

# **THE CRADLE**

"Any adversity is a university"  
-Rev. Fr. Joe Atado

**SHABA SIMON, ABU**

### **DEDICATION**

For Ine Wodi, grandma whose trust in God  
Moulded me, for Maria and Ladi;  
Love so cherished.

The work of a literary writer in the making.

-Timothy Simon, Allah

*An unput downable*, a must read, an exposition of the  
Bassa person, an inner journey of the author's self.

- Fr. Tim

*The Cradle* is a wonderful work; it goes to show that one  
could reach the heights no matter the background of initial  
obstacles.

-Inyang, Happiness Samuel

Author of *The Niger Migrants*; this is simply encouraging!

-Mathew Gbaje

## ONE

It was a narrow path from the market, settlement centre of the village which on the right side meandered along the bank of the *yimoa* stream close to some dangerously hanging steep cliffs and when some drunken cyclist stray off it at night, tumble over to the water below turning the sleepy house into an emergency rescue team. At this point also on the left side are a group of old tall trees looking like those found in thick forest region of Osun State. These cast their dark shadows in a convergence which often gave us fright when sent on evening errands especially against the background that some suspicious ghosts had always been spotted nocturnally within at one evening or the other. A little diversion away from the cliffs to the left took you to the next village, *Ubutu* about one and a half kilometres away. The straight road from *Ubutu* took the form of a bypass that led into the other part of the village away from the old market square and took you close to the Roman Catholic Primary School.

A further turn to your left brought you to the first few huts of our compound bounding the road. In an anti-clockwise turn, the next road took you to Zhou's compound. It was an "X" junction and we found ourselves on top of the forked angle. At this junction, we woke up often to find on the ground some kola nuts, millet, corn, boiled yams creamed with red oil, and sometimes coins which mysteriously disappeared in the afternoon. We assumed that the deities might have picked these coins up in the afternoon, after all it was meant for their shopping which they couldn't do at night. At the sight of such objects we always veered off the road to avoid contact with these fetish and irritating items until the chickens providentially find their meal and cleared the spot. As close as we were to the junction, we hardly saw the courier of these fetish objects. Their nocturnal abilities transcended our very strained and watchful eyes. We never caught them in the act, hard as we tried as if they knew when we were all overwhelmed by a dose of deep sleep which took our curious sights away from their ritual acts.

One night we saw an object in human form, dressed in white, which remained immutably, standing in one position. We were afraid and ran into our rooms. Grandpa didn't bother; he just sat on his couch in his court and slept off. The more we peeped and saw this being the more we were seized by terrific fear that froze us in our rooms.

When we woke up the following morning, it had vanished. Sometimes we witnessed movements all through the night in which we were made to believe that not all were human beings; some were spirits moving to and fro. We dreaded to ask why and where the movements began and ended.

Further away from our compound were two other compounds whose house members preferred to use ours as a thoroughfare to arrive their homes. It was not considered as trespass, it rather improved their relationship and co-existence as members of a larger family. Sometimes they stopped over to exchange banter with members of our compound and even participated, if they cared, in the sharing of meals when it was ready.

Ours was a large compound with five round mud huts and uncle Shiloba's four corner mud-blocks of four rooms and a large room as its parlour but served more as a ware-room where numerous items such as bicycles, hoes, baskets, farm clothes and items of less importance were kept. There were no chairs except when the rains came early in the evenings, finding no other convenient refuge, individuals took in a stool to sit on and told stories until bed time.

The junk items provided a hibernating refuge for rodents and cockroaches from where they live their trade. One evening as we sat during a down pour, one of the rats jumped out of its hiding. The women shrieked. Shiloba became embarrassed at the temerity of the rat who dared

itself out in the presence of people. He promptly got a club and went after the presumptuous rat. In a simultaneous reaction, having found it squatted in a corner, aimed a good hit, descending hard on the stubborn rat. We watched in silence. The smack was meant to scatter the rat for its impertinence as he brought down the club with all his strength. He couldn't see the string Gwatana had tied above to hang his farm cloths. It withheld the club's assignment. The club bounced back heavily banging his head. He gave a yelp and threw the club.

There were also two open huts, *odulo* for cooking and rest which equally provided shelter from sun and rains especially in the afternoons, standing at opposite ends. The mud huts were all made of thatched roofs of fine grass where the chickens climbed in cluster and roosted at night crowing in the early hours of the morning. They lacked windows for ventilation and illumination, such that even in the afternoons one needed a form of light to search for an item of need. However, they were of no much use in the day time except at bedtime and served more useful purpose for putting away in safety personal treasures such as money and clothing. Other home activities which may include cooking, eating, receipt of visitors and meetings were done either at the resting hut or any shade cast down from trees and walls which could be found availably convenient and suitable for such occasion. We did our

homework outdoors or at school before returning home. It was generally an out-door life style community.

The only house in the compound that was roofed with Zink was that which Uncle Shiloba built and lived in with his only wife, Webiye. Here, young Uncle Ndazhaga, also slept along with Shiloba's two children, Gwatana and Kondo. Behind his house were the barns where assorted harvested crops mostly guinea corn and millet were stored. At a further distance behind this house, a group of trees converge into a thicket which provided for us a sporting field for birds and lizards, and where we played our hide and seek game in the afternoons. Here, the birds sing their early morning sweet and melodious lullaby ushering us into a new blissful day.

The thicket also provided the family's convenience when under pressure by physiological demands in a process that was not unmindful of some inherent dangerous reptiles hibernating within as was often experienced. We were also frequently attacked by suspected ghosts who took their shelter here in the evenings where allegedly, they threw stones at us. When the ghosts became too persistent and daring, Uncle Shiloba would organise a team of ghost chasers in an exercise where sticks, whose size were longer than a sport baton were thrown at all possibly suspected directions of the ghost and their hideouts. They were usually accompanied by a ghost Seer who told them where the ghost was likely located and the sticks would be thrown ferociously

towards the direction. After this exercise a moment of respite would dawn on the house from the torments of a ghost which prevented our evening relaxation after a hard day's work until another ghost would take over its nocturnal harbour in the thicket. Where they came from we never knew. Some were assumed to be relations of the family who had died elsewhere and were paying their visits, whereas others as suspected simply found their berthing place of comfort in the thicket especially against the backdrop that there was no news of a dead relation.

To the right of Shiloba's house in the north was grandfather's hut, his *edegunrebe*, twins' shrine attached to the entrance of his hut. At the extreme end was his brother, Pa Shigaba's hut. In that curved arrangement, Shigaba's wife's hut followed towards the North-west. She had the second resting place, *udulo*, by her side. Here, grandmother communed discretely, in a gossip session with Pa Shigaba's wife about the unbecoming manners of her daughter-in-law or of a visitor to the house. Opposite uncle Shiloba's house facing the east and backing the west was grandmother's hut, where we slept. Grandpa had three wives, but the other wives had left him. The young uncle's mother had gone to live with another man in a far away village. This left only my grandmother, Ine, Uncle Shiloba's mother as his only remaining wife. Next to hers was the second larger general resting place at the eastern flank,

leaving enough space for our relaxation at evenings and play in the afternoons with the cooking tripod stands near the *udulo*.

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I realised much later that the woman whom I snuggled to her arms for comfort and warmth, who had cuddled me all this while was not my mother. She was only my Grandmother who adopted me from cradle but I saw her as my real mother with all emotional attachments. A strong cord of love had developed intimately between us that I knew no other mother. When my mother arrived one evening in our house from my father's house, she was completely a strange woman. I remained glued to my grandmother accepting my mother reluctantly into her arms. Though comforting, they lacked the usual warmth I had been used to.

Ine, my grandmother, as she was called, usually addressed me by my first name; Shaba

"A'S-H-A-B-A! Shaba Aguma"! *The Chief's right hand man; Chief of the house!* She would call out with such additives whenever she observed I had strayed out of her presence caring to have me fed and comforted.

"Sit down here and don't go anywhere. Food will soon be ready", she would plead especially if the food was getting late in coming.

The food came one evening but my preference was denied me. I sprawled on the ground in protest and moved away from her and her appeals. I will not eat except my desired cuisine; *fufu* and okra mixed inseparably in one dish was provided for me. I stayed on the floor away from her and in a while, she called out,

"Hey! See scorpion coming"! She screamed.

I scrambled to my feet and dashed back to her for safety without looking for the accursed scorpion. She warmly embraced me, the runaway returnee and promised to make my menu available the next day. She dusted me free and thereafter fed me with her own hand. Afterwards, I found my head falling gradually over until it rested on some soft materials. I opened my eyes dizzily and found I was on a mat and drifted back to sleep.

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"*Uzhagba biyeeeh*"! Good pap!

This refrain echoed one of such call outs that advertised the sale of early morning foods; our breakfast menu. It would be a disastrous consequential market strategy and idiocy to announce a bad pap for sale. Even if

it were poorly prepared, a sales person would always promote his product in the best interest of patronage.

I thought of the granulated corn pap with sugar spiced to the content giving it a peculiar taste. I knew it was day break! These were morning routines for each day as hawkers announced the sale of their early morning foods. These ranged from *Moi-moi (Alele)* and “akara” bean cake, “*Zhagba*”, granulated maize or guinea corn pap, *amassa* and *ogbokuru*. *Akpakpa*, mashed beans wrapped with long large leaves, folded in overlapping style from both the left and right ends and steamed through boiling water to a solid form, was yet another early morning food and in any case could be preserved till afternoon and eating with oil. The mashed beans spillages to the overlapping leaves always tasted sweeter than the mould and might become the eater’s delight. And much other stuff was provided for our breakfast.

These enhanced our eating delight as they gave a variation from the same afternoon and evening foods, which in most cases were made of powdered corn or millet added into a boiling paste of corn or millet and stirred until a soft mass was formed, allowed to simmer for some minutes and then served in calabash dishes along with soup either made from okra or powdered corn mixed with vitally endowed vegetables collected in their freshness from the farm; some of which were similar to herbs but all the same prepared to taste. An *ogbonno* soup, slippery in nature was yet another

delight. We had *eguisi* soup on special occasions when entertaining guests that had come to help grandpa on his farm. These were rare indeed. The seasoning came handy from the locust bean tree which grandma prepared by herself and some dried fish that had been properly smoked and preserved for all through the year usage is pounded and spiced into the soup. Pepper was picked from the garden behind the compound and salt too sometimes prepared by grandma. During early rains she would pick mushrooms from the farm or bush in their different species. They became happily for us meat substitute which was rarely available. A change came only when fresh fish had been caught from the river by hooks or fish nets, when a trap had caught an animal in the farm or when any of the domestic animals had died. These spiced the meals to our greatest delight and excitement.

Although I prized grandma’s culinary ingenuity very high, a change of cuisine was always a welcomed pleasure. Grandma could churn out a variety of meals from a single crop. Most often I compromised my stand, anger, protests, rights or desires especially if she promised to prepare my delightful menu for me; cassava flour porridge, spiced with dry fish and bitter leaves, with or without oil. I could be persuaded to farm from morning till evening as long as my cassava porridge was guaranteed. Sometimes such persuasions were applied for tasking errands, domestic

chores and duties. She had often used this archihilles' heel of a savouring cassava flour delight of mine to her advantage and she always got me subdued, wining my cooperation.

"Uzhagba biyeeh"! She announced again.

I drowsily hurried out of my mat into the early morning sun rays that hit my eyes to a blinding point. I shielded my eyes with one hand and squeezed them with another for clearer visibility. I must have overslept but I should not be forgotten for a ration of *uzhagba biye*.

"Go and wash your face"! It was an order from grandma.

She had bought my granulated pap into a calabash; thick and cumbersome calabash, no matter how hard and cleanly washed it were, to me it was clumsy to handle. This had offended me. I rejected it protesting that it must be served in a plate, which showed decency and a sense of an approaching modernity. I could not tell how it had happened but the Hawker, an Egbira woman, had taunted me ever, even at my adult age with this song cry protest of mine;

*"In hen, injerish keloo,*

*"nu ugbam gbamu ama jala"!!!*

"I say I don't want to drink from a calabash, I want to drink from a plate"! Yes, the calabash was indeed too clumsy for me and the plate was neater and easier to handle which justified my protest in an economic transaction that I could

not contribute! But grandpa would prefer his foods served in calabash as the plate got his foods cold too soon. According to him the food, *fufu* in the plate would sweat and produce a pond of water. For a long time grandpa continued to eat his foods in calabashes until they became extinct and could not be replaced if one got broken or cracked beneath. And a worm, especially during the rainy season, could possibly penetrate through to the food in a calabash which was placed on the ground without a tray. The same for his soup which was served in a small specially designed earthen pot. These got broken into pieces without mending and wasted its entire contents to the ground. I thought the girls did it deliberately to escape the burden of keeping such pots and calabashes clumsily clean in a washing chore.

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Grandpa had his courtyard which usually came alive in the evenings when he recuperated from exhaustive farm activities. It was only meant for men but admitted boys like us too. Women went there only on invitation or when they had matters of importance to discuss with him. Family disputes of all kinds were settled here. Meetings and family briefings also took place here. All his foods were served here. His table manners were simple but commanded strict adherence and this was important to him. You were not



expected to talk, whistle or sing while eating. As a general rule whistling at night was prohibited in the entire compound. Doing so might attract a snake into the compound. It was also believed that either of the grannies particularly, Pa Shigaba may have acquired an anti snake charm whose rule of potency prohibited whistling at night.

For grandpa, during meals you were not expected to eat your meat or fish while eating your food. Meat was only permitted after one had eaten to his satisfaction. It was meant to encourage us to eat more food that would satisfy hunger and restore strength than meat which only satisfied taste. You announced that you were full, and satisfying all doubts leading to your retirement from food, only then were you permitted to commence eating your meat.

Meat was shared in two-first parts, males and females, irrespective of who the cook was for the day. Women took turns to cook and any woman whose turn it was to cook for the day also had the additional duty or privilege to cook the meat, if there was any at all, for that day. The exception was goat or chicken meat sacrificed to idols. This was a prerogative of the men who prepared the meat themselves. The women were barred from eating such meat. The men sometimes played tricks with this chauvinism. When the numbers of women were more, probably with more female visitors, a dead chicken discovered by the men would be reported as one of such that had been sacrificed to the idols,

thus preventing the women from having their share that would have amounted only to tiny pieces after all.

Then Gwatana would share the male portion according to the male number and pass it round in a wooden tray for choice picks beginning with the eldest who naturally was grandpa. The tray moved to Shiloba, big Uncle and down to the least of us. Nobody quarrelled with the sharing formula as the proportion descended in size until the last and youngest had the least. It was justice for age. Webiye always had her share from the female portion reserved for her son, who was the least amongst us thus, sealing every ones mindset that he had a fare share after all. This was the order of feeding. A heavy knock would descend on your head if you acted contrary to these procedures. "It was an attitude unbecoming of a future thief".

Having finished your meals, you were not expected to move away until grandpa had finished eating to his fill and then requested that you cleared all eating materials from sight. Only then were you allowed the frivolities of an evening leisure, relaxation and fun which could either be a story telling session or a moonlight game of hide and seek together with boys and girls from other compounds. This excited and got us thrilled into shrills of laughter and cheers. The world simply and justly existed for our fun!

When the moon had sunken too deep and darkness had become unsafe for games, story-telling became our pastime. Gwatana told us a lot of stories. I don't know where he got his stock of stories from as he always told one new story after another. In one of our story telling sessions, he told us this story:

*"Oloo mo oooh"!*

*"Okoooh"!* We all expectantly chorused back.

*"Story! Story"!!*

*"Story"!!!*

"The title of my story is about the reason the monkey has sunken eyes", he said.

We were all interested and curious to know why the monkey had sunken eyes. So, we listened in silence and with rapt attention as he proceeded. It was the third story of the night as we gathered under the emerging bright moon light in the middle of the compound away from both the men and women to have our own fun undisturbed.

"Once upon a time", he continued. "The Lizard and the Monkey were close friends in the animal kingdom. One day, there was an argument between the Monkey and the Lizard. The lizard had argued that a thief was better than one who told lies against another. The Monkey tersely disagreed and plotted how to prove the superiority of his argument. He got the squirrel to steal the Lizard's ground nuts. Mr. Lizard bemoaned his loss while Mr. Monkey taunted him

against his earlier opinion. Then one day, Mr. Lizard got some honey and took it to the Lion who was the king of the kingdom.

'Your Highness', he said. 'I brought you something good. You may wish to taste it'.

The Lion tasted the honey and found that it was sweet.

'Where did you get this from?' He inquired.

'I got it from Mr. Monkey your Highness. It is his faeces', he replied.

'What, Mr. Monkey has this sort of sweet thing and had hidden it from me?' He summoned Mr. Monkey immediately.

When Mr. Monkey appeared, the Lion asked him to defecate"! We laughed!

"Mr. Monkey requested to know the reason why he should defecate so ill timed. But he received a hard knock on his head". We reeled into hilarious laughter and Gwatana went on to complete his story.

"When Mr. Monkey obeyed and forced himself to release his faeces, only a little came out of him. The lion tasted it but it was not even sweet to start with compared to the honey Mr. Lizard had produced. He got a harder knock on the head and was ordered to produce more. Mr. Monkey kept from one attempt to the other until nothing else was left from his bowels which his metabolic system

could produce. But the Lion would not just let go, believing that Mr. Monkey was playing tricky games with him by refusing to release that which was as sweet as honey. The harder Mr. Monkey tried the angrier the king became. And finally the king threatened,

‘If you don’t give me the faeces which should be as sweet as honey, you will die’.

“King, my faeces is not sweet”, responded the monkey.

“Liar”! The Lion roared in anger.

Mr. Monkey began to sweat and continued further attempts to produce the right faeces for the king until he became dehydrated and his eyes became sunken. The king only released him when he had emaciated to the point of near-death but promised to summon him again to produce the honey-sweet faeces.

And this is the end of my story! It is bad to tell lies on somebody’s head”, he concluded.

We all heaved a sigh of relief and great excitement from a tension soaked story of Mr. Lizard and Mr. Monkey, each stretching out his body and going to a corner to piss preparatory of going to bed having spent many hours deep into the night.

When the moon was at its full and shone brightly, we went out for plays and games. Hide and seek game was much fun for us. The tagged who became ‘it’ and to be evaded was

blind folded with either a covering or a hand over his or her face by a non participating member. The ‘it’ then sang out the refrain;

*“Hi huloooh”?* “Have you gone”?

*“Awooh!!”* “Oh no!!”

As the other members responded in this manner, they dashed in groups to various dark corners behind buildings, trees, barns and of course empty, abandoned and uncompleted buildings or huts where they could not be easily traced. A group may consist of a couple; a boy and a girl, two boys, two girls or even a group of three. The ‘it’ sang out again until all voices peter out of ears.

*“Hi huloooh”?*

The response came in distance sequence of progression of those who had dashed into hiding. This went on until no voices would be heard. The ‘it’ began the search. He searches every dark arena he suspects would be convenient for any hide out. This could take longer or shorter time depending on his or her instincts to fish out any member of his game mates. And as soon as that happens he announces his or her catch. The other members then would come out of their hiding places; some taking longer time in emerging than others while others might not appear at all.

Depending on the momentous excitement of the game, it might continue otherwise the game switched to another variety, perhaps into an 'alayi', a 'lillo' form of pastime. This was usually performed by the girls while the boys only watched. They formed a semi circle; singing and clapping hands. A dancer moved away from the rest and backwardly leapt into the air and into the waiting hands of her mates who sprang her back to her feet. In turn each participated wearing the night into the depth of its mysteries when men and women received dreams, visions and inspirations for sustenance of life in a somnolent rest.

The 'alayi' was symbolic of a group of people who lent support to their own from falling and failing completely. As a mate leaps into the air, coming down oblivious of only one fact, falling down on the ground. But the mates would not let that happen to her as they would all put their hands together to support her up in a springing manner back to her standing position again.

There were however, conspiracies as in all human machinations for betrayal. At times, a particular peer group would let loose and let go their mate crashing onto the ground. While some would laugh at this treachery, conspiracy and betrayal, the siblings of the victim might take it personal for such let down of trust and amity. The party would break off in disarray and every one would go to his or

her tent, sealing the excitement for the day and looking forward to a brighter moonlight the next day.

## TWO

The family members in the home of my cradle consisted of two other children like me, Uncle Shiloba's only male boys, Gwatana the elder and Kondo whom I stood in between in terms of their ages. Uncle Shiloba had no female children. The two boys had different mothers. Gwatana had lost his mother at his birth while Kondo's mother lived with us. Kondo was an only child of his mother. She called him several pet names such as "my only own", "the only one", "the lonely one" and so on. The meaning of *Kondo*, in Bassa language literally connotes a singular noun. In other words he had arrived as a lone stranger, a pleasant surprise to both parents perhaps after a long period of childlessness or was another child who had come to go again in death. He responded in a seeming way that was to get him spoilt and might further develop in him a lazy attitude to work by the day. His mother ensured he got all that he ever wanted or requested for even at the expense of attending school. "School was not by force" she would console her son.

There was the young uncle Ndazhaga, a grown up and the last born of grandpa, also called after the Biblical Archangel Michael, a name which later went into oblivion in

the house as no one was interested in calling him such a strange and meaningless name, *Mekel*. "Nda Zhaga" connotes a world depicted as a scene where each plays his or her part and exit; "do and go"

They were also two girls, who had come to stay with their granny just like myself. They too became members of this communal family. Two tall girls, who were grown up by their sizes, but who still walked half nude daily around the compound with their dangling breasts except for the piece of panties up their waists which did not stop to amaze me as they seem to reincarnate to me the pictorial Garden of Eden. They only wore dresses as a necessity and not as a convenience when going either to the market or outside the house which they seldom did until they got married.

Uncle Shiloba's wife, Webiye was of a very interesting loquacious character and had every story to entertain the rest members of the women folk. She always dominated topics whenever they were in their gossip mood. She knew everyone from anywhere as she would talk with absolute confidence the story of anyone mentioned in their chatting session. Grandma joined grandpa's brother's wife, Njofo, a reticent woman whenever they wanted to while away time as age mates. Grandpa and Pa Shigaba who always talked in low tones were the most aged persons in the house.

Later on we had Huleji Baba whose ability on the farm was amazing, beating us with ease when assigned to

portions. Gagoh, from Rivune too joined us later to complete his primary education at L.E.A. Oguma which provided classes five to six. His village primary school only ended in class four. Invariably, he had come to advance his education.

But there was yet an older woman, the eldest in the house, grandpa's mother, called Kakah. I don't know if that were her real name or was acquired as a grandmother to Uncle Shiloba who simply called her *Kakah*, grandmother. She was our great grandmother. Kakah, suffering from both anthropological and sociological diminishing returns, became our playmate after every one had gone to farm. She could hardly come out as she was always indoors due to her old age. Her wrinkled and white skin which was as dry as those monitor lizards we hunted for games, kept us wondering whether she had ever been young as the rest of us were. Her permanent mat; and sleeping position was to the west, above our pillows where I and grandma slept until I was relocated to another position when my younger sister came.

We moved in as soon as the older ones had gone to farm and the women had gone to fetch firewood. And we played with her, roughening her up, climbing her flabby tummy and squeezing her floppy breasts. She would writ in pain but we would not give up riding on top of her until we were tired of her and opted for another form of play.

