didn't happen to be dancing when they said we were."

Catching the young diplomat's enthusiasm, I suggested that perhaps the Tanzanians ought to wait for the next General Assembly and stage a real dance, saying to the world, in effect, "Now we're dancing."

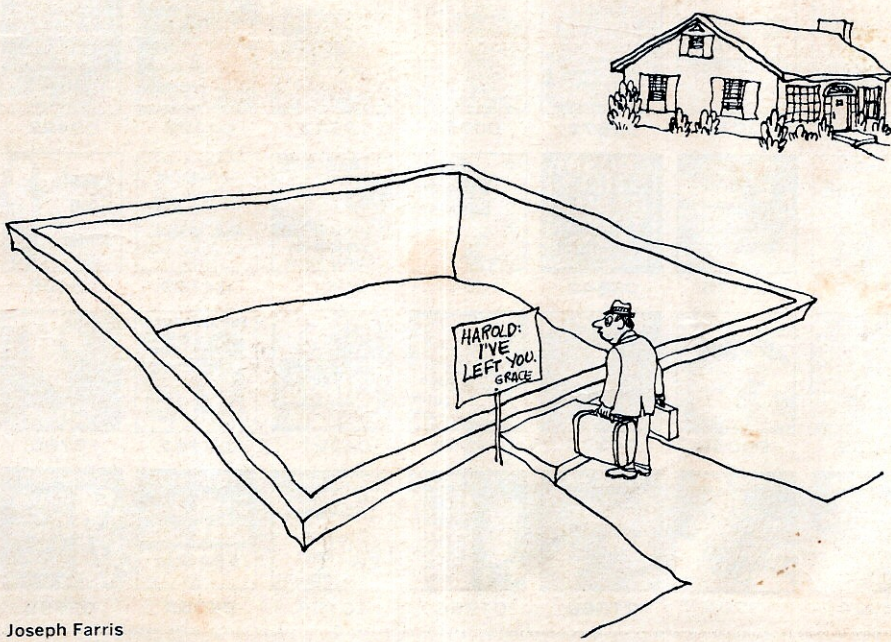
"Don't think we haven't thought of that," said Salim.

I said good-bye to the ambassador, convinced he had been shabbily treated by an overimaginative press. On the other hand, as a rookie in the diplomatic leagues, perhaps I'd fallen prey to some fancy ambassadorial sweet talk. Was it worth pressing further? Years in the future, the Tanzanian Tap might take its place alongside Jenkins' Ear, the Zimmerman Telegram and Count Benedetti's Briefcase as apparent trivia that ultimately turned the wheels of history. I decided to talk to what homicide detectives refer to as "eyeball" witnesses. Tad Szulc was unavailable for comment, but Henry Tanner, The New York Times U.N. Bureau chief, backed his fellow staffer to the hilt. "They were dancing all right," he said. "We're the only newspaper that has a box right in the hall. I was right above them, a little to the side, but Tad had a clear bead on the Tanzanians and saw the whole thing. Ambassador Salim definitely did not leap up on his desk and, of course, I'm not sure Tad did the right thing by calling it an actual 'jig'; but no question there was joyous foot movement."

While admitting that from his position he was unable to see below the knees, Louis Halasz, columnist for the North American Newspaper Alliance,

*Swahili for "Right on."

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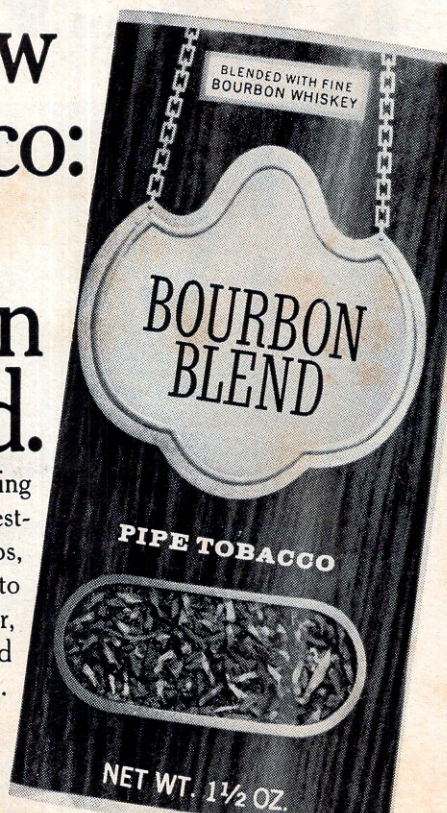
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felt that the description of the dance as a jig was out of line. "Stomping is how I saw it and I reported it to my syndicate accordingly," said Halasz. "They were a bunch of happy guys, not dancing in terms of African rites, but jumping up and down, although not in a jig. There were dance steps involved, sort of stomping dance steps."

A mere twenty feet away, *Newsweek's* Ray Carroll also felt *The Times* jig version was inaccurate, but that there was a definite rhythmic and African quality to the Tanzanian movements. Another *Newsweek* man with a terrific view of the proceedings was Senior Editor Joel Blocker, who described the Tanzanians as having performed a "shuffle dance." "I watched them all the way," said Blocker, who could well afford that luxury since he was there on his own and his magazine had another man assigned to keep an eye on the Russians. (Malik clapped perfunctorily three times and the other Russians were "unsmiling.")

Did their feet actually leave the ground? "Well, you know," said Blocker, opening up another side to the riddle, "your feet don't actually have to leave the ground when you're dancing. That's why I used the word 'shuffle' and didn't go to 'jig.' It certainly wasn't a jig in the sense that Hitler jiggled over his conquest of Paris. One other point which I understand is something of an issue. There was absolutely no arm-linking."

So there it was, a clear-cut deadlock, the press insisting there had been fancy footwork in the Tanzanian box, Salim denying his legation had so much as shaken a leg. Was there a piece missing? I thought back to some words I'd had with Ambassador Abbas Sykes, Tanzania's representative in Canada, on leaving the embassy, an exchange I'd considered insignificant at the time.

"Are you a native New Yorker?" he had asked.

"Born in the shadow of Yankee Stadium."

"Then perhaps you know of a place called Hippopotamus."

"Hippo," I said. "I know it well. A disco, with some of the prettiest girls in the city. Why do you ask?"

"I have my reasons," he said, noting the address and smiling mysteriously. Was he going to slip over to the plush East Side boîte for a few late-night turns around the floor? If this were the case, might not he, and not Salim, be the mysterious hooper in the Tanzanian delegation? Slender, swivel-hipped, resplendently dapper, he certainly fitted the role much better than Tanzania's austere number-one man at the U.N. Perhaps, in all the tumult and uproar, while Salim's back was turned, it was really Sykes who'd worked in a few quick steps. To further complicate the matter, perhaps Salim knew all this and was gallantly taking the rap for his country's man in Canada, thereby shielding his dandified older colleague from the wrath that was sure to come from Dar es Salaam. In any case, there it is, in my view an absolutely first-rate lead for future investigators. #

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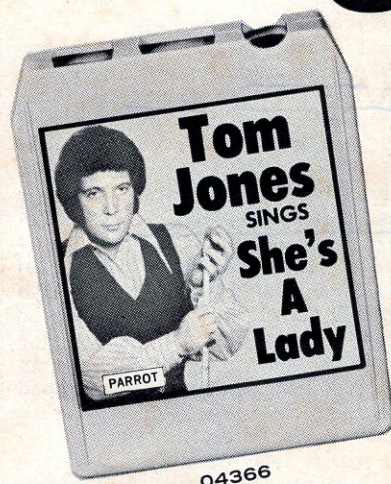
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