"You will kill me these children" she would cry out with a husky voice.

"Yes, we will kill you and eat you", we were used to eating carcasses of dead animals any way and she was our potential meat when she dies too.

Afterwards we would go out and make ridges with our hands and plant some leaves making our own farm. Since we couldn't think of toys, artwork or any other form of pastime which was outside our mental invention, we resorted to the immediate dictates of our environment.

We woke up one morning and while we were outside, I discovered that the door to our hut remained ajar, the rafter, the door veil which served as the curtain had been removed and one could see through to the dark end of the hut inside. We were barred from going in or anywhere near the door. Only the adult males like Uncle Shiloba went in and out of the hut. This was strange! A moment of sobriety had also descended on the compound. No one went to the farm, everybody was home. Somnolence had crept its way into the compound. It was unusual! Worse still everyone seemed to maintain a gloomy face. They were all sad but no one wailed. Only grandma wept silently. Young Uncle kept dashing in and out of the compound on one errand or the other. Children as we were, reacted with indifference to all that was happening around us. They were simply a digression from our infantile daily fun. I found grandma seated in a corner by herself in the general mood. I snuggled in between her

legs into her bosom and looked imploringly into her eyes. She looked back straight into mine and said in a painful tone,

“Kakah is dead! You won’t see her again. You won’t see Kakah again”! She repeated almost in a wailing tone. There was no notice of her being sick. She probably had passed on in her sleep peacefully the last night.

I couldn’t understand grandma. I knew that Kakah was inside and in her sleeping position, but did not know why they wouldn’t just let us see and play with her as usual. And nobody would go in and speak with her or go in there at all except for uncle Shiloba who got in only once in the morning. It meant that something ominous was inside the hut there, alone with Kaka that was responsible for the gloom which had suddenly descended on the compound and overwhelmed us.

Later that evening relations began to gather in their numbers and the house was becoming choked up and noisy. An aspect of their arrival which attracted my attention was the wailing, weeping or a brief cry by some which heralded their entry. Where the cry was protracted, earlier mourners consoled the other. Ironically however, as the sober mood prevailed, the younger women chose to sing and dance asking for favours from the men and sometimes women who simply ignored or chased them away amidst laughter.

That night a gun was shot and a band of drummers, numbering about four commenced a frenzy of drumming.

We slept in another room leaving Kakah all alone in the hut, that night.

The following morning some men began to dig the ground behind the hut where Kaka and the rest of us slept. A beehive of activities was now going on with a horde of human movements; women were cooking in large pots I had not seen before. The place of cooking had been relocated from the middle of the compound to the back side. Early morning food vendors, with more varieties of menu to choose, had come in their numbers including those who never ventured their sales around the house in the past. The frequent and familiar sellers like *zhagba biye* had no problems making quick sales while those who were gate crashing depended on the patronage of those who cared to beckon on them. The band resumed their session; the jesters went on with their begging mission, more mourners continued to arrive, more foods were made, and more movements of persons prevailed. It was an organised confusion; everyone did their own chores. The women clashed over “too much salt...”! “reduce fire...”! “Fetch water quickly...”! They went on and on sometimes degenerating into full scale quarrels and outright shouts at each other.

In the evening of this second day, the house was quite full with grandma asking me to sit at a particular place where she would not have to look for me to feed. My

mother had come in the previous day on hearing of the death of Kakah. Dad had come in and left but was back in the evening. For a while, the atmosphere was quiet except for movements, discussions, men and women together, wives attending to the needs of their husbands who had accompanied them, In-laws paying their condolences to grandpa etc.

Then after what seemed a while, the drum beaters resumed in earnest and there was a staccato movement of persons and grandma took me away to a sleeping mat in grandpa's room. From my curious viewing position, what seemed like Kakah's remains were brought out and lots of clothes were heaped on the floor. Every In-law had insisted that she should be draped in their befitting burial garments which had been taxed and donated. At the end they had a heap of clothing to contend with. More movements and now only the band could be heard in frenzy. I slept off.

Intermittently, I would be routed out from sleep and hear the *araga* beat which was a wake keep in honour of Kakah and continued the following night with young men and women dancing and singing in a circle with the drummers in the middle.

When I woke up the next day, I found a mould of red earth where the men had been digging the previous day. There were more food vendors and the morning was now raucous with people eating all sorts of morning foods,

holding meetings, contributing money, buying wine in pots and seated at different locations in groups of five, six or even eight. Some mourners had begun going home and the population began to diminish according to relational distances until only a few of those who were closely related to the family were left. Eventually, when all seem to calm down, the house resumed its normal lifestyle again. But the perpetual absence of Kakah became a reality which dawned on us that we had lost a play mate, hidden somewhere in the earth mound behind the hut where she slept, and now infinitely asleep never to wake up again.



## THREE

“Conflicts are naturally an endemic aspect of human society. The phenomenon of its occurrence is unavoidable as individuals or communities jealously protect and preserve their interests at all costs, even in reckless manner! The casualties are often those most vulnerable in such communities; women, children and the physically challenged! The spiral effects multiply and spread to affect the entire and even other communities”! The visiting Rev. Father from Ogugu Catholic Church Parish had made a statement in the quoted phrase in his sermon some years after the Nigerian civil war had ended.

Perhaps this was how we became affected in the Nigerian Civil War as collateral victims. I might have been five or six years old at the commencement of that hostility or disagreement; the quarrel between the Generals of the South and North divide of the country in the agitations and struggles for identity, dignity and integral oneness. We neither knew what the cause was nor were we told how the war would affect us. We only heard and subsequently knew

there was a fight between the Ibos (*Agbo*) and the rest of Nigeria which had the consequences of making us either Biafran or Nigerian citizens. As we went out to play, the radio jingles from Rizama’s transistor radio, the tailor who sewed most of our School and Christmas uniforms, next to our compound, would blare in advertorial tunes;

Go – on – with – one – N-i-g-e-r-i-a!

G – O – W – O – N!

The school pupils too developed their version of solidarity and propaganda song as they gleefully sang;

*Ojukwu wanted to scatter Nigeria*

*Gowon s-a-y, Nigeria must be one...*

The war went on seemingly endlessly and as it progressed protractedly, we maintained a set of rules in the compound which were issued from the Village Head who incidentally was my father’s father. I always felt excited when information such as this was relayed from compound to compound conveying the Chief’s message; I knew it emanated from my father’s house and my compound house members knew that too well. I was a member of the royalty. They could not deny that no matter what they thought of me. As a rule all cooking was to be concluded before sunset as no lights were allowed to be seen at night for fear of enemy attack by way of bombs being thrown at

us having given away our location by such illumination as a community. If a compound had not prepared its food before sun set, they would either sleep in hunger or rely on the charity of their neighbours for left over to appease their hunger for the day. The consequences of violating the order could lead to banishment or the entire village would come synergised against such individual demanding why they and their families should be wiped out by war bombers for such recalcitrant behaviour.

The fear of being attacked or killed in the internecine war was palpable. A self imposed dusk-to-dawn curfew for movement and lightning of any form prevailed. People lit lamps only in their rooms and put them out as soon as they came out. Farmers were advised to go to farms in groups to avoid being attacked and killed by enemy soldiers. This fright extended to identifying individuals on their faces at the spread of the news from the North that Igbo were being hunted in communities and homes for reprisal killing. If you were identified without tribal marks on your face, it was assumed you were an Ibo and would be marked for death.

Many Ibos in the village returned to the east in their numbers abandoning their wares or sold them at give away prices as they ran in fright. Those who could not return back to the east immediately were given hide outs by their Bassa friends in farms and barns while day light lasted. One of the Ibos, after the war ended would recall with nostalgia,

“Adumusuba hwe-o”, a bastardized Bassa version of “Ajemeshe hun hwe-o”. Meaning “you cannot not say it all”! His statement became legendary for any hardship which could not attain comprehensive narration. The goods that were sold at exorbitant and extortionate prices or forced on customers to buy compulsorily by the Ibo for daring into window shopping were now sold for less than half the price. And the Bassa people who have suffered this seeming economic disadvantage from their “Agbo” friends sang a farewell song for them;

*A’gbo zhe jiyo  
Ibredi neshi Toro mo!  
Agbo she jiyoo!*

The Ibos are going home  
Four Loaves of Bread for three pence-o!

I woke up one afternoon from sleep and found that Children were gathered under a tree with some elderly persons clutching their wards tightly. A strange man had come with some instruments with which he scarified the children’s cheeks. We were to be given tribal marks to avoid any question of mistaken identity for an Ibo boy. We agreed voluntarily as we took turns. None of us objected or dared to, as we all filed out consciously to escape being

killed for looking like an Ibo face. The strange man drew a stretch mark across our cheeks as already designed by our guardians. He then rubbed a black concoction which must be left unwashed or better still without a bath till the following day. In less than two weeks we all wore our brand new cicatrised faces to escape being victims in the holocaust against the Ibos that prevailed.

But the effects of the war were not over. The entire community had its fair share of the war effect even though we were remotely away from the war zone. Some soldiers who were moved to the East went through Bassa landmass across the Niger River from Lokoja through Edenye to Anyingba, Otukpo and Ubollo–Afor. Their movements in trucks brought the reality, intensity and severity of the war closer to the Bassa community. Rumours flew around each day; ‘Enugu had been captured’, ‘the Biafran Army had reclaimed so and so villages and was on their way to annex Bassa people’. And as we dreaded being part of the new Biafran territory, who they told us ate other human beings, so did we panic every day.

One day a couple of soldiers visited our village, Sheria, on a market day. It was a hot February, afternoon. They came on a motorcycle. At the sound of the motorcycle, and while they made their entrance into the market, the entire market was thrown into chaos. Traders and buyers took to their heels at the sight of the soldiers and the deafening

noise from their loosed motorcycle exhaust pipe, silencer. In the hurricane, “The Falcon cannot hear the Falconer”. It was a mass hysteria. The chaos was unimaginable of the proportional catastrophe and tragic was the fall of traders who lost their wares. The consequential calamity was grotesque. The entire marketers panicked and despatched into diverse routes; some to the farms others to the stream accepting to drown in the waters rather than being cut down in a hail of bullets. Some hid in houses while those who had nowhere to run just kept running to nowhere. There was commotion and in that staccato movement, traders left their wares; yams, clothes, fish, goats, maize, *gari*, cooked food, bags of groundnuts, beans, sugar canes and meat etc. Even those who sold herbal products and their concoctions abandoned every bit except for those who handpicked what they could run along with. The pandemonium as it turned out was a day of looting for brigands, the brave and those endowed with courage to withstand such incursions. This episode ended the career of many a-trader as they became financially crippled; a result of the panic that scattered the market and caused the loss of their wares that was total.

The following day, I joined the children to see what we could pick from the relics of a deserted market. We still found heaps of yams left behind, sacks of corn, baskets of okra and tins of red oil. These items didn’t interest us. It

was a free for all market as groups roamed the various sections for what they could help themselves with from the panic fleeing traders mostly from Idah, Ayingba, Dekina, Abejukolo and environs. Some items like fresh tomatoes had begun going bad. We knew where our more vested interests were. We moved towards the ground-nut zone; bags and baskets, along with half-full and full measures were there gazing at us. We filled our pockets. Next was the sugar cane zone. Standing in rolls were long juicy stems, arranged in all sizes. Here, blind Hausa men, led by their little boys use to beg for alms in melodious songs that either earned them appreciations for their performance or assistance for their disability.

Afterwards we went through the open arena near the central mosque where magical displays always took place. At various times we had seen several dirty looking Hausa men play with live lions. On one occasion, to our amazement one of the magicians inserted his hand into the lion's mouth and jaws; and was not chopped off by the incisors and molars that menacingly glittered from it. God the Creator, had bestowed on the lion strength, sense and speed for its dominance of the animal kingdom but God had also given man the ability to dominate, tame and conquer the wildest of creatures. Snake charmers too brought their dubious magical games into the market to get patronage.

But of a more shocking magical feat and mystery was the magician who set fire on news paper pieces in a box, closed it and chanted some abracadabra and thereafter produced some super prints textile materials from the same box. After his first performance everybody went home a story teller. On his next visit, a couple of months later, the textile sellers prepared a shock reception for him. He performed the first feat uneventful. At the second attempt, the traders surrounded him and confiscated all the textile materials he brought out from his magical box for sale to the highest bidder. Rumours had milled round that at the previous magic performance, some textile traders went home and couldn't find some of their wares. Others claimed that the action of the traders was borne out of the fact that they made no sales as a result of the magician's cheap sales.

We meandered to the cells where cooked foods were sold. Since most food vendors were home based, they were on hand to salvage what was left of their stock. They sold mostly to strangers and marketers. Some husbands sneaked in here to have a taste of foods sold by other hands. Yes! They sneaked in because it was absurd for a Bassa man to patronise a food vendor when he should be well taken care of by his wife. It was popularly called *agumpa food*, a name derived after a stop-over settlement where they ate food on their way to and from the west.

They did discreetly as rumours would file out of one who ate out because he was too selfish to provide the desired needs for his family.

As we moved to the far end of the market where textile materials were sold, we discovered the stakes void of their draperies. Here we encountered Maiduka in his irritating multi-coloured attires. He had taken shelter in one of the stores. He smiled at us showing his excessively stained cola nuts teeth with some chewed cola nuts still hanging out of his mouth. He beckoned us to give him some money with his heavily burdened fingers which he stuffed with rings of different sizes and colours to the nails and with an ankle load of heavy metal bangles.

The meat shops were equally empty. The areas where clay pots were sold at the outskirts, on a street whose sellers comprised mostly old women looking as black as some of their used wares, was also empty except for broken pieces. Firewood was also sold along this street. And this street further adjoined the 'good evening' street. A name it acquired as a product of its activity. It was the equivalent of the "red light street" in cities. Since the hawkers here sold their wares mostly in the evenings, they always greeted their potential customers or wooed passersby with a 'good evening' salutation. They came from bigger cities and were not young but served the interest of their adult patrons.

Where the Ibos had their stalls had been completely abandoned prior to this day. Only the small tables which carried the petty wares of the Yoruba women remained standing; some upturned in their empty little shelves arranged in little steps which had contained chewing sticks, cigarettes, tread, scrubbing stones, herbal sticks etc. This was where Uncle Shiloba had sent me to buy him some cell batteries that produced a tiny deem and dull light when he had inserted them into his torch light barrel. While some believed that they were used cells only re-packaged and sold to unsuspecting buyers others believed traditionally and strangely too that cells kept for too long would have expired their potential functional days and thus could fail to generate power to illuminate as they should; a controversy that had put them in a dilemma of having their trust in me as to whether I was competent for such errands in future.

We found where *Inemi Ze uwe*, 'Mine Is No Problem', sold second hand clothes, swept clean. Expectedly he had fled being an Ibo trader. As we didn't find any further item of much interest, we scampered home with our pockets load of ground nuts, dried fish and sugar canes in our hands.

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One other funny drama about the war was when a low flying plane flew across our village in broad day light. Different families had different tales to tell. In our compound it was a peculiar incident that remained indelible on our minds for a long time. From a panic-struck situation to a comedy loaded session which ended up in a philosophical reflection.

It was in the morning and by my guess at about 11:00 AM. The adults had all gone to farm. Kondo and I were left as usual in the house. Kakah had died but a new face called Gadoh had joined us in the house. He was a distant relation from a distant village. We only saw the people from that village whenever they came to the market usually on foot, and could not go back the same day. They were not traders but came to the market when they brought in their husbands' yams, Guinea-corn or millet for sale. This they did and at seldom time would pass the night with us taking off as early as possible the following day. Since most sales were in the dry season, adequate accommodation was not a problem as spare mats would be spread outside for them to sleep in which case they spent most of the night talking of events after their last visit.

Grandpa's daughter, Dukwo, my mother's sister, my aunt was usually one of them who led them to the house and would sometimes stay back for another day or two before returning to her house in far away *Rivune*. I knew the

husband. He limped on one leg and was a Church Elder. He usually moved with his big Bible tied to the carrier of his bicycle where ever he went but he never made attempt to proselytise his faith to grandpa. His major missionary concern whenever he came on a visit was to attend to the needs of his father in-law. Gezhima had four beautiful daughters who sometimes took turns to visit and spend time with grandfather.

The eldest, Esther, was about my age and we liked each other. She told us stories of her village and people; some were so funny while others were shocking. And we would listen with awe to some strange events of a village life; how an invisible man spoke to them on the farm, and stoned them, forcing them home with swollen spots where they had been hit. She said one day the father slept off in the farm to take a short rest, when he woke up his hair had been shaved off his head. At other time, there use to be a rain bow that turned into a human being and pursued them from the farm. The rain bow man only needed to touch his victim. Afterwards, the victim developed headache, fevers and die within a couple of hours. Meanwhile, the dead person would be found elsewhere, having been sold as a slave in another land. Such persons could even get married and start a new family there but will never have a sense of his or her former domiciliary. And if the grave where he had been buried was to be opened, and his corps exhumed,

they would only find a log of decomposing banana trunk. They suspected one rich farmer, Zhakwete to be the man and brain behind these acts. He was accorded a pariah status. Nobody visits him in his house for fear of being a victim and he had no friends except his family members.

My female cousin had one horror story for another to keep us awed after her visit until she came again for another stint with us. Whenever her brief stay with us was over, grandfather would arrange some tubers of yam for her and got her one live chicken. Almost everyone in the compound would offer her some money. We did not like to part with each other after such brief contacts.

Gadoh, the relation who had just joined us was a blind man. He was an adult. Unlike Kakah, we did not find him a playmate even though he stayed at home like us. I knew that he grieved over his condition. He would sit there and stare into space. He seldom asks for assistance but we would usually come to his aid whenever we sensed his desires. For instance, when he groped outside along the wall and backed the house we knew he wanted a place for convenience. As he groped his way in this manner, his face upward looking into a far distance, but sensing his movement downward with his walking guide, he would knock himself on one object or the other; sometimes a pot or a set of firewood. As he gets into a contraption, we would move and lead him to a

convenient spot. Afterwards, we would watch him grope his way slowly back and guide him to a seat.

We did not know the cause of his optical disability, we did not bother to ask and nobody told us. But from eaves dropping we came to understand that he was struck by an ailment in later life and this affected his sight and rendered him blind. He had come in to find any remedy that might restore his sight back to him. In the prevailing circumstance of his permanent darkness, he knew no colours to either appreciate or admire flowers and attires, neither could he see the beauty of creation nor judge the heights, contours and morphology of men and women. He could either understand the wink of an eye or the signal wave of a hand. Nights and days were both the same to him as he does not need a torch light or any illumination at night.

On this fateful civil war day, a plane hovered so low above our heads at the height of trees, a roaring noise tore through the air, even the pets and domestic animals took cover under any object for safety. It was a deafening noise never heard before in the vicinity. It terrified all its hearers and everybody expected the worst to happen. Death was close at hand! The Armageddon was here! We scampered into the house for safety only to find Gadoh, the blind man in panic, stricken with fear as shown on his face. His eyes were wide open struggling, hoping and praying for sudden

eyesight to enable him escape or take a more precise decision on any line of action away from this Armageddon. We tried to help him as he groped for an exit but he broke loose in terror and we watched as he knocked things around. He went from one corner of the room to the other, missing the door narrowly, finding no exit he came back all over dashing to another end only to hit his head against the wall. At another point he collided with the set of bicycles and crashed unto them with a loud noise. Obviously, he had forgotten his walking guide. His resolve to get out of the building was more than we could help. We screamed! The screams got him more confused as he knocked down every item on his way and as he retrieved his way it was only to another faulty direction. We resorted to commentaries,

“No! Not there! To the left! You have passed...! Gently! ... Gently ... Yes ...! No ... ”!

Gradually, as he scampered from one point to the other, the noise diminished, dying down into the distance. There was a sudden silence and normalcy resumed again the same way the noise had come. Gadoh sat down eventually, breathing heavily, hard and fast, sweating with a twisting movement on his mouth.

It was not until evening when what appeared to be a night to remember occasioned itself. Everybody had now gathered home and we were all eating our evening meal

when Uncle Shiloba asked the question which seemed to have bothered heavily on everybody's mind.

“Let me ask this.” He said with a little pause.

“Did you see this thing that passed in the sky, this sky ship today”?

“E eeeh ...”! It was a chorus from everybody and they made attempts for space to tell their experiences one after the other.

The women who had gone to fetch firewood in the forest began their narrative account. Webiye took the narration first as usual.

“At the sound of the plane, we saw a mighty object coming towards us; we ran into the bush with our loads on shoulders. When we looked up; it was coming closer and closer. ‘We are dead – o’! We shouted!’”. Everybody reeled in laughter.

It was Uncle Shiloba's turn to narrate his experience. He heard the noise, first from a distance, small, then it became louder and louder. As the noise was now too deafening, for him to ignore its attention, he straightened up from his bent-tilling position, looked up and there it was, big, heading towards him.

“Here comes death–o”! He exclaimed and ordered his son, Gwatana to run for cover while he ducked inside a cluster of some yam tendrils. Soon it was over but the



terrifying apprehension of death had left him panting and palpitating.

But it was Gadoh, the blind man's encounter that treated us all into a shrill of rib cracking laughter. When the noise became louder, he asked himself; what could this mean? It came as if the whole building was collapsing. He grappled with how to find an escape route; the doors have been removed and replaced with walls as it seemed now that everywhere had been blocked all around him. He turned to the left only to hit his forehead on the wall, to the right he fell upon a heap of bicycles. The effort to escape went on until the noisy aircraft roared away and an uncomfortable silence prevailed over the entire environment.

"No one knew what else would follow this thunderous, noisy flying object, so I sat waiting if death had come to take me away". He concluded his narration.

Everyone laughed at every point of his narration. Some even forgot they were eating. Gadoh, who up till now had only been thought of as a nuisance, became the author of a rib cracking and hilarious evening laughter with a narration that remained indelibly in our memory for a long time. Some rags were of better use than new clothes. He concluded sadly, how he had sustained some injuries in the cacophony and process of his attempt to find a haven. Attempts to answer some questions from his listeners only ended in more laughter.

"But you have always wanted to die, why didn't you just stay when death was coming"?

"I don't want that kind of death", more laughter.

"Assuming you found your way out of the room, where would you have run to"?

"Anywhere"!

"And you may have ended up in the stream".

A long session of laughter followed this remark. As the laughing session was drowning quietly, Uncle Shiloba added as if speaking to self but nonetheless, addressing all in a soberly reflective tone,

"Who wants to die after all"? They all agreed that no one desires to die if he could help it. He went on,

"If death were visible some who are dead today might still be alive and those alive may have died".

It was a message for philosophical reflection as everybody apparently seemed absorbed in deep contemplative meditation on the implications of this statement, an atmosphere of somnolence suddenly descended on the gathering, each dispersing to their huts, perhaps, in sober memory of their departed loved ones.

But I would not sleep. A question kept nagging in my mind to the exemption of those who decided to die out of their own volition; a desire which made them take their lives. I resolved to ask uncle Shiloba sooner before I forgot.

As I confronted him with this question on the farm one day, he was taken aback in shock.

“Who told you that people took their own lives”? He queried.

“They said Nazumi in sheme village hung himself. That is suicide”, I said with assured authority.

“Shut up! What do you know, and about suicide for that matter? Don’t you realise that anything that makes a man hang himself, to take his own life is sickness? It is the disease of the mind that forced him to commit suicide and not the man’s desire. When that disease enters the head it controls him and he kills himself. Nobody wants to die!” He assured me calmly thinking I must have just been too young to comprehend the complexities of life. And thus feeling relaxed, he continued.

“Everybody wants to live and see his children grow to become adults. It could be better! See Gadoh, he thinks one day he would see again. That is why he is here for treatment. Didn’t he run when that thing came, and to no particular destination? Do you now understand?”

I understood him and his lectures quite well. Every death was caused by sickness, events or natural occurrence but not courted.

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Dangara Gunnu had enlisted into the Nigerian Army during the civil war. It is not clear whether he was conscripted or recruited. But about four of the men in the village had joined the Nigerian Army. Some against their parents’ wish just disappeared only to send news that they were now soldiers in the Nigerian army. Afterwards they visited home in their toughly starched Army khaki uniform. They were not educated but came back with military jargons and some negotiated marriage ties with the girls. Those who couldn’t come home sent pictures in their smart Army uniform to negotiate marriage proposals with any prospective and interested lady. And to the envy of others such lady would be eventually led to the soldier man. One of them was Musa Jimba, popularly called “illegal” who came back after the war ended. Some of them however married at the war front and sent in pictures of their Ibo or “Calabar” women.

But the case of JS, as he was popularly called was not the same. He was tall, huge, attractive and amiable. He left the catholic missionary activities as a catechist and joined the army during the war. He came home to pick a wife. But he was not as lucky as others were as he had an equal contender who was a Police Officer. Perhaps the Police Officer was more aggressive and arrogant than the soldier that he was.

One evening both men met at the girl's house and the Police Officer gave JS a thunderous slap on his face. Too shocked for a prompt reprisal, he lost his chance to retaliate immediately as arbiters came soon to intervene in order to prevent the fight from degenerating into a full blown battle for a wife. Mr. JS made a tactical withdrawal and left the scene of quarrel into the recess of his home. Late at night, when all had gone to bed and all was quiet, he sauntered into the girl's compound knowing full well that his rival who might be having his fun would be pressed to ease himself from the liquor that had galvanised him into a duel with him, the Soldier. Patiently, he waited in a dark corner, stilled himself against the wall and mosquitoes' bite in an ambush for his earlier assailant. He must have put into practice all the military training and tactics he had acquired from the war front.

After a long wait, suddenly a door latched off and the police Officer staggered into the dark of the night to ease himself. He was still groping in the dark when JS who had acquainted his iris to the environment got a full swing blow at his face. Dazed and shocked, the police officer screamed in pains,

"They have killed me-o"!

JS responded, "that was for the slap, take this for the woman". A hard kick sent the police officer to the ground.

When people woke up from their sleep, aroused by the commotion to rescue the police officer from his attacker, JS had disappeared and was found snoring deeply in his room.

\* \* \*

I do not know whether Dangara Gunu had a girl taken to him or got married at all. He was equally tall, huge but had a thoroughly scaring face with a dark complexion.

It was the second time I saw him since the war commenced. The first time he came home was in the night. When we woke up the following morning he was gone. During his second visit, he stayed a couple of days longer. As his compound was next to ours, he had to do a thoroughfare in our compound each time he went out and came in. He never greeted anyone and no one bothered or worried about his attitudes. He was a soldier! The entire house preferred that he simply passed through without exchange of greetings as would have been traditional with any one going through another's compound. But we were comfortable with his silent intrusions. We never knew where he went to or whom he visited. He simply marched with his heavy jackboots in loud footsteps. Once he was in sight, silence would take over us until he had passed to his compound or to the road. Any gossip about him was with

high sense of discretion as it would amount to suicide if he ever heard you mention his name.

“Who said something”? He would snarl and everybody would keep quiet, feigning to be engaged in one chore or the other.

“Fak yor! Bloody *f-a-u-l!*” He would spit out the tension.

He came back one night, as it were customary with him, marched in loud jack boot steps through our compound but left a trail of silence behind him as usual. His household members were still preparing the evening meal. Gunu could not extend his patience for food beyond his hunger. He marched straight to the cooking pods, and with a single kick smashed the cooking pot on the fire. The entire hot liquid spilled paste into the fire, doused the flames even as the fire hissed to ashes and charcoal with a thick white smoke enveloping the arena up to the sky. The women screamed! Gunu barked in his new found English phrase.

“Bloody faul! No food?”

He marched out in awe with more silence trailing him after he had gone even longer now than usual. The women bemoaned their predicament while the men lamented their cowardice to a son who had acquired a new mentality for brutality.

## **FOUR**

One evening my father came round as he does occasionally, to greet his In-laws. By sheer coincidence two of my father's In-laws shared the same neighbourhood. So each visit might lead him to both houses except he chose otherwise. Obviously, he had come to see his wife who had now stayed with us for about a week. I did not know whether she came to have a break from her matrimonial home or may have had a squabble with the husband that made her relocate temporarily to our house. It was not her first time of coming to the house, perhaps just to have some respite. She had always visited whenever any member of the house was either protractedly sick, especially grandpa or grandma or whenever there was work to be done on the farm requiring assistance. She came when her brother, Uncle Shiloba was sick after he fell off a tree he had climbed to get some locust beans. He had fractured a rib and remained in bed for about a month during which period a local bone therapist attended to him daily; rubbing some oily substance which he claimed was Lion's fat with a potency that transferred the strength of a lion into the healing process.

My father sat with grandpa and they talked for a long time in his court. His stay with Uncle Shiloba was brief and

eventually ended with Mum at a corner out of ear shot. They laughed out loud when they amused themselves.

Finally, it was time to go. It turned out that I was the last to be attended to in order of preference and or importance. I do not know the scale of preference or importance I was rated, either the most important or least important of matters to be discussed.

"Tomorrow you are going to school", he said.

I remained quiet as the idea of going to school had never crossed my mind. None of the boys in my house went to school but my father had a different thought even when being brought up away from him. And because of our location in the village at the outskirts, I seldom saw boys going to school except for a couple in their white shirts and ash colour khaki shorts, who passed from Ubutu, a smaller settlement which could not be given a school of theirs. There were no girls. I have never seen what a School environment looked like. I only knew that boys went to school and thereafter spoke a language we could not understand. At this information, I was eager to know what went on there but he added a statement which disoriented my excitement and imagined pictorials of a school environment.

"There in the school, the teacher would flog you and you will become wise because you are too quiet for my liking. Do you hear me"?

I heard him quite well but the phrase of a flogging teacher for wisdom worried me. Could that be the reason these boys from Ubutu were not consistent in going to school? But were they not to go to school to learn or be taught to become wise? Some days they were off school. They chose when to go to school. How much premium was paid to the cane to impart knowledge, my father's so called wisdom, more than the teaching as a process or do they go paripassu? Would the cane now make me loquacious and talkative? Was there a process like that? The holy writ had acknowledged this fact in Proverbs 22: 15; a child is filled with foolishness; the cane drives it far away. This brought me to query my father's inclination to education; to become loquacious as ridiculous. Do people go to school to become talkative or to acquire knowledge? I became curiously worried but determined to unravel these mysteries in the evolving days or years of my school experience.

"Tomorrow in the morning, I will come and pick you to the school". He concluded his mission statement.

I was confused throughout the night. So, I was going to school to become wise. But the cane!

I woke up the following morning; my father arrived on his motorcycle. I was dressed in my best attire and we rode off to school. For the first time I saw the school compound, a long block of five-room building with several doors in between. The rest of the wall remained open at the lintel

level to the top of the roof except at the Headmaster's office that the bricks blocked above the lintel to the roof. At the base it had a dark red colour oil coating paint and finished to the top with milk-colour emulsion paint. There was another block of two class-rooms detached from the main block. They were for classes one and two. The school compound was swept clean with large Melina trees at equidistance just away in front of the classes. The football field was adorned with flowers at the edges. We entered class one and the pupils rose up in unison with several infant chorus voices.

"Good m-o-o-o-r-n-i-n-g Sir"!!! All the pupils stood up in a united refrain and the teacher asked them to be seated. I watched as they all shrank back to their miniature figures on their desks. I trembled at their easy minded obedience to a simple order. For the first time also I saw more school pupils than the duo from Ubutu. They were all strange faces. Some came from other neighbouring villages to school or to quote my father's famous statement, 'get wisdom', the process of which I had now begun. The teacher, Mr. Innocent, T. G. was my father's friend. He took over from my father, obviously aware of my prospective enrolment into the school and led us to the Headmaster's office.

"What name are we registering him"? He asked "Simon Peter". My father responded.

The Headmaster noted it as he entered into a register all necessary details which were not limited to age, tribe, Birth place and religion. The last information was necessary as this was propriety of a Catholic missionary primary school education grant aided by the Local Government Authority, whose headquarters was then in Lokoja. The headmaster and Mr. Innocent resolved that I was too young for a class one pupil and recommended my being placed in the pre-primary class which other school mates generally referred to as class “Chacha”.

The following day I assumed a class “Chacha” pupil along with other boys of my age. Here we were thought the A, B, C, D ... and 1, 2, 3, 4...in a sing-song form and we practised to write on a slate which was collected at the end of each day’s class activities. Once in a week, the white man in charge of the Catholic Church Mission, Brother Conrad Con, would visit our nursery class with gifts. The gifts usually varied from used clothes, salted pawpaw, Groundnuts, biscuits, milk and sliced bread. We looked forward to the days he shared powdered milk. We received it on our hands and picked it with our tongues savouring its gentle softness down our throats. He encouraged many a pupil to be at school in the event one would miss the special package of this generous missionary ‘priest’.

Isah Zhiya, a mate in the nursery class was the monitor. He demonstrated exceptional brilliance and

academic abilities. He had known the alphabet off hand before we could ever make any attempts and would answer mathematical summations with ease. I often wondered where he got this superior knowledge from. We admired him greatly but he always stunned us shy with his ribald songs and stories we never heard before.

*Gbofulonu, yime momo,  
Gbofulonu, yime momo,  
Eyeje zhe tugwapa shi huru!*

A song story about an itching female private part, the male member in attempting to assuage the itching spot plunged hollow. He was a small boy in stature but was many years above our various ages and experiences.

Unfortunately, Isah dropped out of school tragically before we could reach standard two. He joined a group of boys who went to *Badu*, an acronym for Ibadan in the west of Nigeria, to work on the Cocoa farms where at the end of the year they came back with new clothes, shoes, or some exotic objects they had desired in their personal quest. The bigger boys returned with brand new Bicycles. Isah and many boys got recruited by the rich men who advanced some token money to them with an agreement to become their servant boys in the cocoa farms also called *west* and were transported to Yoruba land, where as we were told,

they worked under sun and rain from sunrise to sun set on these farms, February to November and sometimes extended to December when they returned home for Christmas celebration. The price for any farm work was negotiated by their master but not disclosed to the servant boys and thus their labour was heavily exploited. This modern day slavery carried away many young boys from homes and schools and our model, Isah became a victim!

When he came back he looked haggard and had also acquired another habit, cigarette smoking. In contrast, he now spoke the Yoruba language as an added advantage to their group communication. It became a vogue to go to the *west* amongst the youth especially when they now began coming home with brand new Suzuki and Honda motorcycles. They abandoned school and their fathers' farm.

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## ***FIVE***

Maria Efue, was by every definition a pretty girl if she does not pass for a Beauty Queen. Her parents were from the then Bendel State. She was tall and slim as a sapling, always neat in her fitting school uniform. She was about my age and puberty was soon to stare at her just like other girls of her age. I knew it by the little budding on her chest and the sly and covert looks she attracted from the boys. It occurred to me that before we had rounded off this primary part of our education she would have turned out nubile and be wooed by restless boys seeking her attention in numerous ways including dubious and occult means. Her legs shone reflectively, polished by excessive pomade which she applied on her body. She stood out cool, quiet and calculated with large bright intelligent eyes, a heart shaped face, trimmed shining black hair and white teeth from a sensuous mouth that produced a contagious laughing voice. She was gentle and calm in her movement, speech and actions, Maria exuded confidence with a radiant attractiveness around her. I admired her possessively.

We found ourselves sitting on the same desk in an arrangement made by our Teacher in class four. Initially, I was wary of and uncomfortable with her and always ensured that I avoided body contact so as not to smear her neat uniform with an urchin like me. More fundamental, was my shy character with the opposite sex. But gradually



however, I warmed my way into Maria's confidence through a process I do not know. I began to feel more comfortable with her and sat with ease not mindful of my tardy looks. I did my best to appear neat as it was now a challenge to me but could never match her ranking.

For most of us who were in the same age group, morning bath was never in our itinerary especially during cold weather. We brushed our teeth using a chewing stick, preferably a neem tree (*dogonyaro*) branch, slim, peeled at one edge, chewed soft to a brush by persistence, then moved up and down vertically and in most cases horizontally across the length of mouth. 'Pwa'! You spat out saliva. The process continued until the mouth was rinsed clean living a bitter *dogonyaro* taste in the mouth. We were encouraged to use the *dogonyaro* branch to brush our teeth in the morning as an antidote and cure for minor fever. The face and legs were bathed with water, leaving the rest of the entire body. It was a dry-cleaning exercise. The bath for the day took place only after school sports and other manual activities in the evening. We trekked bare footed to the school. During hot weather we took cover under the shade when closing from school and at times leaped on one leg stepping on fresh green lawn to cool off our searing feet until we got home.

Every morning assembly, there was a personal hygienic inspection. The teachers went through every row of pupils ordering;

"Show your fingers"!

"Open your mouth and show your teeth"!

You thrust out both hands in the teacher's direction and parted your lips to expose your teeth. A ruler landed on the finger nails that were not well trimmed and a bang on the head for a set of teeth that were not well kept. I received much of the ruler on the head until one day I sat in front of a mirror, with a needle object and picked my teeth of stubborn dirt inside out. I bled but it cured me of the tension and pains I went through from a ruler banging my head each time on the assembly ground.

My intimacy with Maria began with solving mathematical equations and quiz comprehension together.

"What is this word called? H-e-a-r-d, Head"? Maria would ask.

"Heard ... Toma heard..." English lessons consisted in a book called "Toma and Tani". The comprehension quiz was one headache for many pupils. With spying prowess into my work, when our teacher was less concentrated in his vigilance, Maria would score above average. She was not too proud to learn but demonstrated willingness to be assisted.

"And this"

"That is *Airport*"

At break time, Maria would pull a small plastic box containing either some pieces of fried yams, jollof rice or

*gari*. With these she cemented my affection for her as she would give me some from her ration to eat. At closing hours, Maria would wait for me to trek with her to the 'Y' junction that separated us to our homes. It became a daily routine as long as it was a school day. One day, I kept a long smooth piece of yam in the bush for Maria which I had brought from our farm. As we approached the "Y" junction, I jumped into the bush and leapt out with a piece of yam in hand.

"Here take, I brought it for you". She stood there staring at me.

"Take", I pleaded.

"I don't need it, my father bought lots of yams. They are in the store room".

I stood petrified. How foolish, I should have known that they don't farm but bought the yams Uncle Shiloba and others produced from their farms. I should have known that a lot of stock was available in their pantry. I had no other idea of what to show my appreciation for her kindness. I was only a farmer's boy and that was all I could boast of. But she would not move away from me. We stood staring at each other. Then I walked away slowly from her clutching my beautifully selected piece of yam which had been meant to please her.

In our terminal exams Maria came 12<sup>th</sup> of 22 pupils in the class but was nevertheless, first among the girls in the class. She was my pride. One day our teacher, perhaps

basking in the euphoria of her performance or testing her real abilities asked her the most difficult question during a passage comprehension exercise. Maria stood up and stared into the blackboard for an answer. The board did not provide any. I scribbled down the answer for her on paper but she would not look down. She kept staring at the board that stared blankly back at her.

"Open your palms", ordered the teacher.

And six strokes, three on each palm came down. As she twisted her face and threw her hands in desperate need of relief, I squinted on my seat. Afterwards she wept. When it was time to go home she packed her books, looked at me and said,

"Let us go home".

I was amazed at how she had quickly recovered and overcame her trauma. She looked confident as if nothing had happened to her that day. I expected to see a shy-looking Maria. But not from a refreshed looking Maria by my estimation. I warmed up to her but trekked home in silence trying to avoid evoking memories of the humiliation she had gone through the day.

We ended the year's class session. Maria told me she was going to spend the holiday in Benin. Her father had told her so.

My relationship with Maria went beyond the school. At our neighbourhood, we bathed in the same open stream.

Once I came in to bath, and Maria was in a bath, we would play games. She would respectfully and discretely wear her clothes without disclosing those body parts that were private to her and sensuous to us. Where she was overwhelmed with shyness, she would hang on until I left. We fondly became attached to each other. One day I went out with my playmates to our market square converted football pitch; we had to go beside the fence of her compound. I made efforts to see her before joining my mates. Peeping through the mat fence, she spotted me and beckoned me to come inside their house. She was frying *gari* with her mother. I stepped in trembling, fearing the outcome of her mother's scrutiny over an urchin who had intruded unnoticed into the compound. She spoke to her mother in Isoko language and I could see the mother resting her resentment. Maria scooped some *gari* into my palms which I threw into my mouth as I walked out. She had mixed it with granulated sugar and the taste was wonderful in the mouth. I had half of it before sharing the rest with my playmates.

We returned from the long break which spanned almost two months from July to September. Two days after resumption, I could not see Maria. Was she still with her uncle in Warri? The whole week went without signs of Maria. But on Monday, I eagerly looked forward to seeing her in our new class and where we had our new teacher, Mr. Oriade. When I could not see Maria, I became apprehensive

of her protracted absence. My loneliness in spite of all the pupils in the school was heart agonising and obvious. Undauntedly, after school hours, I went to Maria's house, peeped through the rafters that made a barricade of fence expecting to catch a glimpse of her as usual. But I was disappointed. I was later to understand that Maria had been found another school in Lagos where she was to continue her education. Would she come back again and would she see me again? What would she look like if I ever saw her again? Questions ran through my mind; many throbbing questions they were indeed!

## **SIX**

Our new class teacher, Mr. Oriade, a Yoruba man was a black, tall and slim young man. By my estimation, he was one of the most intelligent of all the teachers we had in the

school. He was so slender we thought his neck would not carry the weight of his head. But he did carry his head with ease and pride whenever and wherever he walked. He believed in academic excellence and would not tolerate any classroom indolence. Those who were unable to read a passage successfully to his satisfactory assessment or failed to meet his requirements in performance during class assignments in his efforts to impart knowledge on us had rough times with him. Gradually, he became a nightmare and some pupils dropped out of school while others preferred to repeat the junior class. He assembled all those who failed his class test to the front of the class and requested for several strong and resilient canes to be brought to him. He tested their resilience and flexibility before commencing his flogging session. He had a strange way of flogging his pupils to satisfy his pleasures. The girls received their floggings on their hands, at his worst moments he did so on their buttocks where it hurt sensationally more than the boys. The boys received their floggings on the buttocks, extending to all over the back in a sensation that made the victim fall into an ecstasy of unknown traditional dance steps. These dances thrilled Mr. Oriade greatly as he becomes overwhelmed with excitement.

Whichever sex that was involved, he stroked hard with all his strength and portrayed that he enjoyed this hobby by several mimics of the flinching pupils. Lifting his left foot

unto a chair, he took his male victims bent over his thigh with his left hand on his victim's buttocks and the right hand with the cane; he commences as one beating a drum. He would first of all hum a Yoruba musical drum and the cane descended in that rhythm which left the victim screaming and wailing, throwing off hands and legs. The canes he used sometimes got broken and he would select from his stands, satisfied that he had gotten the toughest one, Oriade would resume, summoning his next victim; already fear stricken, feverish, fainting and agonising pupil to his desired flogging position. It continued until the flogging session was through for the day but we knew it only adjourned for the next day.

Our reprieve only came on Wednesdays, when soon after breakfast, the music class commenced and all school pupils gathered in one class room to learn a hymn, a song or a chorus till the closing bell sounded. In one of the sessions as it were, we couldn't resist the appellation to one of the teachers as Mr. "Zoom-zoom".

*...somebody shouting help!*

*And another crying help!*

*Just because we say!*

*Zoom-zoom-zoom-zoom-zoom!*

The class ended in fiasco as the last two “zooms” were delivered in a feat of out bursting laughter. He didn’t tell us what the *zoom-zoom-zoom-zoom-zoom* was zooming all about. Thus the music session came to an abrupt halt but not without two strokes each of the cane we received stoically from the “zoom-zoom” music master.

Sometimes Mr. Oriade was assigned by HM to flog pupils during morning assemblies, a duty he performed so well with zeal and pride. He received loathsome glances as reward from the pupils. But those that Mr. Oriade considered hard working and good pupils in class escaped his hard discipline as they enjoyed his pleasantries.

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There were a lot of school curriculums, and drama was one of such lessons we volunteered to participate. Drama play was performed for out-going pupils in their final year. We became so interested in the last drama presentation where the thief having been caught red handed stealing a ram and covered its mouth from shouting, defended his action when confronted by his accusers saying, he “was in a biological assignment counting its teeth”. We wanted to be part of the next drama play and be a cause of laughter for our audience.

I joined the drama group and was to play the role of the thief even though under a different setting. During one

of our rehearsals, Edwin Nwobu, an Ibo boy was to play the role of the police officer to arrest me; a role he played so well beyond a drama to a seemingly real life scenario. Edwin Nwobu turned the drama into a reality displaying the unwholesome character of a true Nigerian Police Officer angered for brutality, bestiality and jack boot orders. He hit me severally severely with the baton that I developed bruises on my hands and head. Abandoning my lines, I protested that it was after all a drama and not a reality show. Mr. Oriade, who was our class teacher and drama master, laughed out his ribs when he saw the drama rehearsal turned into a real scuffle. And that ended my interest in play drama and crippled my ambition in play acting.

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The HM, the Headmaster, Mr. Clark Awana, an Ijaw man was a peculiar personality in many respects. He was tall and of a moderate athletic physique perhaps the reward of his sporting activities which were never in doubt. When he was not on the field playing foot ball with the boys, he was at the lawn tennis court, which was a sacred game meant only for Staff. Senior pupils only ventured there when the Staff had taken their recess. At other time, the HM would be found playing basket ball with the girls. We took delight in watching him in the stream as he swam

across the tide in the fast moving water current as if he were in stiff competition with an opponent. He had a voice that was more feminine than masculine especially when he dished out orders coarsely.

“Cam henre”!

“Sit dan”!

“Nou, this wey”!

A couple of months, after he was transferred to take over from the former Headmaster, he replaced his ageing Suzuki motorcycle. One morning, he rode gently into the school compound with a brand new Honda motorcycle, with a double silencer exhausts. Parked in his usual lot near his office, we went admiring this heavy size motor cycle with its glittering silencers and other silvery rods. At a point we saw where HM had been boldly written on it. We concluded as a rarity, it was only Headmasters that rode on it. No wonder, no one else had had it as his possession except HM.

Mr. Clark was determined to leave a landmark of a disciplined and hard working school environment in both pupils and teachers which he went about zealously to achieve. With a successful family of four children and a beautiful wife who was adored by many because of her complete femininity, sensuous appearance, a tender disposition and with a skin that radiated youthfulness which gave her an ageless beauty queen demeanour acknowledged by almost all of us, Mr. Clark was simply an idol. Only HMs

acquired such women! His children; Nicolas, Rose, Raymond and Ann always appeared neat, cool headed and were for us a classic example of the elite’s children. Mr. Clark also had many dependants, boys and girls who were also pupils in our school. One of them, Adomene, incidentally was my mate in class three. He was later moved to class four in our second term because of his extra-brilliant performance in class. He did not disappoint his recommendation as he came 5<sup>th</sup> in his promotion examination to class five while we trailed behind in class four. In fact, he left class five for Secondary School. He was not HM’s son but one of his brothers just as Gbenekeme who also was in HM’s house.

Gbenekeme was more of an adult. He was tall, huge and dark in complexion as the rest were in HM’s house. He was in class seven. We all imagined he was the immediate younger brother of HM. They looked alike. One day in school, an unexpected incident happened that stunned all of us.

The atmosphere as we gathered on the assembly ground that morning was different with the faces of both teachers and pupils devoid of cheer. An unusual dullness and tension had prevailed on the entire school and the morning assembly was going to tell the reasons. The chatting of teachers before commencement of the morning assembly, where we prayed the “Our Father, who art in

Heaven....” and sang some hymns or songs and marched smartly with the band to our classes beginning with the junior class to the final and adult classes, had all suddenly ceased. We were simply nonplussed. There was a void and a grim suspense hung in the air. It was a stern looking HM that stood in front of the assembly ground. A long table had been brought out from one of the class rooms to the assembly ground.

“Gbenekeme”! He bellowed out in a voice that was treacherous conveying a feeling of what was to come.

“Sir”! The response came from the tall boy behind the row.

“Come out here”! He called out in a louder voice that betrayed his anger than a command. Everyone shivered but HM remained aloof to the reactions that trailed his order. We guessed some persons may have been informed of what was to come and gotten the ominous signs of the day. Gbenekeme strolled out obviously, aware of the fate that was awaiting him this day.

“Climb the table”, HM said in a gentle and innocuous tone pointing at the table with the cane, a tender but dry bamboo branch he clutched tightly in his hand.

Gbenekeme knew what to do. He climbed the table and lay on his stomach, his buttocks up. HM stood behind the table facing us, and began stroking. We counted slowly as he brought down each stroke with strength and venom.

Some of us winced and took our hearts to our mouths holding our breaths. Gbenekeme remained still until his ordeal was over. One of the teachers supervised the strokes until they were twelve, the last two coming with more vigour. HM stopped and walked straight back to his office without a word conveying the meaning of his action to us. Gbenekeme slowly got up, staggered a bit and went back to join his mates but the tears treacherously weakened the dignity of his manliness. We all praised his tenacity as he did not openly weep but only winced as he absorbed the venom of pain striking from a bamboo branch. Many of us did not know what warranted this manner of capital punishment for the brother of the HM and by HM himself. Sometimes HM brought domestic offences to be settled under school punishment for members of his house hold. If he treated members of his household this way what would happen to the rest of us? It earned him more respect and awe. But what could have been responsible for this recent punishment and its magnitude? It was later rumoured and allegedly too that Gbenekeme was caught red-handed in a compromising position with a female adult member of HM’s household. Others however, believed Gbenekeme was so severely flogged to keep him off HM’s comfort zone.

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Titus Yizokwi, my Cousin was from all indications our unacknowledged leader both in academics and games. He was well endowed with sporting activities and played football with strength, resilience and agility. He was always preferred to us in a selection process that preceded a teams' formation for our evening games and practice. I played the opponent with him as the next to be picked for the other team. If I had Amos Tukura on my side we were sure of defeating his team. But if I had Musa Zhokwo, I was in for a lousy play and conceded defeat even before the game was over. But Titus never got the opportunity to feature in the school's football team whenever there was a tournament. Nonetheless, we admired him for his better performances, constant victories and preferences over us.

An incident happened that erased our doubts and confirmed his leadership position among us and earned him our respects. Okpobbo was a huge boy. Although, he was short but was also stoutly built and he used this to his advantage and intimidated us at school, home and on the streets. By every standard, he was simply a local bully with his big and a strongly built physique. He terrorised us with threats of beating us plum and silly even when unprovoked. He dared any of us to tempt him each time he forced himself into our company especially on our way home from school. But none of us could dare to dare him.

One day, he challenged Titus to a fight for unprovoked reasons as he always did when he was in the mood for a fight. Usually, the boys would take flight at the fright of a fight with a bully like him, cursing all the way as they ran away. This day he picked on Titus for no just offence as we thought but probably because he was too aloof for his liking. We became smitten in fear as he pranced on the road challenging Titus to dare him for a duel. Titus handed me his books in a privy manner. I didn't know what was on his mind. Okpobbo saw it and ranted the more. It was too late to stop them now! Okpobbo had found yet another victim to satisfy his orgy of brutality. He pulled his school shirt over his face in readiness for the fight. In this process and in a lightning speed, Titus rushed at him. The first blow hit him on the stomach. As he crunched, a second one hit him on his face. He grunted! His school uniform was still on his head with his hands entwined in it. The third blow caught him on his chest. He then slumped to the ground. Titus now astride in a vantage position pummelled him, then throttled his throat choking him to suffocation while we watched in excited animation the peril of this brute and the Goliath of our age; suffered his greatest pains, humiliation and defeat.

*"Ka bashi kashi! Panabu ahwai!"*, one of the cheerers said. This was a major sign of victory and to complete total humiliation of your opponent in a duel, you



fed his mouth with dust having over powered him. An arbiter came and detached the combatants. We watched as Okpobbo, slowly and shamefully got to his feet, dusted off his body, picked his shirt and walked away silently home, disgraced. We never saw him in school again. He transferred to LEA Primary School, Oguma. And that ended the saga of an intimidating brute!

## **SEVEN**

Moses Duniya, Shigaba was older than all of us in age. By definition, he was an adult, stoutly built with big muscular biceps that showed off his arms with tight fitting singlet he wore often. He walked with the strength of a bulldog and

stepped heavily on the ground with his heels perhaps with the intent to create footprint impressions whether on soft or hard soil. He had become wise in the things of the world with the advantage of his age. He was in Standard five. He was my mother's cousin.

At home on his walls, he had written several catchy phrases. On his window lintel, you would read such phrase as; "if men were God...!"; indeed if men were God, they would deprive others even the free air or on the contrary annihilate every other act that was wicked, inhuman and selfish. Further away, he had boldly written in multi coloured chalk, " God is Love". At his door post lintel he had written, "No condition is permanent"! At another point he wrote "salutation is not love"! I used to imagine what all these baring syllables meant to him. These were big grammar an elementary school pupil like me found difficult to comprehend.

Moses could be shrewd in some ways, but to us it seemed he possessed some magical powers which he displayed mysteriously. Moses would play tricks with us; if you picked a coin from his pocket, he would tell us, "you would be worth a penny richer". But if you failed, you got a penny to lose. He would then lift the coin before our eyes and insert it in his pocket and ask us to pick it out. Simple! It was a game! You would feel the coin but it lay behind the lining of his clothes, impossible to retrieve. After several

failed attempts, he would bring out the same coin to your consternation. You lost your penny to him; he bore no remorse for your loss and stupidity.

On market days, he would arraign us in the jungle that was our hideout and instruct us to get him some smoked fish from the market women warning us not to be caught. We went with our coverlets tied to our necks down concealing our hands. Our leader would pretend to be pricing some fish with the seller while we helped ourselves picking one piece of smoked fish each for Moses from the sacks that contained them. We left immediately we found a piece and this we submitted to the kingpin who inspected its juiciness. You were sidelined by the don in his sharing formula if you brought in a bony fish but would be consoled by your team mates who contributed their own share to you. I suffered this consequence as I always returned either with crumbs I had picked from the ground or when I could not get any at all feeling too jittery for a pick from the sacks.

On some market days, Moses with his gang of senior boys would order us to get them cigarettes. Where he found us incapable, he went himself with the bigger boys and came back with their loots. This time he shared it with only those that had been able to deliver efficiently.

One market day, Moses and his gang gave the usual orders. We went out with our team leader in front. The market woman was not watching. Her back was turned on

him. We watched animatedly as he picked the first big, curled, dry and oily fish that expertly disappeared behind his coverlet. He went for a second dip, it was another big one. We thought he should have left but he went on. Suddenly as if hit by hard instincts, the woman turned back to her wares only to find Baba Daudu with a huge one in his hand. She didn't raise any alarm; she knew it was a little boy trying to pinch her wares. She simply caught hold of his coverlet and began hitting him all over. He struggled free but without his clothes. He fell, rose and ran naked like a mad man straight into the jungle. The party dissolved and each one went to his home. Some of us never went back to the jungle again until it was pulled down for a building project.

But Moses turned out the School's best goalkeeper for the School's football team, "Holy Angels", Roman Catholic Mission, RCM, Primary School, Sheria. He caught the ball with such dexterity that he boasted no one would ever score a goal with him at the post except he allowed it. He proved it severally until he became the adjudged best and number one goal keeper for the School's football team. He was always the man of the match in most of the football tournaments around the zone with "dangerous saves" that could have earned his team a defeat. For these the team always won and returned with the team's chanting slogan;

*Every day, Sheria winnerrrr!*  
*Every day, Sheria Winnerrrrr!*

It was believed that though Moses could not pass the promotion Examination to his next class, he was being promoted as a reward for his goal keeping prowess so as to keep him in the School's football team. Doing otherwise might amount to losing him out of shame in repeating a class. This was more so that the HM, Mr. Clark, was a lover of sports. To the amazement of his pupils, Mr. Clark played most of the games practised by adult males and females in the school. Soccer, football was one of his best constantly played games. He always got himself kitted for the evening games. His "adidas" as we all called his foot kits and stockings rolled up to the knees, gave him a classic distinction of a high fashionable degree and attention from others players on the field. On such occasions, when HM got into the field, the football practice took a different turn of seriousness as if a tournament was imminent.

We were only interested in one player on the field, the HM. He dominated the field as other players are either scared of being crushed with the "adidas" which by our observation, seemed to have some nails beneath the soles. Mr. Clark would dribble clinically possessing the ball from the mid-field to the goal post. He usually scored even with the indomitable Moses at the post to our admiration and cheers.

We would ask Moses why he couldn't stop the HM's shots. He explained that he had to make HM happy. But on the days they had quarrels in the class, which might have ended in flogging for one academic inadequacies or the other, Moses braced up to stop all HM's shot at the goal post, frustrating HM's ego and thus, settling scores his own way. HM would change sides to team "B" and have his scores but Moses would walk with his heavy steps shoulder high having satisfactorily avenged his humiliation in the class and proven his superior abilities on the field.

A friendly football tournament was organised for schools by the Local Authority in charge of schools. Holy Angels was in the final play with LEA, her biggest and strongest rival having defeated two other teams to emerge in the finals. The match lasted almost into sun set and dusk was blurring our sight as the two contending teams played out their best form to prove their superiority over the other.

The first half had ended 1-1 for both teams. Michael Musa, a dandy even on the foot ball pitch who had exhausted himself rambling the length and breadth of the field was substituted for a younger and agile player, Alhassan, Baba Ogu to reinforce the blunt attack on the opponent's eighteen meter box. By about ten minutes into the second half, Holy Angels was on the lead count by 2-1 goals through a header by the captain, Bala Akpa, shortish,

a dribbler on the field who always mesmerised his opponents and spectators. The count remained until injury or dying minutes. But the referee would not just stop the match for reasons we suspected were bias for the opposing team on whose ground the match was being played. An attacker from LEA's team pulled a long treacherous shot from the outside right over heads to the eighteenth meter box. A sudden and spontaneous shot, beating Maichikwo, the 'iron back-man' complemented that effort by an awaiting attacker into the two posts. Our hearts jumped to our mouths!

"A g-o-a-l"!!! The chorus came cheerfully and confidently from the opposing fans and unconsciously from all spectators. My mouth became dry and emitted warm air as I imagined others too did with our hearts palpitating at the same time.

The dust settled, clearly making visibility better and we saw Moses tightly clutching the ball, sprawled on the ground. He had caught it! We were relieved! But how would the match end with a Referee who was unwilling to stop the trauma we were being subjected to? The pressure mounted on Holy Angels which seemed to be manifesting signs of fatigue and weakness. Would it end in Penalties if there was an equaliser? Moses lifted the ball on one hand and shot the ball with a hard kick into the air. Simultaneously, the referee, Mr. Ali, "Fire-Fire" breathed-in hard, spreading his hands in

the air and the shrill tone of the whistle tore through the misty dust.

*Every day, Sheria winner!!!*

*Every day, Sheria winner!!!*

We chanted and danced our way home. We didn't wait for the closing formalities and presentation of trophies. We had to be the first to share the news at home. Even our parents were happy at the potentials for victory which their wards always displayed at such events.

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I got home excited just like everyone else having won the football match played at Oguma, the headquarters of the Sub-Native Authority. It had been a tiresome day. No other leisure was necessary. When we wanted to retire to our beds, Uncle Shiloba raised an alarm about a missing bicycle.

"There are three bicycles in this house. But only two are here now. Where is the third"? He inquired.

The question came to me indirectly. He continued, facing me,

"You went out with a bicycle. Did you come back with it"? He now addressed me squarely.

I couldn't remember ever going out with any bicycle. But how did I get to the venue of the football contest? I went out there in a group on foot and came back with them. We had all met at the catechist's house where we took off. In the excitement of our expectations in this group, I had left behind the bicycle I rode to the Catechist's house, where we took off for the venue of the match to pick it up on return and was not kept under anyone's custody. And following the ecstatic excitement of our victory I forgot to pick it up having returned from the venue of the great match.

Grandma lit her lamp and led the way to the Catechist's house. We met no one on the road as it was late for any to be found outside except those on ritual assignments as those invisible people who dropped fetish items at the junction near our house or those in critical situation like myself. Grandma kept muttering some prayers asking God to come to my rescue and find the bicycle. She had always prayed for me whenever I was in any danger or in need of a way out of any trouble, harm, sickness or ill luck. She wondered why God who stayed in His white heavens would allow anything unpleasant happen to me at all; gentle, quiet and innocuous me. Sometimes she said God was a fool to allow any disaster to affect me at all in my loneliness and innocence. But God has always worked in His foolishness to confound the wisdom of man just as He turns the wisdom of man into foolishness. I had been threatened

with deportation to my home if the bicycle were not found. I dreaded the idea of going to my father's house with all the multitude of women consisting of grandfather's three wives, father's four wives, his elder brother's three wives and his younger brother's two wives each with their own dependants in addition to the number of visitors. It was a crowd to which I loathed to belong, with all its implications; quarrels, misunderstandings, missing items, gossips, numerous errands. More so, I had known no home other than this which had become my cradle and refuge. Shiloba had practically taken me to my father's house on one occasion and handed me over as a returnee son of his. But I soon found myself back to my maternal uncle and Grandmother's home.

"Is there anyone in this house"? She announced our presence.

Instantly a voice from inside said,

"Who is there"?

"I am Ine from Wodi Mawa's house."

An endless moment went by and Stephen Sokwo, the Catechist, came out unlatching the door loudly. A soft spoken man, who measured his steps while in movement. He represented for us the epitome of a Catholic faith, blessed with a family that was for us, the envy of many homes. One of his sons, Solomon was our age mate and friend. Others are Cecilia, Francisca who later became Mrs.

Titus, and Simeon including his younger ones. He, Stephen as catechist prepared us for Baptism and his behaviour depicted the character of a Reverend Father. Whenever he went for the Holy Communion, he maintained a position that was esoteric. He knelt down piously and muttered some silent words in communicative tandem with God; only his lips moved. We looked forward to when we would get to that state of worship where you communed with God and poured out your love for Him, your desires in life and He in return tells you, He knows and cares for your worries, desires and all that you needed in this life. Catechism, the preparatory class for baptism was a daily class activity for us during holidays and we attended it with zeal.

“Who made man”?

“God made man”!! We would echo back.

“Who is God”?

“God is Spirit that is everywhere at any time”!!!

“Why did God make man”

“God made man to know Him, to love Him and to serve Him...”

He carried on with his catechumens instructing on pantheism until we got to the complex issues of the Church’s ecclesiastical decisions and Vatican’s position that border on Sacraments and Sacramentals, mortal and immortal sin, Abortions, Confessions, Celibacy, who qualifies to go to heaven etc. Further catechesis took us into the abyss of

theological damnations, perdition, eschatological doctrines and the argumentative possibilities of heavenly attainment which finally led us on referral recourse to the Constitution of the sacred “*liturgy sacrosanctum concillium*”, solemnly promulgated by Pope Paul in 1963, Second Vatican Council.

“What is the matter, this night”? He inquired.

“My son brought a bicycle here in the afternoon and forgot to pick it home after their ball”.

As if ignoring the statement, he went in and came out rolling the bicycle.

“Oh! Thank you God”! Grandma exclaimed.

“The bicycle was here until late and unclaimed by anyone. So, we decided to take it in and secure it”.

Grandma thanked him profusely, appreciating his line of action. Others, she said, would have abandoned the bicycle outside until some thieves made away with it. After all, it was not secured under anybody’s custody. She did not mention however that some bad persons would have actually taken the bicycle in and claimed they left it outside and might have been picked by its owner or stolen by any thief, since it commanded a lot of value and respect for those who had the economic wherewithal to possess one then.

## ***EIGHT***

Uncle Shiloba and grandpa had a communion that was inseparable. At the dry season and harvest time, palm wine

became a daily source of leisure, entertainment and pastime for father and son. They ordered their palm wine in the evening after finishing the day's supply. The tapper would come in the morning to remove the gourd for a refill. They could not afford to disappoint them both in quality and supply. They were connoisseurs of palm wine taste as they easily distinguished between poor and good quality. Both Grandpapa and uncle contributed half of the total cost respectively for the contents of each keg they bought. They always agreed on their timing for the commencement of their drinking session.

After farm work, which was always towards sunset, having had their bath and eaten some food, they would retire behind the compound where enough shade had been formed. We would set up the couch for grandpa and the drinking session would commence. We were invited to either wash cups or fetch a glowing fire for their native tobacco smoking which consisted of a length of an iron pipe connected to an attached small oval pot where the grounded tobacco stuff was loaded. A live coal would be placed there. He drew the pipe with a mouth drained air into his lungs and let out the smoke through his nostrils. After a few draws, the pipe is lit up and he relaxes while the tobacco glows.

After having a couple of cups between them, a half cup would be extended to each of us, I and Kondo.

“Drink ...! Small....! S-l-o-w-l-y”

After we had had a few sips, I would exit the company and dash into playful inanities. The duo would stay long into dusk discussing and having their swell time. On a market day, they would change variety to the locally brewed *pito*, wine made from Guinea-corn mostly by women. Foshi Zeje and Chenge Abu were good at this trade. They duo, being such connoisseurs of good *pito*, never missed their wine.

This became a routine for the duo each day except for days they got disappointed by their supplier and did not get their supply or when they had minor disagreements between themselves. But we knew that neither of them could stay away from this addiction as they soon returned to their sitting position within two or three days after any of such disagreements.

At one time father and son disagreed and remained aloof to each other for more than two weeks. The house became a ghost of itself. Everyone was affected. The wives separated their cooking activities. We were confused on whom to support in this cold war between them.

But the wives of both men brought us foods separately. Thus we ate variety of soups but not without being mindful that a once harmoniously knit family was gradually disintegrating. We didn't know the source of their quarrel. But it began after one of their drinking sessions.

Their usually low voices began ascending until both were at the top of their audibility.

“I farmed for you more than fifteen years. What did I get”? Son hoarsely shouted.

“I settled you afterwards with yam seedlings to commence your own farm. That is all custom demands! Where did I go wrong”? Father replied.

The rest members of the family tried to calm nerves down. And finally it was quiet! That night we slept uncomfortably. The usual greeting of father and son did not take place the following morning neither did the evening routine hold. The situation began to degenerate. The house became uncomfortably quieter each passing day. Catastrophe had struck in the house. A week went by, both parties held to their rigid positions of not submitting to the other. In the middle of the third week, our neighbour, Zhokwo, who often shared banter and told stories with them in the evenings, came around in the morning, obviously aware of the imbroglio between the two, and notified them that there would be a meeting in the house later in the evening which required the attendance of both parties. Both father and son were apprehensive of the situation as they came back from their farms earlier than usual. Perhaps each was bearing the burden for a reconciliation which pride couldn't allow either of them to initiate.



The meeting commenced. Zhokwo had come in with another neighbour and the talks began. We sat quietly but excitedly hoping this war of attrition between them would be over today. I was getting weary of the tension that brewed daily which was heading towards a routine in the morning as we woke up and in the afternoon when we all came back from our various endeavours. The evenings were devoid of our usual stories as father would not eat son's portion of meat sent to him or would son do otherwise.

The son stated his own side of the story and the Father followed suit to be heard. As it was a tradition in our local aphorism, you do not listen to one tune of music and fall into a dance step which was quite apt to the rule of natural justice. Both parties to a quarrel must be heard. At the end of talks, father was found guilty of making a statement beyond its limit and son was found guilty of overreacting. However, the arbitration panel requested that the son tender apologies to the father with a firm belief that one does not fall an elder and remain on top of him.

Uncle apologised and a keg of wine emerged from nowhere. Presumably, he knew what was to be the outcome of the mediation or as a tradition he would offer drinks to the peace makers. As they drank we were relieved of the tension that always hung around which made it uneasy for us to move, eat or talk freely. Grandfather cleared his throat and thanked the peace makers and afterwards apologised to

uncle for any statement which had caused him hurt. In response they all stooped and greeted grandpapa for allowing the mediation to take place at all. The normal relationship between father and son resumed and we became a happy family again.

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Kondo woke up one morning with a high temperature we assumed was fever. We had assumed as usual that he was into one of his pranks to keep away from farm. He was excused from farm that day with a strong support by his mother. When we returned, he had developed some spots all over his body. He had caught measles. Two days later, we had all contracted it, from him obviously. Treatment commenced and now generally applied to all of us and we were given some orders and barred from eating certain foods and drinking water below certain temperature. We were not to drink cold water or any other water except the concoctions until we were confirmed cured.

I couldn't tell the nature of medication we received as it was discretely prepared and handled by grandma. We were not allowed to see the preparations or the contents of its make. It was only brought to us in our weak state, from the back of the house, where it was prepared and administered to us for our cure. It was mostly fries with

lavished red oil. It was much the love they could shower on us, patients as we were. It contained dried fish and other items we could not discern its properties either from its confusing taste or from its look.

Gwatana was the first to recover after two weeks. One day he informed us that we have been fed with human dung all this while as medicine for our cure. We tacitly disagreed with him in strong improbability of anyone being fed with human faeces. He swore that he saw grandma go behind the thicket, he watched her carefully bending down to pick some objects he suspected was shit which she wrapped in a paper and took it to the place our medications were being prepared. We felt disgusted. But what did it matter anyway? After all, he had already gotten better.

I and Kondo's case were protracted because we had violated some rules. One day we sneaked into the resting hut when his mother and everybody were away, plenty cold water stored in large pots beckoned on us and we had a good drink of it that had become our precious desire all along three weeks. I resisted the temptation of gulping much, lest it worsened my situation but Kondo went the whole hog. In the evening he caught fever again while I felt slightly cold. His mother was devastated!

"Did you people drink any cold water"? She barked. Kondo and I remained silent.

They suspected what had happened and cursed that we would have ourselves to blame for our deaths.

But we survived!

## ***NINE***

Grandfather's last born; Ndazhaga was an adult, far above our age in the house. He had attained maturity. His

age mates were talking about their marital desires. He held more talks with his mates than the rest of us. They laughed quite a lot while having fun and enjoyed their unhindered outings. They did not allow us to accompany them like we did with Gwatana who was younger in age. He was a jolly good fellow, gentle in all manners. He never scolded, brooded or bothered us on itinerant errands. He bought most of his items by himself, enjoying the swift ride of his bicycle in and out of the compound.

He left the farm one day earlier than he would. When we returned later, he was in company of his friends discussing in low tones. They left in a party of three without our young uncle. Towards sunset they came back in animated spirit and chatted heartily. In the evening a girl was brought in escorted by some of her siblings. I knew her. Kasuwa was her name, the elder sister to our Isah Zhiya. She was a popular pretty girl known by her friends and neighbours for her razor-sharp tongue and quarrelsomeness. Sometimes she fought with the strength of a man without minding her exposed sensuous femininity.

She had been caught by the party of three on her way to the stream; having overpowered her strength they took her to a hideout which was possibly one of their homes. She knew the reason for the ambush and her abduction. She had become a wife to our young Uncle that had been making overtures towards her. Her parents were equally aware of

what had become of their daughter. Once Uncle Shiloba paid a visit to the family; probably they had discussed the vested interest of young Uncle on their nubile daughter. Such abduction was usually arranged with an insider if the wife-to-be were conscious of her intending husband's move to "catch her into marriage". A signal of her location and time would be given by such accomplice. Her abductors would have to wait patiently. If as it were the arrangement failed another attempt would be made until the mission was accomplished.

Elopement was practised but lacked respectability amongst matured members of the community. Why elope when you could request for a wife and be given? The Jews once practiced elopement but it was out of necessity (Judges 21:20). People who eloped with women were either men of questionable character, who knew their request would not be granted until they had had a repentant attitude to life or for those who fell madly and headlong in love against accepted societal norms or family will. No matter how hard a known thief begs for a wife, he has the advantage of knowing he would be rejected and his request turned down. As the saying goes; a thief may stop to steal but may not be devoid of claiming to have found lost items. In other words as they say, once a thief always a thief.

The household offered the new bride and her siblings who had now accompanied her some food but she would not eat anything in spite all entreaties. She was in a different environment and probably in a sober mood if she had not desired the marital proposition. Her reactions might however, result from mere pretence as one who was not eager to consummate a marital relationship. I empathised with her, abducted from her home and perhaps had nursed some ambition for her greater tomorrow; plans of school, business or even becoming a Reverend Sister in the Catholic Church where she would freely take the call to consecrated life of celibacy, taking vows and being faithful in the "obligation of practicing chastity for the sake of the kingdom, poverty and obedience".

The following day, preparations were made for a welcome party in the evening. A popular Local musician was invited to complement the home based artiste. It was an evening to remember as both artistes competed for honour and panegyric space amongst guests who had trooped to listen to them as they sang out their best performance until the early hours of the next day. The guest artiste suddenly went hoarse and gradually, diminished, his voice drowning into an alarming croaky inaudibility. He was consoled albeit, in ostensible mockery to take a bow and get some rest while the home based artiste prevailed till day break. It was rumoured that the home based artiste had concocted some

fetish items to silence his opponent out of ovation and accolades he was being showered with from guests.

The wonder artiste, Dekina Momoh, the blind musician, a soloist thrilled us later in the day with his mouth organ instrument and a stringed wooden box he places between his legs. Dekina was blind but nevertheless did not allow his disability affect his life. He turned out to have weaved the best and most beautiful baskets and water strainers found on every Sheria market day. He owned and maintained a large farm which he cultivated and weeded all by himself. His music career had taken him to places like Makurdi, Lokoja and Kaduna. Radio listeners would always increase to louder volume when Dekina Momoh was being featured on a radio programme to a proudly listening large audience. On this wedding occasion he had come to pay his dues as an in-law to the family having married one of their daughters and blessed with two children.

Earlier in the morning, the women had taken over; they washed the bride, dressed her with fresh clothes that had been brought by her sisters from her home and thereafter showered her with gifts of items and money. She left with her siblings after two days.

When she finally came back, as some might not if they don't approve the relationship, after several visits by the women, she was assigned to a sleeping slot on my mat until when it would be considered ripe to consummate

intimate relationship with her husband. In actual sense she might have been a nubile girl of twelve or thirteen but still displayed infantile attitudinal manners. For instance she was not bordered to strip off before us and charge us not to stare at her in such process feeling for those parts of the body that were private to her.

I was to sleep next to the wall as my propensity to roaming the entire mat-spread was high and this would prevent any disaster of roasting a leg in the bonfire that kept us warm during cold weather.

Kasuwa, though displaying such immaturity had attained puberty with signs of a developing womanhood. In her innocence she still slept naked and threw her parts carelessly. Sometimes when we woke up, our positions had taken swaps; we had changed places. At times she wandered into my territory and on other occasions I found myself on her body. The locations of these contacts vary from night to night or repeated themselves. If I found myself on her bare chest, I felt a sensuous sensation that kept me wanting to remain there.

“Keep to your side or do you want to break my mouth?”, she would yell and push me hard all the way back to the end of the mat close to the wall. A little while, when I assumed she must have resumed into deep sleep, I would wander back to get a feel of her soft bare chest.

Afterwards we became friends. She would call me out to assist her in one domestic chore or the other that had been assigned to her by older women in order to prop her into her subsequent role as a wife and mother. Sometimes we quarrelled and fought each other.

I came back from school one afternoon and was helping myself with the leftovers when she suddenly returned from the farm ahead of others. She was obviously hungry and tired. As soon as she saw me helping myself, she dashed into the pantry, finding nothing left to help herself with, her fear for hunger intensified. She lost patience and manner of approach. She came back and grabbed my meal ferociously away. I fought vehemently to retrieve my food until it degenerated into a scuffle that wasted the little food left for both us to have managed by sharing pending the normal afternoon meal. Whether both of us were happy depriving each other of the whole lot or not both of us suffered the consequences of irrationality and remained hungry for that moment.

One day at school, the teacher pulled my hair painfully out and instructed that if I came to school with such bushy and unkempt hair again he would send me back home from the class. I discussed my predicament with grandma and she pleaded with Kasuwa to do a barbing job on my hair if she knew how to.

“Why not”, she responded eagerly.

A pair scissors was brought and she commenced work on my hair or rather was it my head? I could not tell whether the instrument which looked ancient had lost its sharp edges as it could hardly sever any object or it was simply an amateur at work. Kasuwa resorted to pulling the hair off my head until it ached. I stood up in protest but she would not give up.

"Sit down and let me finish this barbing"! She ordered. When I resisted she raised an alarm.

"He will not let me barb him"! She announced.

"It is painful", I proffered my defence in sobs. But nobody supported my story that she was pulling out my hair instead of cutting it with ease.

"Fear! You won't stop this fear of yours even for ordinary trimming of hair. Shame on you"! Uncle Shiloba supported her.

We went back to work and my ordeal continued. She winked at me thrusting her tongue outward and excited herself at my wincing while she tormented me in untold pains as we made progress. After she had been through, my head ached and I felt like live coals had been heaped on it burning with pains and tears rolled down my cheeks. She mimicked and jeered more at me. She had had her day I suppose. But I quietly craved to avenge this cruelly inflicted pain and her bestial scorn. When I got to school the following morning, my classmates laughed at me and my teacher too

teased me. It had been a poor work from a bad artiste. She had designed my head not better than a bedraggled vulture. Having been so humiliated at School, my resolve to avenge became even stronger. I plotted my strategy.

The opportunity soon came. She was in the habit of using my coverlet in her casual moments. She felt good in the multicoloured locally woven piece. This day she picked them eyeing me expecting an objection. I ignored her probing, eliciting looks for objection and feigned my complacency. As she made a dash to the stream, I sneaked behind her evading her sight. No sooner had she dived into the stream than I grabbed my coverlet and took flight home. She cursed! She was now torn in between coming home nude to report the incident for immediate reprisals against me or borrow from those who had gone to wash and save the disgrace of a housewife walking home nude from the stream. I knew the battle lines had been drawn. I took leave from the house even before she could return.

I came back home late in the evening and sneaked right into grandpa's court yard and took refuge. I met them concluding their palm wine communion rite. They didn't mind my late coming as I joined them discretely. But I was just on time to overhear grandma getting restive about my whereabouts. She blamed kasuwa for my absconding.

"He will come back today. I and him today"! She exploded.

"For what are these threats"? Grandma demanded as she rose to my defence.

"He left me stranded naked in the stream"

"Is that all, and what does that mean"?

"Must he follow me to the stream to collect his cloth"?

"Why should you take his cloth in the first place"?

"He should have told me to drop his cloth instead if he didn't approve of my using them. He watched me pick them after all"

"Don't you have yours? You want to save yours and get his worn out on time? He should have stripped you naked on the road, then, you would have learnt your lessons the right way. Is it because he is a child? Nonsense"! My solicitor responded in summary submission and my case was laid to rest.

That seemed to have silenced her! Someone told them I had come back after all and was in grandpa's courtyard. Grandma was relieved but I was aware since I knew her too well, that Kasuwa was strategising her intransigence and recalcitrance. After a while, when she had imagined no one would read any more meaning to the incident and her threat, she burst out,

"A-s-h-a-a-b-a"! She called out in a pretentiously friendly manner, feigning grandma whenever she called me in my pet form.

I played deaf and dumb. I knew from her bellicose manners that she would not give up without a show of it. She repeated the call. I replayed my role as we evolved into this drama. She knew that after the second call and without any response from me, I would be reprimanded for ignoring a more senior member of the family needing my attention for either assistance or something important. Instantaneously however, and ironically to my surprise, Uncle Shiloba perhaps, galvanized by some palm wine or induced by my precarious condition and or against the extenuating argument of defence put by my Grandmother, the Solicitor-General, barked out,

"A'shaba! A'shaba!! Can't you just be quiet even for a moment and let people alone? *Haba!* You know he is with papa in his courtyard, you want him to stop attending to papa for you?". Great Uncle! I smiled within me.

At this time, I thought that her spirit was crushed. She might have wept after all. It was my day at last! But it was dark; I would have winked my eyes and stuck out my tongue at her as well.

## **TEN**

Young uncle watched his wife as she developed into a full grown woman. He often stole glances at her and would touch her playfully when the opportunity provided for them to be close to each other. When he returned from farm and starts having his rest, he would invite her to his room where they would be together for a long time. Nobody cared for her absence at such times. He would request for instance that something was moving in his head, wife should please remove it or he would ask that his back itched and she should scratch such spots. At times we would find him cross one of his legs over her laps while they discussed. The discussions went from afternoons to evenings. And then one day she came out half nude breathing heavily. There must have been a fight!

Sometimes by complicity, the women began encouraging her to spend more time with her husband at evening time. They would deliberately give her an unnecessary message to deliver to her husband such as

“Go and pack your husband’s plates” with emphasis on the *husband*.

“Go and give your husband some water”,

“Take this or that to your husband”.

While she went there, she spent more time than usual. Sometimes she would come out only after we had retired to our sleeping rooms. Then one night, I woke up and found myself alone on the mat. I knew I had lost a sleeping mate.

It was not quite long after this development that what seemed an affront to my sense of our family composition was unleashed. I didn’t know what to make of it as the entire incident took me unawares. One morning after we had woken up, I discovered that young Uncle and wife had not joined in our usual morning routines. His absence was palpable, slicing ominously into my mind. I began to wonder what had become of him and his wife. Were they still in bed? Not a dim possibility. But nobody seemed to bother about their absence. Only the gloom of their missed companionship hung, I guessed, on everyone’s mind. Curiosity took over me but I was not in a hurry to make inquiries. I waited, giving every doubt a chance to prove itself. Later in the evening however, someone came and asked after young uncle. The first reaction was reluctance as to disclosing the precise whereabouts of young Uncle. He and wife had left before dawn for the west, *Badu*, to work on the Cocoa farms owned by the Yoruba people. He had been taken under the tutelage of one his relatively well to do maternal Uncle and would work



for him for the farming season and return for Christmas later in the year. It was just about mid-January.

I was devastated upon this discovery. I had come to admire the young uncle; quiet, gentle and he did not disturb our infantile penchants. I came to like his independence from his parents. He was not scolded or sent on errands like the rest of us. He went in and out as he willed and was never prodded to go to farm or assigned any tasking job. He was happy with his wife. Ever smiling! He was just himself! He knew what to do and when to do them.

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One day, during holidays my mother sent for me as she always does to come and spend some few days with them in her husband's house, my house. In as much as I loathed frequenting their company, I knew she must have had some important things arranged for me for this special invitation. I couldn't imagine what assignment it could be but I accepted to go if it would make her happy after all as I eventually found out that it was just meant to be in the company of my father. I disliked the taunting of her mates; "Mr. Shy", "Shyness, kill him"! On and on they would go providing fun for themselves, with me being their centre piece. Whether it was borne out of goodwill or not, I wouldn't know but I surmise they were more persons who simply enjoyed the fun

of making me shy in their presence. Such were polygamous family set ups. You wouldn't know who abhorred your presence or not as it was not ostensibly exhibited. You only saw a harmoniously knit family relationship that sometimes fell into disagreements, gossips, long faces and open quarrels.

I caught my mother in one of those quarrels one day with her mate as she struggled to utter those words that would counter the brim-storm coming from her opponent to settle scores. She managed, albeit slowly and inaudibly unlike her rival who spoke with professional ease, lashing out louder and enjoyed the effective weight of her verbiage as it reverberated through the compound to the next, attracting the desired impact and attention.

"They said you are the best, carry on madam best". Her opponent charged, loud and clear.

Since she didn't get any reply but silence she fired on.

"Any time there was anything worth doing; you were always the choice for it. They rest of us are fools *abi*, fools? So if you were not here the Abu's family would collapse. *Heeh- heeh*"!!! She added in mock laughter.

I watched my mother imagining if she would ever give a reply and how she would respond at all but she was absorbed in her task, ignoring the ranting of a disgruntled and frustrated woman, I thought. In a snap, as if realising it

was time to retort, she suddenly uttered some words, perhaps out of considered deliberations or rehearsals.

“If you knew how to do anything, why were you not chosen for this task? Ask yourself. After all I didn’t lobby for it. He is my husband, I wouldn’t refuse his assignments. If you were envious talk to him and leave me alone”. It was a slow stuttering response, but it gave vent to a dumb reaction in which case the logic prevailed and projected her rival’s envy.

I discovered however, that our mother gave too much consideration to the feelings of others than her comfort. She never exhibited pride in her abilities, possessions or potentials. She disliked being the centre of a glorious attraction where others stayed behind and watched. She liked the glory of her life but not the pride, glamour or attention that it commanded. She turned down further requests from my father that would make her the centre of attention and gossip. I discovered more incidences as long as the brevity of my stay with them in my father’s house lasted.

My father had a whip for his erring wives and children. The floggings took place in the evenings after meals. He would invite the culprit to his room. Some discussions would commence. Afterwards the swish of a whip would sound and a cry for help would follow. It was always too late for intercessors. Enough strokes would have taken place, enough to instil discipline on the erring victim.

One night it was my mother’s turn. The only time I witnessed it and the only time I made up my mind not to be part of it again; better my solitude with my grandmother than the weeping of a mother’s agony. I was told unbelievably that it made love and the entire relationship more fondly. I wept as she was incarcerated and locked up there in the room screaming for help and the sound of blows that went on inside. Items tumbled over themselves in the ensuing struggle between husband and wife. As I thought of the little baby inside her, our last born, I prayed that she would overpower the husband and the baby should be in safety and would not drop out! But I knew that my Father was such a huge mass of body put together by God which might have attracted the women to him in the first place.

He had a way of approaching them without their slightest inclination to arouse any suspicion to the fate that awaited them. The offence may have been committed over a week and seemingly ignored by him. Then at another day, he would invite the unsuspecting culprit as he does when he wanted to discuss serious matters with any of the wives or children. He would remind him or her of the details of the offence and its gravity. I would not know whether they tendered apologies or argued their cases but the beatings came. It was a disciplinary process I couldn’t behold or understand. It had become a vogue amongst men to beat

up their wives as it boosted their ego in age group while the wife glows in stoicism the attention of the other women. I cut short my visit and left for my grandmother's place.

My mother showed her abhorrence to cruelty and her indisposition to pride, arrogance and aggression, as I came to learn of her weak character subsequently. But she was one personality who wanted to be fair to all in life irrespective of who was involved.

Audu Zeje, my cousin, my paternal uncle's first son had argued with me as to who was elder to the other. In his smallish stature, I towered above him and so I assumed equally in age. He refused to succumb to my subordination of him insisting he was my elder. We quarrelled until arbitrators came and announced our various dates of birth. He was my senior by two months, just two months, but I was bigger anyway. Basking on the euphoria of this verdict, he taunted me at all times, "I am your senior"!

One day we were given some groundnuts to share. Audu, using his seniority coefficient, appropriated three quarters of the share, which I considered was even more than a lion's. This got me infuriated and a struggle with him ensued. It degenerated into a fight. I hit him hard severally and he went down weeping. Our mothers separated the fight by tearing us apart but mum was not satisfied that her own son had taken dominance, victory and glory in a fight that was just. She got a whip and flogged me severally in

order to induce me into a cry, equal in terms to Audu's. It was meant to pacify Audu's mother that both children were crying after all. But I simply would not please her by losing my victory and glory to an induced cry in a good fight in which I just had an upper hand to please an over compassionately weak mother. And this got her all the angrier. But I knew that within her, she enjoyed her son's show of strength to be able to stand his own amongst others but would not just accept the attraction of its pride.

## ***ELEVEN***

“E’W-E-B-I-Y-E”!

“E’W-E-B-I-Y-E”!!

“E’W-E-B-I-Y-E”!!!

Every one called in all directions. Some took the road to the farm others went along the road to the stream. Another group went through Ubutu road while some were in the thicket shouting or rather calling out the name “Webiye”. It was without order! Some actually called out the name, out there in the bush as if they were confronting the “Webiye” physically, adding one phrase or the other. “Come back-o”. “They are waiting for you-o”! “Kondo is crying-o”!

I had just returned from school to witness this confusion in the house. This was not what I had expected to find. The pangs of hunger were tearing my intestines apart. All this now had to give way to the emergency at hand. I was starving and now my condition was about to get complicated.

“E’W-e-b-i-y-e! Come back-O!”

The call outs continued into loud expectant voices. It was a raucous situation. Inside the hut, Webiye sprawled on

a mat supported by a couple of men and women holding her lifeless body into a sitting position. Her eyes were closed, mouth loosely open, with a down ward flowing fluid. They poured her some cold water and spoke loudly into her ears eagerly expecting a response of any sort as from one gone deaf. They asked her questions which she apparently remained silent or ignored to respond. She seemed to be half breathing. They twisted her hands and legs to stimulate her into responding to pain but she felt nothing of the sort as she had gone numb in pain, a state of her unconsciousness.

They poured more cold water on her, getting her to a more proper sitting position and talking emotionally to her for a response. “Will you leave us”? “Are you truly going?” “Look at me”! This went on and on without any reaction from Webiye.

Those in the bush, farm, stream and everywhere were asked not to give up. It had now been about 30 or more minutes of calling. Some began to cry, weep and wail.

“Get more serious!” They pleaded to the callers.

“No one should cry yet”. This was an order.

Then suddenly, there was a grunt, a sneeze and Webiye opened her eyes. She looked around her in shock. She looked at the people in surprise, passed a hand over her face which was now dripping with water. She heaved a sigh and began breathing heavily.

“What happened?” Uncle Shiloba asked.

As she made efforts to answer, she closed her eyes again. The callers who had now been recalled began coming back. Instantaneously, a man came in, still in his farm clothes and cutlass. Obviously, he was from the farm.

“I got to the mango tree, the big one when I heard the call out”. He began his story.

Initially he couldn’t make out the name but somehow he thought it was “Webiye” they called. What was happening? He contemplated as he advanced. Suddenly, there was her wraith walking in fast and hurried movement towards him. And he thought, “this was Webiye!”

“You”! He challenged the wraith that was advancing towards him.

“Are you not the one they are calling? Get back, home!” He had ordered and the wraith suddenly vanished from sight”.

Everyone profusely thanked him as the saving grace that brought back Webiye to life.

Webiye was prodded to narrate her out-of-body sojourn. She claimed that after she came back from farm, she suddenly felt dizzy and, in a twinkling of an eye, found herself approaching a beautiful compound, with flowers and an environment that was well kept. Not even a pin could be found on the ground. The calabashes were too neat and everything arranged in orderly form. Then she saw Kakah

and other persons that had died. Their condition was that of splendour and bliss. As she moved further to step into the compound, there was a tall man, described like the one who had met her wraith on the road who shouted at her to “go back” as she was not yet needed. Like in a trance, she opened her eyes and saw people all around her.

It was a sigh of relief to see her back to life. She became fagged and haggard by her looks and frail body. A hot steaming pap was prepared for her to drink and recuperate from her exhausted condition. Where was she going when she took the road to the farm? If she had not met the farmer returning home, what would have become of her and the household? Questions, nagging questions; I had no answers but went on finding ways of assuaging my hunger condition; devising means on how to get food to eat soon, Webiye having taken people’s attention earlier away from preparing food.

## **TWELVE**

Ruwo Sheneni was apparently deaf or partially so. She strained to hear you even as you shouted louder than usual to get her into hearing you. But she never lost the rewarding sight of her good eyes. Although, she could not appreciate the rhythm, rhyme and lyrics of good music or could she enjoy the velvet voice of the musical icons of those days or could she listen to the fire and brim-storm Sermons and the prophetic message of God's infinite goodness, love and power to amend injustice neither could she listen to the competitive tunes of the canaries and the Sparrows in their morning delight nor eavesdrop on the gossip of mongers, She was nevertheless gifted to spot events even at far distances.

Ruwo, who had finished having her bath, was sun-tanning on the sand, sitting and watching the Children's game. Why she sat there and never went home, I didn't know. She just sat down there, all alone by herself. But fate had a role for her in my life that day. She saw me as I gulped the first volume of water gasping for air and safety.

It was a hot afternoon after school. I had moved out to go for the usual evening activities which might end up in playing a football, cleaning the parsonage or going for a choir practice or catechism classes. I was so excited watching some children playing the *tor-tor-beh - aye* game in the fast flowing *Yimoo* stream. A chaser, *it*, was only expected to tag a member of the crew and was relieved of the chase. The 'catch' refrain took the *it* unawares and he frantically goes for

a tag. The tagged now became the *it*, the chaser. Simple! I watched animatedly as the pursuer chased his prey that now scampered in different directions, some crossing to the other side of the bank in cheerful delight while others dived inside the water only to surface a further distance away. The boys went for the girls they liked so did the girls. I didn't hesitate to join pulling off my dresses as I jumped into the water and fell along with them.

*Tor – Tor – beh – aye*

*Tor – Tor – beh – aye!*

*Tor- Tor—beh-- Catch!*

We scattered in all directions amidst shouts, shrills and laughter depicting our happy moment in an excitement filled game. The chaser pursued his prey in all directions with every one making for escape.

No sooner had I joined the group than the chaser came after me. I had not learnt the escape tricks and manoeuvres well enough. Since I had not known how to swim in the waters, he soon caught up with me. I was now the chaser to pursue others.

*Tor – Tor – beh ...ayeh!*

*Tor – Tor – beh Ayeh!*

*Tor – Tor—beh...Catch!*

They all scattered in various directions. A member of the game close to me was heading towards the other bank of the stream. I gave him a hot pursuit, determined to tag him, I dashed frantically at him. My hand could not reach him, my legs could not find the water bed; I sank deeper. The water overwhelmed me. I had fallen into one of the ditches which were carefully avoided by those who were familiar with the water terrain. I plunged deeper until my legs touched the bed. I struggled up to the surface, gasping for air but swallowed up water. I gasped for breath and groped with my hand to get a hold on an object for safety. There was none! I plunged down for the second time. As I grappled with the situation for the safety of my life, I saw her in a swift and lightning speed, dive into the water. It seemed a moment before I came up again the second time. I was becoming weak in strength. But this time I took in more water both in my mouth and nostrils. I became weaker and helpless with hopelessness.

The third time I would have taken in water would now include my eyes and ears which would have made me weigh as heavy as a lead and drop to the bottom of the flowing stream. I might have rolled on its bed hitting one rock or the other, wedged by a trunk or stopped by shrubs until decomposition of the body started and only to surface perhaps after two days if it had not been found before then.

Suddenly, I felt the grip of hands round my waist that lifted me to the surface of the water. I clasped her head tightly like a vice. It is a sure danger for an inexperienced swimmer to try to save a drowning person. The grip was iron-like, the vice that was not easily detachable. Thus, the drowned and rescuer might be swept away with the tide and add to the calamity.

She walked me straddled on her neck to the bank of the stream. I saw a new world; trees, green leaves, human-beings, grasses. In the immersion where I had been salvaged, all was white, endlessly blurred white. In the intervening struggle for escape, and as I opened my eyes beneath the water, the only sight was the colour of water all around me. She dropped me on the sand, looked into my eyes and my now bulged stomach. She gradually began to deflate my stomach of water with a hard but gentle push, persistently until water gushed out of my mouth and nostrils. Everywhere was still and quiet except for the current of water that moved nonchalantly and endlessly as if nothing had happened and or was simply unconcerned that her victim had been salvaged. Not many had been as fortunate as I was this day. Many had lost their lives in this water which happens as a ritual every year. My playmates had taken to their heels, one after the other and left me alone as they did when they escaped my touch and the tide that swept me away from them. I closed my eyes for a

moment and lay still. Did they imagine I was dead or was going to die? Yes "I was dead but now I'm back to life!" One moment ago we were all chanting, playing and happy together. Now they have all deserted me. "You are lonely when you are dead!"

Opening my eyes, Ruwo handed over my draperies and feeling too dazed, she helped me to my feet. I put them on with dizzying eyes and a frightened self. Too alarmed to go home straight I followed my saviour to her house that has now become dear to me. Ruwo is my mother's cousin.

## **THIRTEEN**

The rains had disappeared and the weather was becoming chilly in the morning, dry in the afternoon, cold at nights and heavy dew gathered on grasses in the morning as

we moved to the farm. The damp in the morning got me into excuses to stay away from early morning farm, especially when we had closed from school for the term. Grandpa noticed my apathy to the chilly dew and would advance with a stick, bringing down the gathered dew collected by overgrown grasses along the path to the farm. Going to farm at this period of the year was leisurely as there was less to do but harvest what had been toiled for earlier in the year. Harvesting yams proved more exciting as one was likely to pick some pieces for roasting at home. More exciting was the fact that we returned soon after we had gone leaving the daily supply for the women to bring home.

As the year wound up in December, harvest activities increased to include guinea-corn, millet and Fish. It was also time to chase rats in the bush or set the whole dry bush on fire for bigger animals like squirrels, grass cutters and sometimes rabbits. This hunting expedition for rats and other animals at times ended in tragedy. One day, there was a bush-fire, burning in the direction of our farm, uncle Shiloba felt instinctively uncomfortable and decided to take a look at the scene of the inferno. But for his quick intervening instincts, more than half of the harvested sheaves of guinea corn would have been charred by the conflagration. He detached the rest from the flames.



At other times, chasing rats and bush animals proved more dangerous as we encountered snakes while digging holes for rats. We usually followed the sniffing instincts of our dog. She would get to a hole and stop, nuzzle it and begin to dig; we knew then there were rats inside. The more ferocious the dog dug, the more the number of rats to be found in the hole.

*Gana'anda*, was the name of my dog, a name which depicted my status in the house as a sojourner. My grandmother had named her so in view of the treatment meted to me on account of my being a non bona fide member of the house, "any how you treated him". She was a naturally trained dog that had instinctively caught in a lot of meat for us in the house on many hunting expeditions. The dog passed by any hole in which there were no animals.

At one of our outings, we saw a potential rat hole; Ganaánda sniffed the hole and quickly removed her snout. We were not convinced she still had her good sense of smell, even for rats' harboured in their territories any more. A smooth and polished hole indicated how frequently a horde of rats had been in and out of their habitat. In the past, she would dig ferociously and we would find plenty rats and kill them one after the other closing the mouth of the hole as we dug along to prevent them from spilling out spontaneously in numbers in all directions. Any rat that got out was pursued, caught and brought by Gaánada. Some were wise as they

made concealed escape routes; and we lost them. As we dug and got closer, we saw signs of their presence in their faeces and soft grasses, a nest for their little ones, we slowed down the process, using a cutlass now and gradually, putting one hand in the hole, we brought out a rat, flung it heavily on the ground. We completed the process by flogging the rat to death with our canes. They made good meal with their tender flesh, soft bones and tasty sauce especially when spiced with bitter leaves. But this day we ignored the warning wisdom and natural instincts of the dog and his antics and followed our inordinate desires for rat meat.

We dug endlessly, one after the other until what seemed to be like their nest appeared inside. We became galvanised but curious. Gaánada, the dog would not come near us in excitement to sniff and dig with her claws as usual notifying us we were getting there soon. She just stayed aloof and wandered away from us.

I had become intimate with her. I cuddled her each time we played together and she liked to play with me, we even slept together until grandma reprimanded me over my obsession with an animal in over indulging her. But I felt pity seeing her outside in the colds and rains. I fed her with my ration of meat-bones and food. She was my closest and true friend who shared the same hatred I endured.

My saddest day came when I returned from my evening games and couldn't find her as usual to welcome me home and to brush my thighs with her furs and nuzzle into my embrace. I enquired. Grandma spoke up as if sensing my emotions as no one else would have placated me enough from the grief that overwhelmed me. She had been poisoned during her outing by some wicked neighbours. I recalled that in a bid to get her disciplined I had hit her hard, injuring myself in the process as one of her protruded incisors pierced into my foot. This was to dissuade her from sniffing into other people's plates and pots. Never the less we had become best of friends. She knew when I was being offended or rather when I was sad. She would sit by my side, in a sad mood too, devoid of her usual playful inanities.

I wept bitterly for her death as I would for a human being and refused to be consoled or persuaded to eat that night, cursing whoever was responsible for her untimely and painful death. They threw her away in the bush without a burial.

As we became more curious about her lack of interest in this hole that we thought inhabited some good meat, we zealously went ahead with our task. Gwatana with his experience deepened his hand into the hole. He withdrew his hand instantly and peeped cautiously inside the hole. He suddenly sprang out throwing the hoe and broke loose into a run, shouting in fright and flight, "Snake! Snake! It's a Snake-

o! Run-o"! We ran forgetting our caught rats until we reached home.

We followed from a distance and watched as Uncle Shiloba peeped into the hole. It was still there. He positioned the nozzle of his gun and emptied the contents of it into the hole with a bang! He must have gotten a good shot as a large, long and massive multi-coloured snake sprang out and sprawled all over where we had been expecting a harvest of rats. He picked a long stick and hit the intimidating reptile on the head repeatedly until it lay still. Using his cutlass, he chopped off the head and loaded the entire lengthy remains into a bag. The sight terrified us even as he roasted it emitting some hissing sound as it burned. He had often returned with big snakes killed from his nocturnal hunting. We now know how he did it. He had always remained a superman to us. We were barred from eating the snake meat until we had developed the second generation set of teeth else we would grow up with multiple sets as possessed by the snake. Such was the case if a monkey had been killed; pregnant women were not allowed to eat its meat as they were more likely to give birth to babies with sunken eyes like the monkey.

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The tempo of socio-economic activities kept increasing daily with the expectation of Christmas celebration which meant more sales and purchases. New clothes, plenty rice, oil, meat, fish and a host of sundry items would be required in high demand by both adults and children.

The intensity of the Harmattan cold had gradually increased. We slept early now and woke up early to form bonfire and warm ourselves until sunrise. Both the young and old brought out their seats and told jokes about the weather. The older ones had their feet marked by deep sharp openings, *gutters* that could hide some bedbugs and cause tear to some fragile textile materials, to a tender skin, or rekindle a dying wound if such legs were to intermingle on the same bed. Some skin turned scaly white while the lips cracked and sometimes bled too like Moses', the goal keeper. Petroleum jelly, the form of Vaseline ointment was always a good remedy.

Often an argument would ensue as to how many days remained on the calendar count to celebrate Christmas. Some would argue fourteen; others would insist it was seventeen days to go. Yet others would speak with heavenly certainty that it was fifteen days to go, indicating the position the moonlight would be found when the celebration date arrived.

The preparations for Christmas had many implications. Foods, mainly rice in different cuisines, fish and meat and

exchange of food gifts all came into serious consideration. For the children, new clothing was of high premium and sensitive consideration. It was a moment I wept like an orphan. My guardians would insist I went to my father's house for my Christmas attires while my father would posit I was more useful to them and should be rewarded with Christmas clothing. He would only provide for me if I accepted to return home to him. I traversed the two houses while they kept rigidly to their opinions. Gwatana and Kondo would regale themselves in new clothes, the sales product for which I was a major contributor but denied its due profits for being a sojourner. Sometimes, two different attires, one for Christmas day and the other for the New Year, would be acquired for Uncle Shiloba's boys and none for Shaba. It didn't justify my hard work on the farm which was quite acknowledged but was unrewarded. I would be consoled with previous year's clothes which Gwatana had used. Since he was bigger, I wore them clumsily with oversized lengths folded at ends for ease of movement. They jeered at me!

One year I braced up and collected guinea-corn from gleaning exercise which was threshed for me and sold to buy the "*egbe*", uniform dress for youths. I was further confronted with having a set of shoes; rubber shoes which burnt your feet when the sun rose in its afternoon intensity and the sharp edges which bruised your ankles sore, with or

without stockings. At its most painful moment, they were reverted to the hands and conveyed home. Mum gave me four pence and with that we headed for the shops and finally picked what was my size but there were no stockings. My request for stockings was not attended to while the days drew closer.

“Three days to Christmas”!

“No, four days”, we argued amongst ourselves.

My stockings stood between a blissful Christmas celebration and me. I wept! At that weeping, one of my stepmother Ra’han, came to my rescue as she gave me one and a half pence for a pair of stockings.

The eve of Christmas was preceded with carols on one hand and cultural plays for the youth who were not into much church activities on the other hand. We shifted from compound to compound drumming, singing and dancing, celebrating Christmas. They told us in the church that the “Saviour is born. His name is Jesus the Christ” and we should celebrate. We were just happy. Tomorrow, certainly, we would wear our new clothes and eat rice in all varieties, tastes and colours which had never been a house menu at any other time but was only reserved for special days like Christmas. On these nights, some went into an alcoholic drinking spree only to arrive at the Christmas Eve Mass drunk, dozing with heavy snores in the church as the Mass progressed. Choir practices, Christmas carols and

confessions took the church’s preparations for the coming of the saviour which climaxed into a Christmas Mass on Christmas day.

*Go tell it on the mountain  
Over the hills and everywhere  
Go tell it on the mountains  
That Jesus Christ is born*

And on such Christmas day, one could hear the resonating voice of Jumai Veronica, Umoru in high pitch tone amongst the choir group. Perhaps this was one of her favourite tunes; you could see the excitement reflecting on her beautiful TV-News face as she took the lead in the choir section.

There was another hymn that reverberated within the church hall. The chorus was sung by the choir group but the refrain was everybody’s tune;

*O, come let us adore Him  
O, come let us adore Him  
O, come let us adore Him  
Christ the Lord*

But there was yet another popular hymn that was so interesting and interested me too. It was in the local dialect;

*E'mechi hwai bu'lelegi*  
*E'mechi hwai bu'lelegi*  
*Ga Jisos she Agwangwama!*

Today an Arbiter, the one who reconciled man to God is born; Jesus is Lord! It was usually a recessional hymn that gladdened everyone's heart as we filed out of church to our homes in immeasurable excitement.

"Happy Christmas"!

"Happy chrissimissi"!

"Happy cheresimissi"! And so on as everyone wished the other.

The excitement of the moment mattered more to us than the faith, freedom, liberty, victory and hope for mankind it professes. It was a moment of unlimited liberty, relaxation and rest from all forms of work. At the end of the Mass we retired home, the December cold lacing through our skin, giving us each a running nose and leaving us exhausted and sleepy.

The next day, Christmas day, was a special day of action; a busy day of numerous activities, an eating day, the bright and best of days. We thanked God for witnessing the day as soon as we woke up, which was unusually early.

Cooking would have commenced in large pots. Undaunted by the morning cold, we rushed to the stream in front of our house, dived into the flowing stream, the water beneath at this time was always warm until you came up the surface to the chilly breeze and this made one hurry his bath. We came back home with chattering teeth, taking protection by lavishly applying Vaseline to our bodies to keep us warm and moist. We do not put on our new clothes yet. The new clothes were reserved for dance time as we would all gather in the afternoon at the market square already demarcated for that purpose with palm fronds used to cover the stands for shade.

The chairman of the *egbe*, youth group and his co executives would have held several meetings and rehearsals to ensure an excellent celebration of the festival. A couple of years back, they had broken away from the leadership of their immediate seniors whom they alleged were misappropriating collections meant for general entertainment and formed their own group. It was a coup that crippled the older generation. Thus a new band was born. The band, yes, our local band went into frenzy of rhythm to prove a point as we took centre stage in a general dance of a new group. Sometimes we recessed into dancing competitions, male and male, male and female, female and female amidst cheers for the best performing dancer. Titus was at his best as a backup band drummer.

This musical potential, he transferred to full scale as a Choir Master subsequently as we grew older.

Coke, Coca-Cola was our most desired drink and we all saved to afford at least a bottle. We drank it with excitement and feigned being tipsy as all other alcoholic drinks would, to mimic the adults we had seen do so. At night, the band led all of us, celebrating in visits from compound to compound especially such that were disposed to giving warm reception in terms of hospitality and generosity in cash which was used to maintain the band and the masquerades that were abandoned by the fleeing Ibo youths, who had yearly used them to celebrate Christmas. We avoided houses that had semblance of proclivity to hostility, stinginess or that were not well endowed financially. The leader of the household spoke through an "echo" man, who amplified the spokesperson. He spoke more loudly than the senior man of the house, thus helping everyone to hear what he said. This helped him from shouting himself hoarse to be heard. Sometimes the interpreter as he was called added fun to his assignment in order to spice up the celebration. He would announce for instance that the man of the house had made a donation of one thousand kobo when he had in actual fact given a ₦10.00 note.

The youths took over the masquerades left behind by the fleeing Ibo and inherited the characteristic arrogance inherent in an Ibo masquerade at such occasion, stampeding

on items displayed in the market showing their lack of respect to other Celebrants. Sometimes the masquerades demonstrated their quantum strength. For instance, it would strike a tree peeling its bark out and walk away with idiotic energy, moving its head proudly from left to right all over the place, getting only restrained from its excessive display by a controller who held a rope tied round its waist. It looked ugly, with a black face and snarling wide toothed gaps that tilted to the left corner of its mouth but yet it was full of colourful delight. We looked forward to seeing these masquerades at Christmas as we followed it everywhere.

There was also the baby face masquerade, purple coloured face, the *wife* to the ugly looking masquerade which we tagged as the *husband*. She was considered the junior; gentle and non aggressive with a permanently smiling face in parted lips which exposed her white teeth. These masquerades also marched from compound to compound displaying energetic dance steps in a rhythm that complemented the gong hitting the ground simultaneously hard typical of an Ibo masquerade dance. We ran helter-skelter to avoid an encounter with the dreadful masquerade, yet desiring to behold its beauty, colour and performance.

The celebration of Christmas continued the following day and those who could afford more than one set of new clothes showed off. The children of more wealthy parents

had up to three new clothes with another set for the New Year and especially for those that had travelled to Cocoa farms, in *Badu*.

The whole period between Christmas and the New Year was a moment for plays, dances, relaxation and fun. Sometimes villages exchanged visits to entertain themselves with their bands and establish affinity among them. Such arrangements often ended up in more private visits afterwards that might lead to marriages between the boys and girls. Christmas was and still is the most wonderful period of all!

## ***FOURTEEN***

The palace of the *Aguma* of Bassa was not more than a flat of three bedrooms. But it had acquired a royalty that elicited awe amongst the subjects and passers by extending to the entire lengths of Bassa land. I have heard about the *Aguma* and the palace, which was fenced round with zinc and the activities that went on within this sacred arena. The police were on guard at the entrance and since police 'caught' and detained people, made the palace more dreadful for us. We had to pass by the palace when we went for National day celebrations such as Independence and Children's days.

I most often wondered what the *Aguma* himself looked like; with all stories that had been told of him or of an *Aguma* in the past. We had been told several stories of an *Aguma*, who was not incidentally a Bassa but imposed on the people by the Colonialist who needed a loyalist to report to him but found none available amongst the Bassa to carry out such treacherous responsibility. They appointed a stooge. He was a Nupe man from Lokoja. He came with his paraphernalia of Office which included a horse as means of his office mobility. He rode on this horse when he went round on visits, tours or inspection of the

land in desire of an appropriate report rendering to his masters. Two other alien Chiefs succeeded this initial "impostor" before jettisoning this negating ruler-ship after series of avoidable catastrophes.

One day in his peremptory tour of the land towards the Eastern part, he saw a beautiful Bassa woman travelling with her husband on foot; he ordered that the woman be taken to his palace. The Native Police pounced on the protesting husband, beating him plum, blue and red until arbiters came and pleaded with the police but blamed the victim for daring to challenge the Chief in his powers who wanted his wife. In fact, he should have been a happier person for a Chief to have desired his wife. After all, he could have chosen to marry any other woman thereafter and save himself the victim of a double tragedy. Three months after this incident the chief was unceremoniously deposed. It was generally believed that the deprived husband had done some fetish things to avenge his humiliation, even though the Chief had been removed based on allegations of extortions and maladministration; another variant of corruption.

In another instance, one of the Chiefs visited a village that had resisted payment of taxes which they considered not only exploitative and inappropriate but also double in nature as was unbecoming of the shrewd habit of colonial agents. Taxes were paid many times in a given year fraudulently under dubious sub-heads. Yet it was supposed

to be a poll tax. He arrived Parau and demanded for reasons why they had refused to pay their taxes. As no explanation could pacify him, he ordered that even the women should be assessed for tax payment immediately. This scenario degenerated into open conflict in which all the retinue of the Aguma's team and his entourage were killed but the Aguma was said to have mysteriously escaped only to request for reinforcement from Lokoja that razed the entire village to ashes. Subsequently, several stories hung on the Aguma's powers and consequently such rulers were considered mystic beings and held in awe.

When we heard that the *Aguma* was to be elevated to the status of a second class Chief by the then Kwara state Governor, Col. David Gbamigboye, a flurry of activity began in preparation until the appointed date. It was an opportunity for us to see the *Aguma* face to face. We all trooped to the venue where a new Staff of office was to be handed over to the *Aguma*. There were various dances and plays. We found Military Officers and government Officials who had escorted His Excellency, the Governor from Ilorin and other dignitaries including traditional rulers from other domains. I assumed these other traditional rulers were those with whom the *Aguma* attended meetings together in Kaduna during their Traditional Council of Chiefs. Kaduna was a far, far away land where they "met with the Sardauna", we were told.



Also amongst those that attended this ceremony were some white men and women. We were not seeing white men for the first time but these ones seemed different. They were not Rev. Fathers that we always saw in their cassocks. These ones carried cameras and snapped everything they saw. Of particular interest was a white lady who carried a miniature baby in her hand. We couldn't just understand. The miniature baby cried when depressed and blinked its eyes when tilted to a direction. But it lacked moving ability of its own except by the handler's initiates. Sometimes it moved a hand up and down but that was obviously too mechanical. It had no life in it. We looked and watched with awe this mysterious baby. Then somebody hissed and said,

"This is not a human being! It is a white man's idol, *i'tete'nue*, a sort of deity. It is their *juju*!" He bluntly blurted out. But it was after all, only a doll, a baby toy!

## ***FIFTEEN***

It was a Sunday Morning. We all got dressed in our best attires. Uncle Shiloba came out in his farm clothes. It was a sharp contrast to our brightly coloured clothes. Out of habit nobody bothered about how neat the farm's clothes looked. After all, you would perspire in them; soil them and sit on the ground with them. You had no care for sand, dust or ashes on them. It ought to be, every profession has its tools. Some farm clothes were never washed until they got torn beyond usage. Such was my Uncle's as it seemed to us rags, that Sunday morning.

He watched us for a while, then went in and brought his cutlass and local gun, always the last item to come out of his farm items in procedural sequence. The hoe slugged on one shoulder, the gun in one hand and the cutlass in another, the right hand always in case of emergencies he would swiftly react to any danger. The gun was mostly used in killing any big animal that strayed into the farm.

But Shiloba also engaged in nocturnal animal hunting with his carbide head lamp; with this head lamp he could see as far as a quarter of a kilometre in the bush at night. We used to watch him prepare his carbide head lamp. He would put the carbide lobes into a small container and add

some water. It would then begin to make a hissing sound. He would cover it and screw into place the other parts, strike a lighter and a sharp light would emerge. The system has a regulator to adjust the beam of the light from short to long distance. He would wear it on his head like Xuma, the South African miner in *Mine Boy* story and off he goes into the quiet, lonely night, dark, dangerous bush and jungles. What if some spirits, wraiths or ghosts began to dance before him out there without anyone to come to his rescue? Or some swaying trees, moving to-and-fro as if controlled by some unseen force, making some imaginable sound causing apprehensible fright. Or worse still some wild animals as alleged that spoke like human beings asking him “please do not kill me”. On days like these, we would pray that he came back home not only with animals he had shot for our meat but also safe from wild animals.

As we always slept off not knowing when he came back, we would find in the morning either a grass cutter, an antelope, Mr. Hare or an animal that would cause a debate as to what name it was identified with. The older men would promptly give its appropriate name.

“You are all going to Church”? He asked as if he had forgotten it was a Sunday which we had all looked forward to.

No one answered him in particular. We went about our preparations for the Church service or engaged in some

other distractions from his enquiry. As far as we were concerned, any attempt to stop our rest on a Sunday and if that were his motive at all, would end up in futility.

“Make sure the *Oyibo* man gives you food there before you come back. Don’t eat my food today. You won’t do any work on Sunday but you eat on Sunday. You are small and of inadequate minds. That is why you are just being deceived by a lazy white man. Let me ask, does he own a farm at all”? He laughed scornfully at his sarcasm exposing his four toothless gums.

Many persons of their age group had found it fashionable to replace their natural front set of teeth for an artificial one sold to them by Dentists. They paid exorbitantly for them as they were told that the artificial teeth were better and cleaner; you could remove and wash them at will avoiding teeth decay. They were also whiter and induced some of them often to indulge in a perpetual smile showing off their newly acquired modern teeth. Uncle Shiloba always removed his own artificial set of teeth except when he was travelling. He wore them just as he wore his best cloths for a journey.

He went on,

“Tell him that Shiloba is asking, where is that his God? You people say he died and rose. That is what you do at *yister*. Fools! The white man will just tell some stories and gullibly you follow. Won’t you use your own sense?

Have you seen anybody that died and rose again? And after three full days"! He shook his head and hissed ruefully at our innocence and impressionable minds.

We all kept mute. He had raised a question that made us admire our new found love the more. No one had died to rise again unless it was an apparent death. This made the religion exotically, different from his traditional belief. The maze, wrapped in a jig-saw puzzle and delivered in a mystery represented the birth of Jesus Christ which in the same vein manifested in His rising to life after His death. He came in mystery and He went away in mystery.

It would amount to stupidity contesting any facts with him now as it might get him angrier. All we knew was that there was no farm work for us that day and nobody was going deny us that privilege. The worst moment would be when he returned from farm. As we would welcome him from the farm he would utter some inaudible words as his response in protest to our presumptuous behaviour.

At an earlier time we had gathered in our usual evening relaxation to tell stories before everyone would retire to his room. He had asked this rather stupid question,

"They said the white man is a *fada* and that he has no wife. So, who does he sleep with"?

"Nobody", I replied.

"It's a lie!" He said." Have you visited him at night? Just tell me. They are deceiving you people. You don't seem

to know. And yet they keep saying he has no wife. Who said so? When the wife will meet him at night time will you be there"? He hissed and folded back his couch and left in self annoyance.

But how could I convince him that Rev. Fathers take the oath of a celibate vocation and do not marry for the sake of the gospel. As a traditionalist, he believes all men must marry. As he had always been of the opinion that, if one had not been born, how would generations continue to survive and sustain the human species? We had told him that not all men were born to become celibate for the sake of the Gospel. Out of such tradition emerged the protestant churches whose priests and pastors picked wives for themselves to sustain their lineage and generation from extinction. Between the two of us therefore, I wondered who was actually being deceived; he that was ill informed and refused to believe that Rev. Fathers, as a vocation, do not marry or I who could not convince him why they could not marry and that some chose to remain so for the kingdom of God. On days that the Gospels read were about the doubting Thomas, the Rev Bro. Conrad would emphasize "blessings on those who believe even though they did not see". I concluded the debate with uncle was over. He has lost his blessings for refusing to believe in absence of empiricism. I rested my case in peace!

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When I took ill with fevers, and this could have been malaria or typhoid as there was yet any medical equipment in our local clinic to determine the nature of an ailment, I resisted every attempt to get me any traditional healing methods. Herbs were for those who were not Christians. Orthodox medicine was for Christians. We had been told that all traditional practices would lead us to the damnation of a burning furnace in hell and deprive us of the bliss of a heavenly attainment. I wanted heaven where we would sing the Alleluia songs of doxology with all the celestial beings.

I deteriorated daily in that condition. My body became searing hot and my head popped to bursting point. No amount of cover-lets assuaged my feverish condition. I went back to the local clinic; the female Clinic Attendant counted some tablets in three different paper sachets and handed them over to me with instructions as to how to administer them into my system. She assured me that I would be well soon. One of them, I guessed, was chloroquine tablets; its bitter taste told me so. I feared it would itch.

The following day I grew worse with my knees buckling but yet recalcitrant on any traditional alternative treatment as suggested by my Uncle, Shiloba. On the third day, at sunset, he came quietly to my side where I laid still on the mat unable to move and spoke to me gently.

“This medicine I want to give you has no occult in it. You don’t need to slaughter a hen or pour any libation or wine on the ground to any deity. We will just boil these leaves, ordinary leaves”. He said this with emphasis as he paused, then continued.

“The boiled water would be used to prepare pap mixed with two raw eggs. That is all. You drink it and get well! You would have gotten well by now if you had not intransigently resisted my treatment in preference to this your *fada* medicine. They say its *oyibo* medicine. Where was its potency all this while, where?” He waited for an answer but I kept quiet contemplating my dilemma. He however, added persuasively.

“What do you say?” He needed my committed affirmation before embarking on his herbal preparations.

“Okay”. I said, struggling in my dilemma with tears, knowing that my faith had diminished and failed me.

My faith had betrayed me and put me to jeopardy again. When we were old enough and began attending church, the first test we encountered was how to avoid eating meat offered to either *ijile* or *edengu* idols. We had made known our stand on that matter. We would no longer participate in their idol sacrifice or eat any of such foods offered to their deities. We were now new creations.

One day we came back home from our sporting event, food was offered to us with chicken meat for a

change. We had imagined that one of the chickens had taken terminally ill and died thus providing us with a chicken delicacy for a change of our evening diet. We did not suspect any foul play of an idol sacrifice to have taken place as we would have been aware by the preparations a day or two before such sacrifice was offered to their deities. Half way into our delightful meal however, Uncle proudly announced that, there was an *ijile* sacrifice while we were away. He had simply forgotten to inform us before we had begun to eat. He tendered a profuse apology which was apparently laden with some tone of mockery. We all sat stupefied, unable to eat further. But as it would amount to such uncanny behaviour, no one attempted emitting the contents we had just voluptuously consumed. I became irritated with this treachery. It was a night I spent in hazy thought of hell fire. That Saturday I confessed my sins to the Rev Father explaining how I had eaten meat sacrificed to the family idol not out of intention or desire but out of a trickster uncle. He handed me my penance and assured me that God's mercy would not send me to hell as I make attempts in future to investigate the source of all my foods before I ate them.

I was still contemplating this fall when he went about collecting some herbs into a pot. He had obviously brought them from the farm with a conviction that I was going to succumb to his herbal treatment since my condition was worsening in intensity and dimension. I had now begun

vomiting and lost appetite for all kinds of food; not even any amount of meat, fish or seasoning served me appealed to my taste. I was numb with hunger and all foods smelt to upturn my stomach inside out. I became lighter, haggard and pale.

The preparations were soon over and the pap was prepared out of guinea corn powder. It looked dark brown, a colour inherited from the boiled herbs. I took it hot. The taste was tolerably, not as bad in the mouth as the chloroquine tablets I had the previous time. It was medicine after all. Soon I began to sweat and now regained a little strength lost from my lost appetite. After two days of little or no food, one was bound to be fragile and incapable of keeping steady. I breathed heavily and laid back still on the mat and slept off.

"How are you feeling?" I heard a voice beside my head.

"It has not changed for the worse", I managed to say.

"You will be better by tomorrow", he assured me with a concerned tone in his voice and I knew he genuinely meant well for me.

The following morning, I woke up earlier than usual. I had slept for close to twelve hours. I stood up stronger, much stronger; dizzying and staggering were less than experienced as in previous days. Grandma had prepared

my medicine. This time I drank it with a relish of hunger than the curative potent it was meant to serve. By evening though slightly still weak, I had found my playmates again. I was however not allowed to go to school or expose myself to any hard work no matter the confidence of strength I thought had been regained.

I survived!

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Uncle Shiloba was quite an adventurous personality. One afternoon, after we had returned from the farm, a strange man came into the house. They went into the room in the heat. We concluded it must have some matters of high confidence and importance to keep away a man from the cool shade offered by these large trees behind the house. When uncle finally emerged from his room to rejoin us there was a smile of satisfaction on his lips. We knew he was excited about something. The strange man must have taken his exit through the side door as we didn't see him leave. We waited for him to brief us but he went into other issues keeping us in suspense and his excitement to himself.

The secret of this meeting didn't take long and was soon exposed. It began one evening; he gave me an already used bottle of procaine penicillin injection and requested that I should get to the chemist shop to buy a similar

medicament. After meals, he asked for a bowl of water to be brought to his room. When I got in he was unfolding from some rags, sets of needles and a syringe. With these he lifted one needle and carefully placed it at the tip of the syringe. It was long and terrifyingly big. He sank the needle into a broken bottle that contained what should be the distilled water. He transferred the contents into the bottle containing the powdered substance I assumed was procaine penicillin, piercing through the thick rubber seal. The bottle contents turned into liquid milk. He removed the needle from the syringe and shook the bottle vigorously, up and down and sideways with the dexterity of a trained medical personnel. He sank the syringe into the bottle again and carefully drew out the whitish liquid with a slow pull until the bottle was empty. He replaced the needle with another one. He sighed with relief as one who had achieved a feat of medical discovery. We waited for his next action. Instantly, he noticed our curious eyes and ordered us to leave. From our vantage position, but which was too dark for us to see, we heard some groans and there was silence. We now realised that the strange man had brought in for sale this medical equipment for treatment of patients at home and Uncle Shiloba had just treated himself by administering an injection into his body. We dreaded this knowledge as any of us could become victim of his new found profession; this unlawful medication. We wished he

stuck to his herbal methods of treatment. But he believed like others, that it was a therapy which made them strong on the farm. Many however, died out of complications thinking they could treat any ailment with procaine penicillin.

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I kept sleeping on grandpa's bed with him since my transfer to his room during the renovation work on grandma's hut which leaked in the last rain and water was collected into a calabash placed under the spot on the floor. I would play football with my mates or would be running away from some masquerades as I hit him in the leg, stomach, at times on his face and even dragging his coverlets away from him as we did with Kasuwa when we slept on the same sleeping mat. He promised to have me bound if I did not stop boxing him in my sleep. An incidence happened subsequently that consequently made his threat realistically, compulsorily and strictly adhered.

We had just returned from school one day when we saw grandpa, earlier home than usual, leaping on one leg. His right leg hung on air along the ground with the support of an adopted walking crutch. As soon as he reached the wall of his hut, he went down with groans. He had been stung by a scorpion on the farm. We got him a mat spread out there under the shade cast by the wall and its roof. Intermittently,

he gave shouts of pain. The consoling gathering agreed that it must have been some wicked species of scorpion that had stung him.

Uncle Shiloba got home from his farm somehow late and swore to deal with the stubborn scorpion that would not just ease its pain away. He waited until dusk and brought out a spirally loop bound cloth, unwound it and took the contents inside. It was the items I had seen when he injected himself. Grandpa was not allowed to sleep inside his hut as traditionally, they believed the scorpion might decide to crawl on all the number of wood used in constructing the roof before departing the body and this would lead to prolonged pains and delay the healing process. So we stayed outside with him, having now moved him into his courtyard with a bonfire beside him. Uncle Shiloba came out and asked him.

"Where is *he* now"? He was referring to the increasing pains of the scorpion sting.

"He is in the groin" placing his hands where the pain was most hurting.

"Let us go inside", Uncle Shiloba confidently ordered, equipped with his weapon to deal a terminal blow to the pain.

They helped grandpa to his feet supported by Grandma and Uncle on both sides to the hut. I followed with the lamp held high at my chest level. Uncle lifted his

syringe and needle, moved behind the leg that had been stung, felt for a soft spot on the buttocks, found it below the hip near the divide and sank the needle whole hog into it. Grandpa gritted his teeth and grunted in pain.

“The *water*, injection is not entering”, the farmer turned medical worker muttered.

He pulled the syringe out and complained to no one in particular that it was blocked. He selected another piece. This time, he pushed in the liquid with a seeming force to the last drop. Grandpa grunted but it was over just like it began. They took him back to the mat where he laid in pains. I began to empathise with him. Although we dozed off once in a while as sleep was out of the question that night, we all had to keep vigil with the scorpion stung patient.

The following morning grandpa could not get up. The leg had become too heavy and stiff with more pains. Uncle assured him that he would be alright by evening. The next morning he became worse and the dimension of his condition degenerated to a level of concern and fear. Grandpa had been partially paralysed on the leg that was stung and injected. That began the agony of grandpa. He had to be brought out for bath, morning and evening.

While this lasted his numerous In-laws took time to come along with their mates to harrow, weed and cultivate grandpa’s farm. Their wives too including my mother paid their visits one after the other as they took time to attend to

him. Three months went by and with the administration of hot degree of water; morning, afternoon and evening, a little respite began to dawn on the ailing aged grandpa. His recuperation was gradual. He began taking a walk with a stick around the compound until he regained walking strength to continue his noble and most prized profession as a farmer.

Also, while grandpa’s pains lasted, my sleeping position was transferred from his bed to the floor before I did more damage to the already bad limb. I however resumed my sleeping position when he felt better careful not to hurt the leg or any part of him by my sleeping habits; playing football or trying to escape from one pursuit and thereby end up roaming from one corner of the bed to the other. Sometimes when left alone on bed, I could invert the head position to the feet. By the consciousness not to hurt grandpa and be moved back to grandma’s hut, I overcame my bed roving propensities.

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I did not always know when or how many hours grandpa slept in a day. At times he would wake up at night, go out, come in restless and commence a monologue;

“Before day break, hopefully I think, there would be rain” or



"So, wont it rain for now? The tender crops and plants are withering off..."

"There is some lightning up in the east, hopefully it might rain..." He would go on soliloquizing.

I often agonised with him knowing full well that my source of food came from his enterprise on the farm and is the source of his peace and happiness without which laughter would be lacking in his company. One night he came back having inspected the sky for his weather forecast and announced that the moon and the sun were fighting.

"What about"? I asked without knowing the nature of the fight.

"Come and see", he said.

We went out. The full moon at sun rise was half being eaten away.

"Why are they fighting"? I thought I should ask him again.

"The sun today followed the moon's path on its way back. You see, each day as the sun rises from the East and sets in the West, it will return at night to the East again to commence its journey the following day. It never gets tired! But this day it didn't take off on time, so the sun met on the way with the moon. They are now fighting."

"Will the sun kill the moon"?

"Well, not completely, the moon will shine again when the fight is over. Sometimes too, the moon fights the sun

when it crosses its way going back. But this is not frequent because the moon is always afraid of the sun".

I wholesomely and cheer-heartedly, not only agreed but also accepted this submission and the knowledge I had acquired. But I wished I could witness, one of those days, when the sun and moon would fight in broad daylight. The eclipse of the sun rarely occurs.

Some nights, grandpa would just lie there and respond to some distant beating of drums especially where death had occurred in one of the villages. Custom demands that an elderly person who dies, which was a sequence of death, be buried out of broad day light. Consequently, all dead persons were buried at night with differing ceremony accorded to the males and females.

"Are you sleeping"?

"No"

"They are bathing the corpse..."

At another moment he would say,

"They are taking the corpse to the grave..."

At the change of every rhythm, he would tell what event was taking place out there, many kilometres away. It was mystery to me.

"They are lowering him into the grave..." And afterwards, a gun would explode.

“It’s all over; the undertakers are out of the grave”!  
And the grave was usually more than seven feet below. He would add with a deep solemn sigh,

“One day it would be me”, moving one of his feet from side to side. At such scene, a moment of sober reflection would descend on me. I didn’t want him to die like Kakah died. I wouldn’t think of myself dying. It was old people that die! And I liked him dearly. He should live so that we could continue to enjoy this company.

## ***SIXTEEN***

Our farm was about a four-kilometre distance from the house. Grandpa and his son, Uncle Shiloba made sure they went far into the bush to get the most fertile of lands. Lazy farmers farmed at the backyard of their houses where the soil had been tilled loose without being fallowed and thus became weak and yielded less produce. Both farmers farmed at the foot of a big hill which required that we trekked about one and a half hours daily to get to our farm. The result and the energy sapping trek were rewarded with good harvest annually that made both men smile to the barns and market. We cleared the thick bush and harrowed the land for corn, such as millet, beans and maize. Yams were planted in heaps of soil. The mounds gradually diminished in size as the rains wore them out and ponds of water developed beside them whenever it rained.

When fertilizer was introduced, grandpa was slow to accepting this miracle substance that made crops grow faster than they naturally would, insisting that it made crops lose their original taste and vitality. It took a long time in persuading him to embrace this new technique of farming that encouraged and excited farmers. He would then apply fertilizer only to those sections of the farm he would consider for sale in the market but not for his consumption. The women had complained that tiny lumps

of yam still found after being pounded was because of the fertilizer applied to the crop. He had picked quarrels with the women warning that if his pounded yam was not smooth, that is without those “pebbles”, they should consider leaving his house on their own and stop him contemplating an option of getting himself another wife who can cook him a fine meal after a hard day’s work. The lumps killed his appetite.

He would wake up early in the morning and take a dash into the thicket before anyone could ever wake up. He arranged his farm implements inside his *kuroro*, a woven long basket he slung over his left shoulder; he never forgot his bow and arrows in their quiver against any eventuality with an enemy or dangerous animals. He hardly ate in the morning but took his breakfast of roasted yam after a little farm exercise. This would equally become our lunch until we came back in the evening at sunset. The yams tasted differently according to their species. Some were sweeter than the others and became even sweeter as the dry season wore off into the rainy season.

Planting yams excited us. This was a period when yams were scarce but became sweeter. Grandpa would immerse into a mound of sand, a well nourished big looking yam and select skinny and haggard looking ones for our roasting. We complained! Sometimes he ignored us as if he never heard us. At other times he would respond in one aphorism, “The size of a ghost is determined by the size of

the corpse”. He knew where he would harvest the bigger yams for the market.

“If you ate all the big best yams today, you would diminish your tomorrow”, he would add in another proverbial phrase. He needed such wisdom to keep being not only a successful farmer but also a surviving one who would guarantee the availability of food all round the year for his household. But we disliked his idea of a better tomorrow when the pains of spare grass piercing through our hands, fingers and even the eyes linger on during cultivation and weeding. At such times we administered on the eye salted water as our medication until one got better.

I recall a joke that was often made of a neighbour in a Bassa community. In actual fact it was a true life story. In one particular year rainfall had been sparse and this affected farm produce as harvest dwindled. Consequently people’s feeding habits altered. Many now ate once in a day and even then never had enough. But for the hardworking Bassa farmer he always had a reserve from previous year’s harvest. A Bassa man and his non Bassa neighbour became friends out of share convenience. His friend always calculated his visits at meal time. And at the prevailing shortage of food, there was need to keep a reserve after each meal for the rest of the day which was now impossible with the constant visits of his friend. One

day he visited as usual. His Bassa friend had just begun eating his meal when the friend announced his presence.

*"Ga'afara dey"*! Excuse me. He bellowed.

*"Ee'eh"*! Yes, responded his host tucking his plate of food away, scooping and stuffing some into his mouth. In the process his visitor heard the clicking and clanking of spoons and plate. The visitor lost his patience and salivated asking,

*"Sa ne meh hure-hure?"*

*"O-oo! Sa ne meh hure-hure nno"*, replied his host.

It became legendary for one who was scooping food from a plate in such manner. *"Sa ne meh hure-hure?"* "What is scooping there in a plate"? And the other will jokingly answer, *"sa ne meh hure-hure nno"*, "Nothing is scooping anywhere".

In a similar circumstance, one day my uncle sent me to deliver a sheave of guinea-corn to a non Bassa neighbour having taking plight of his lack of food. The neighbour was profusely thankful and later on came round to express his gratitude. He genuflected before my uncle in appreciation. After he had gone, my uncle muttered a statement to the effect that "if only the world were to be this tough, some persons would have learnt to respect the hard work and dignity of others".

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For many years we went to farm; it never occurred to us to take a walk beyond the boundaries of the farm. We were always engrossed in demonstrating our hard work as was pleasing to grandpa or uncle. One day, when farm work had reduced to mere picking of yams, we were tasked to fetch fine stretched grass to roof grandma's hut as it had begun to leak during the last rainy season. We trudged into this assignment, sickle in hand and went right under the foot of the hill. We discovered to our amazement that at the base of the hill was a flat mass of land but a bit stonier than the plains grandpa and Uncle Shiloba farmed. Gwantana, our eldest led the way. As we sickle and scythed fine grass, we went deeper and deeper in search of finer ones.

On the first day we had gathered enough for two days load. On the second day we sickle more but had time for sports. We found a dried brook with heavy fresh groves thick as forest. We went underneath it and savoured the cool breeze that blew to and fro in a movement that was almost palpable. It was quiet except for the noise we made stepping on dried leaves. The birds hooted, the monkeys scampered in fright of the intruders who had suddenly appeared on their territory uninvited. Large monitor lizards crawled lazily away and some drank from the ponds ditched by running water. We suddenly became apprehensive as we suspected that some other dangerous reptiles, the

cobra and other bigger snakes could be cohabiting within and we took our caution not to disturb this eco-environment. Sneaking through the shrubs we went across the valley and looked towards the top of the hill, beckoning us to come up. Gwatana advanced his movement edging forward. We followed the steep, locating a flat spot for our feet and steadily got to where a lonely tree stood. A bit weary now, we found under the tree another good shade and convenient rocks for our sitting positions. We looked back to see how far we had come. Whoa! There was grandpa on the farm; we saw the tiny road to our house. In trail, we saw the roofs of our homes, we saw the zinc roofs in the village, and we saw the plains! It was breath taking! It was exciting! An awesome sight!

We didn't waste time to advance our movement upwards. This time, we aimed the top of the high hill. It was an adventure that couldn't wait for another day. Slowly but steadily, we got to the top of the hill and looked around us; we could neither believe our eyes nor ourselves. What a wonderful world! What an awesome Creator! What a God! This time around we saw beyond our village which was now at our base and we made notice of every compound. Further we saw other villages left and right of us. In a farther distance, we saw Lokoja! The so much talked about city. We saw the rivers Niger and Benue and where they had their intercourse in a confluence that had gotten us numerous

stories of how boats had been pushed by a mysterious force to derail a course across either to Shintaku or Lokoja.

We didn't know how long we stayed up there pointing to one visibly known spot or the other; the market square and the tree inside it, the church and the road leading to **this or that village. Oh! We thought of ourselves all alone on top of this hill;** undisturbed by errands, scolding Uncles, domestic chores, women disagreeing with themselves... I thought of Peter, James and John on the mountain with Jesus, Moses and Elijah in the transfiguration Biblical story. We found spots to sit and feigned dozing off as the breeze, different from that which we experienced at home caressed our bodies into a lullaby. But we were truly worn out after the climb. After what seemed to have been more than a rest, we rose from our reverie in full realization that we would be looked for; our protracted absence might have cast apprehensions on grandpa and uncle that we might have been attacked or devoured by some wild animals, we embarked on our journey home. We had been on a paradise altitude and seen the awesomeness and beauty of God's marvellous creation.

The journey back had less strain and stress but appeared even more dangerous than climbing to the top. We little realised the risk we had taken by climbing that far. We couldn't trace our exact route but we knew down was our destination. So, we just

kept descending holding unto one shrub or the other to keep our feet steady from sliding down. The little rocks didn't help matters; as soon as we stepped on one it skidded off while we held tightly unto one shrub, a bigger rock or a bunch of grass. As it was becoming obvious that we were in more serious danger using our feet standing upright, we went down on our buttocks, tracing a wedge with our feet and hands, sliding slowly down to the bottom of the hill. Everyone was now quiet. The excitement of the past minutes in a paradise of our sort had given way to an impending perilous descent, capable of somersaulting one to the bottom of this stubborn deep, steeply sloppy mountain, which was becoming an unending ordeal. Sweat began to drip out of our faces. It was time to pray for safety.

Kondo, the youngest of us was fast ahead up in a sudden movement that presumably suggested an expert in hill climbing but was ostensibly being propelled by a force that was beyond him as we watched him racing down in a jiffy speed that was abnormal.

"Kondo-o-o-o-o-o-o"! Gwantana called out a caution note.

It was too late. We watched in shock as he plunged face ward, hard unto the ground and began rolling uncontrollably, pummelled by rocks and shrubs until he got to the bottom of the hill. There was silence! All was quiet now! There was no cry from Kondo's end; no groans and neither was any movement heard. He must have died! We

began to weep silently. Gwatana would have more to blame, being the eldest for allowing the adventure unto the top of the hill in the first place.

"Kondo-o-o-o-o"! He called out again in-between sobs.

This time around not to sound a note of warning, but to find out if Kondo were still alive. We hurried on our buttocks still careful to avoid another disaster. We found him at the basement, covered in a pool of blood from head to toe. We touched him for breath, he opened one eye covered in blood and lulled back to sleep. He had rolled severally to get his head spinning for a long time. Relieved that he was still alive, the task now was how to get him home in good time to be attended to by elders better than we could. Gwatana backed him and we headed home. His mother wailed as for one who was dead.

After several weeks he was scars from head to toe. We never beheld the beauty of Lokoja and the confluence point from the hill top again.

## **SEVENTEEN**

Between September and October and from February to April each year fish in its freshness was never in short supply. This major source of protein, delicacy and tasty sauce for meals provided pasty tissue for a sweet savouring menu. Various methods were used in catching fish from its source; both the stream and the ponds located away from the village were veritable sources. Depending on the suitability of the occasion, fishing nets, hooks, strainers, spears and fish traps were used to get fish for domestic cooking and sales. Catching fish like in any other human endeavour to satisfy man's taste for hunger, had since ancient times been pronounced tasking and of course risky but rewarding in its pleasures, sport and of course, economy.

In September, when the waters overflow their banks and spill to the creeks, fish could be caught along these outflows by laying nets as unsuspecting moving fish would be caught in them. Gwatana and I would go up in the morning, lift the laid nets, staked by pegs at short distances to give strength to them against waves and bigger fish; we picked out fish from the nets, some of which might have died. We picked out the good from the already rotten ones while we hit those still alive to weaken them especially the "*Kurungu*",

the ones Hausa would call "*mungu kifi*", wicked fish. Its specie is popularly noted for its painful stings which had injured many fishermen. As the water drained out within two weeks, we moved to the streams with our hooks; short and long *threads*, lines. With the short thread and its hook one would catch smaller fish from the shallow waters while the long thread could get you bigger fish from the deeper water which could drag you into the water and got you calling for help.

We dug earthworms early in the morning when they were still close to the surface of the earth before they got deeper into the soil as the sun heated up the surface. This might require more labour to get just a few. As soon as we returned from our major outdoor activities; school, farm or sometimes church, we picked up our hooks, and it was time to have fun with the fish. Both the short and long lines have their respective advantages. Sometimes we attached to the line a sinker whose blinking into the water indicated that a baited prey had swallowed the hook and in the process of escape the sinker began to deepen into water; and the deeper it went the surer you were for a catch. Simultaneously, you jacked the hook upward to the surface, into the air and to the land, killed it by hitting it hard severally on the ground before unhooking it else it might sting you. Some unhooked inside the water and we lost

such ones while others unhooked in the air and got forced far into the bush. We went after these in desperate search.

At times, we considered some fish wiser as they ate the bait from sides; loosed it completely and your hook came out frustrating your efforts, empty of both bait and fish. We changed positions on noticing that the fish had either discovered our tricks, have been overfed or that a number of them have been caught while the rest had fled their aquatic location. We looked for where the water current was low and partly stagnant or where there was a shade from trees that would attract the fish to a habitat and a resting position. In the process we went down the flow until we got tired, hungry or the bait exhausted. Sometimes we lost our hooks to bigger fish or to an object which broke the lines and we lost out. We usually went with spare hooks anyway in the event of any of these casualties.

With longer lines we stayed on one spot staking from the cliff. We tied a metal at the tip of the line near the hook. The hook went far into the deep water when propelled and shot into the air descending far into the water below. The flowing current suspended the bait in the hook in between the bed and the surface, visibly juicy and attractive to the bigger fish. Holding the line with your fingers you felt when a fish had swallowed the bait and struggled to break loose. The more the stress on the line the surer you were for a catch. Yet still the more the resistance the bigger the fish. In

excitement you pulled in fast motion with both hands the line and the fish to the shore. Sometimes it swayed from side to side in resistance while you pulled up to the shore. When we got too frantic we slid through the slippery cliff into the water. Some fish broke off the hook while pulling them off shores. We lost such ones.

We caught different species of fish; tilapia, cat fish, electric fish, even the wicked *kurungu* which gave us tough times to unhook. We seldom caught crabs, big Cray fish and shrimps.

Since there were so much fish at such times of the year, we were allowed to cook our small pieces and still enjoy the bigger fish caught by uncle from his fish pond. The women provided free seasoning and we practiced our own culinary undisturbed.

Occasionally, chemicals were used for fishing until it was out-law and became an offence for any group to catch fish by poisoning. *Gamalin 20'* or any other local substance of serious harmful and disturbing effect was administered to the aquatic kingdom. Poured at the upper basin, as the water flowed downwards stream, the fish got disturbed, became weak and gasped for survival. Men and women with their hoop nets went for them amidst cheers and fun. It was like a festival but afterwards, the water would be unsafe for drinking until after 24 hours when the poisoned



water had flowed innocently into rivers Benue and Niger and eventually found its place at the Atlantic Ocean.

Having been adequately instructed by the town crier, repeatedly of the inherent dangers of drinking the unsafe water until the following day, the danger of poisoning was averted. People stored their water a day before the fishing festival. The fish itself was not automatically safe for eating, it was thoroughly washed, the intestines spilled out of the fish and thrown away before being cooked with lots of red oil which neutralised any other poison left. Such was the danger but every precaution was taken to ensure that everyone was safely out of danger.

Infantile disposition! Why I ate the small pieces of fish in their raw sweet taste baffled me. I nauseated until only blood came out of my bowels through my mouth and nostrils.

But I survived!

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Uncle Shiloba had a fish pond where he harvested fish every October. The labour was exacting from August through September but the reward was adequately compensating. He would catch large collection of fish in different series,

specie and sizes. At such moments, he took a permanent domicile in the creeks, about fifteen kilometres off the village all alone in a little tent he made for himself under a big tree which he cleared free of shrubs, equipped with all his needs and a gun as his weapon of defence. Sometimes they brought him palm wine from the forest. He stays there close to a month with occasional visits to check his farm. We visited him very often when the women went to cart away fish he had caught to the market for sales. He stored the fish in a big strainer where he scooped them out on market days. We ate fish, infants as we were, to the bursting discomfort of our bellies; sweet, large, boneless and juiciest parts of fish, the head, the middle or the tail, were all available for the eating. In this creek environment, there was no need to share fish; you took what you wanted from the pot as often as you could without hindrance all through your stay.

In spite of these pleasures and fish delicacy privileges, I was never tempted, not even with all the trappings of free fish to pass a night as others did with him in the forest. The silence, interrupted only by the noise made from birds, wild animals like the buffalos, elephants, monkeys and other animals sent chills through my spine. At such moments we climbed tall trees and watched the wild animals especially the Buffalos move in their tribes along their sacred paths.

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About March and April, there was always one fishing expedition or the other in the ponds. Gwatana picked me on a bicycle on one of those expeditions and we went through the rough tiny path encumbered by sand, shrubs and dried hard *fadama* terrain. Eventually, after what seemed an endlessly exhausting and painful ride, we got to the pond with our spears and cutlasses. Some other persons in their numbers had gotten there before us. The sun was already blazing hot at about 11.00 o'clock. But we knew that as soon as orders were given to commence the exercise, and once we were inside the water, its cooling effect would assuage the heat that seared off our skin.

The orders were eventually given by the organizers and we all dashed with our spears into the pond which had been covered with weeds. Inside this water, several aquatic animals could be found; reptiles, insects, water plants and of course fish; of different species as well as sizes. Occasionally, we encountered dangerous snakes, routed from their abode in escape or chase of its intruders and the fishermen scampered in all directions. The *real* men however, went after it. Men and women had been bitten in the past by these snakes; some survived while others died but man would not run away from the search for a means of his

livelihood; life consist of several risks and dangers, and fishing for livelihood was just one of such.

The insects, sometimes a colony of red ants, got into ones groin and only then would they start feasting on their prey. A victim would dash frantically out of the water to the shore, strip hurriedly and unconsciously of being nude to get relief from his tormentors in a macabre dance of the forest.

We jumped into the water with Gwatana. Now there were many spears thrusting in and out of water. It was a blind thrust into the water per adventure, your spear pierces a fish; you bent down into the water with one hand holding the spear handle and the other traced the end of the spear to locate your hit. You lifted both spear and fish simultaneously to the surface and killed the live fish with a cutlass before it escapes back into the water. Lucky men killed a bagful of fish.

I watched in amazement as much fish was being killed. Gwatana had killed quite a few but I was yet to make any kill. I was becoming frustrated as I thrust my spear in vain. My spear would not just hit a fish. I wondered if it were my novice performance in this exercise or just ill luck that was responsible for my inabilities. I prayed, yes, I prayed. "God give me just one fish to roast and another one for the priest at the parsonage". And we went on dangerously behind each other. Since it was energy

sapping, you rested when you got tired and resumed thrusting in and out of the water. I kept close to Gwatana to observe how he did it.

“You felt in your spear, if it had hit a fish, it would make a movement which gets the feeling transferred into your hand and you knew you had hit. Then you confirm with your hand beneath. Sometimes, it might have hit a shrub, a stick or even a snake”. He said.

“But for a snake, the feeling you got in your hand was always different. It would be a slow twisting and twining movement. So you must always be careful and instinctively, don’t always rush at any feeling for a search”.

He went on, demonstrating with some few thrusts into the water until I felt well coached into becoming a super spear fisherman.

We kept advancing deeper into the water covered weeds. I followed Gwatana in toe. And all of a sudden I felt I had hit a fish at last and pressed harder to steady my spear from losing it.

“You have hit me!” Gwatana groaned.

I was still absorbed in my excitement of a fish hit that I didn’t hear him well.

“I said you have hit me!” He repeated, “remove your spear!”

Shock and embarrassment first overwhelmed me which subsequently led me to agony and shame as I broke

down completely in helpless tears. My God! Why did this have to happen? I prayed to hit a fish, I got a human foot. Why? I kept weeping while he groaned and gritted in pains. We had to go home but how would we make it home? He was too big for me to convey even on a bicycle, what with the sandy, tiny road and its sharp meanders. Someone offered to get him home on a motorcycle while I rode the bicycle home. They found him a shade and his treatment commenced immediately. Some untrained medical commentators were of the view that the foot should be impaled through for a quick healing process as hot water would pass in a thoroughfare in the perforated foot. Others suggested the contrary. The leg had swollen up. No one feared or even thought of tetanus on the foot but he now had to be lifted from one spot to the other.

He remained like that for the better part of three months while the farm work suffered. He was, away from all pretensions, of immense assistance to his father, Uncle Shiloba on the farm unlike Kondo, his younger brother. I had no excuse for laziness now. I worked hard to complement his efforts and compensate for his absence from the farm. Nobody blamed it on me, nagged or reminded me of the incident, nobody talked about it. It was simply an accident and considered as that. But within me was pain unexpressed for inflicting such a magnitude of injury on Gwatana, my Gwatana. He got well after all and

life resumed its normal course in the house and on the farm.

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A moment of sobriety enveloped the house. We were not allowed to make noise, laugh or speak out loud. We had become irritants shoved away from the elders' gathering.

"Go to the women's side". They ordered us to move away from them as more male relations began to make their assemblage in grandpa's courtyard.

Each of them wore a moody appearance but nobody wept or wailed. We were relieved that no one had died but apprehensive of a serious inherent calamity. They were simply silent and spoke in low tones. It sent us into somnolence. The women too had gone on a talking holiday as they went about their domestic chores mute. We had no choice but to obey the prevailing atmosphere and fell into obedient silence and spoke quietly without arousing any cause for reprimand. The men spoke in low tones late into the night in grandpa's court.

The following day they went to farm as usual but void of the normal boisterous excitement. Everybody kept a moody behaviour as if they were scared of something. We later found out what all the hullabaloo was about.

That evening, they all came again and gathered in grandpa's court. Abraham, one of Shigaba's sons, the spokesman of this sad convention, had ridden on his new brand Suzuki motor cycle straight from wherever he went to the house and his head covered with white mist and dust. He was greeted as one hero with great tasking achievement. Everybody seemed to have an attachment to him to hear what things he had to say. More than two women had offered him cold water at the same time. They empathised and sympathised with him and he responded in expressive delight enjoying the accentuation he received. Other members of the household trooped in immediately in a rush even before he could settle for a sit. Everyone gathered around him in grandpa's court as he commenced his narration. Members from other compounds joined too to hear the story of his adventurous journey to a far away unknown land. This time around nobody cared for our presence any longer. We snuggled to vantage position to have a clearer view of what was to happen without being pushed away as Abraham began his story with everybody listening, with rapt attention you could hear a pin drop. Any distraction was reproved immediately and Abraham continued his narration interjected only by demands for specifics. When he was through, some let out cries of helplessness and hopelessness while others simply sat still, speechless and absorbed in the fate that had cruelly crept

in like a miasma into their lives with little or no respite of redemption.

Musa, the elder brother of Moses the goal keeper, also one of grandpa's brother's sons, had gone out with a group two weeks earlier on a hunting expedition right into the jungle, a thick forest. According to the report of the incident, he had seen a monkey behind some shrubs, aimed a shot and got a good one, always a good one at that, at such times. No sooner had the gun exploded than there was a groan from one of their colleagues who said

"You have killed me - oh"!

On realizing what had happened, that he had taken a shot, not at a monkey as he saw or as he had imagined but a human being, his colleague, Musa took to his heels in fright. The rest of the party didn't see him and the other colleague. When they returned home, Musa had concealed the incident but one of their colleagues was missing. Giving chance to doubts, after two days a search party was engaged to go to the forest. The horde of flies gave up the decomposing corps to the search party. They knew what had happened, it was not new. It happens once in a while in a pastime of this nature. There was an accident. He was buried in the forest as tradition demanded in such a mishap. But someone had gone to the police. After preliminary investigations, Musa was picked for murder and remanded in prison custody at Idah. A lawyer was hired to plead for manslaughter since it

was not a deliberate act except that Musa had not confessed about this sordid act, his misfortune one might say out of fright. It however, remained a felony in the eyes of the custodians of justice. Consequently, after several sittings he was thrown into jail. The house silently grieved his sentence and we never saw him again.

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## ***EIGHTEEN***

I did not know her really. I did not even know her name neither did I know her husband nor where she lived. But every morning on our way to the farm and as we came back home, she was there on her farm, close to our house, moulding the soil to transplant some cassava sticks. She had a baby about five and six months old. He was either strapped to her back or kept under a tree while she tilled the soil for food that would be harvested in another year.

Two peculiar concerns always drew my empathic attention altruistically each time I encountered her on this voyage which ordinarily was the exclusive reserve of the Bassa man's profession. Because of the amount of stamina required for a successful great harvest in farming, women's part was merely reduced to fetching firewood and attending to the domestic needs of their families. I observed that she went through a terrible ordeal everyday and worst of all with little to show for it at the end of the day to make ends meet. By my count she could hardly cultivate ten cassava ridges in the whole day under sun and slight rain. Real farmers do not run away from light showers except when the rains came in torrents.

To compound her ordeal, the baby cried most of the time and was left behind shrubs for shade and comfort from

the scorching sun. But that would not placate the baby whose cry at times, the mother would deliberately ignore to enable her give more attention to cultivating. I became obsessed with a burden of pity to bail her out of this trauma.

I recall at a more tender age, mum had left my younger sister, Helechi, under my care, instructing that she would soon be back from the farm. In the interim she should be given her food if she began to cry. I accepted this responsibility with zeal and began a playing session with the crawling baby. Soon afterwards she began to manifest gradually the symptoms of a cry until it became full blown. I felt she was hungry and as instructed fed her. But she would not eat. I gave her some local toys to play with, she would not play. I sang for her as I saw mothers do, she was not placated and would not listen. She rather increased the intensity of her self-known protest and desire for which I found no discerning answers. I had exhausted all available panaceas to her seeming problem and was not getting positive results. My nursing confidence began to fail me and my abilities buckled. She cried, wept and worsened into a wailing. I became helpless and miserable for an incurably uncontrollable baby; I burst into cry in self-pity. Mum came home rather late to find both her baby and her nursing brother crying.

Now, as we passed through to our home each day, I would imagine or assume the crying baby must have been probably hungry, sick or stung by some wicked, inconsiderate and inhuman farm insect. At times out of crying fatigue, strapped at the back, the baby lulls in response to the ritual movements of a farming mother in a drowning cry of a child's body mechanism. Choked with this misery, I said to myself, "something must be done to stop this woman's ordeal and the baby's agony". And that *something to be done*, I told myself, would be done by me.

I estimated the hours it would take me to cultivate the entire farm which would probably take this mother farmer another three months to complete. I strategized when I would cultivate the entire farm without her notice and without giving myself up as the one who did it. I knew I could do it in less than four hours but I must undertake my adventure in her absence and remain anonymous. This opportunity could provide itself on a market day when she would have left for the market as she and other women always did, and I would take over the farm work.

The plan excited me but I had to perfect it in such a way that no one would suspect that I had done it and bring it to her notice. So, I devised a strategy that would perfectly keep me particularly unnoticed and remotely unconnected to what was to happen to her farm.

Peter Koro was our neighbour's son, a bit younger than I but capable of shielding me from the assignment I had undertaken for myself. We had always farmed together in the past. He liked to go to school but his father insisted he must always follow him to the farm else, he would have no food to eat. He staggered his school attendance and was an acknowledged truant. He worked hard in the morning for the father and in the evening to complement his school fees and pocket money just like I did. I therefore, sold a familiar idea of farming for him in one evening and he in return would do the same for me the other evening. It was easier to get much work done through this process as you both competed on who showed better ability and thereby encouraged each other to work harder. He bought the idea but I reminded him that mine would be on a market day after attending his turn. He liked to go to the market; all the same he accepted my proposals.

We ended his turn and the next day we went to the mother-farmer's farm. He wanted to know how much I was being paid for the cultivation but I let him know that I was doing it for free and wanted to remain anonymous. While market women and men passed by we went to work and in less than three hours we were through. I was relieved of a serious burden that had bothered me for many weeks now. I went home happier than ever and slept smiling to myself.

The following day Peter Koro was just on hand to give me a narration of the woman's reaction to the whole mystery that had taken place in her farm and life. I was however, made sober by her reactions or rather over-reaction.

She got to the farm and discovered that every each of the farm portions had been cultivated. She clasped her hands to her chest, with a gaped mouth went round the farm in shocked expression.

"How could this have happened"? She restlessly, moved round and round the cultivated ridges, from one corner to the other watched discreetly by Peter Koro.

"The spirits of the dead came over night to cultivate my farm"?

She became like a confused fool.

Her assumption to the spirits from the dead who might have assisted her on the farm didn't go well with me. Peter had adhered to my instructions to a detriment. I was not a spirit and giving glory to the dead and not to God was never my slimmest contemplation.

But why did I want to remain anonymous after doing a favour that should have gotten me profound appreciation and won me admirations? I imagined the mother farmer coming round to our house in the evening and going down on her knees offering a thousand "thank you", extolling my kind heartedness to the weak and vulnerable farmer like her. Then after she had left, a session of talks would commence.

My uncle's wife, Webiye would descend on me with all her venom of hatred seeking her pound of flesh with the opportunity I would have cheaply provided her.

"You will go out there and help people you don't know while you ignored those who cooked the food you ate. If it were not a big fool like you who ever does such a thing? You didn't receive any money. Worse still, she didn't ask for any assistance from you. And you just went to somebody's farm cultivating all over the place unsolicited. What if anything had happened to you there, what would people say? What took you there? I don't know why my *husband* keeps harbouring you in this house when you should be in your own father's house. One day you will bring trouble to this house, I know..."

And she would keep on ranting in such verbiage magnifying the event into one who had committed the most heinous crime of humanity in order to drum up attention and whip up sentiment to get Uncle Shiloba grieved enough to take immediate action to repatriate me to my father's house. Grandma would usually remain taciturn only to ask me later why I did what I did.

But how could any of them understand that my heart went out to a baby's cry whose mother turned farmer ignored his cry for attention; how would they know that the man hours wasted by this mother turned farmer produced little or no results every labour day. They would have



instantly forgotten how we had been jointly assigned to cultivate and weed up their farms every month to enable them pay more attention to domestic activities at home whereas this poor mother had no one to assist her in same way. They would forget how grateful and happy they had been when we cleared, made ridges and maintained their farms at various moments. Instead of acknowledging my role for an act of charity, sympathy, kindness and having a vulnerable heart, I would be scolded for being foolish and idiotic. Against these backgrounds, I preferred the status of anonymity. After all it is said to fall in love is romantic but to live in love is mysticism. This mystery perhaps led me into what I did.

## ***NINETEEN***

My mother came on her usual visit to the house, her father's house. She was heavy with a baby, the third after me having lost the baby who was to be my immediate younger brother. Helechi came next and now we were expecting another baby. She delivered all of us in our grandfather's house except for our last born Guma, who was born in our father's compound and who stubbornly abhorred the name and rigidly prefers to be called Ziporah, a name she neither knew the origin nor its biblical history. Why she resisted being called Guma; meaning king, I do not know. She was named after our paternal aunt who had passed on a couple of years before she was born. Perhaps she had misrepresented the name for the aged looking and wrinkled aunt who was described with tough adjectives hence she loathed the name with a passion. She could go into a fight to prove her objection to such identity. This behaviour further reminded relations of the attitude of an aunt called Guma; a fighter and quarrelsome individual who did not brook indiscipline, which was why perhaps she

abhorred the name as a female. She became a cyclical victim of the old woman's replica and a quintessential character of her intolerance.

We all put up with calling her Zipporah to avoid incurring her wrath. As such grandma called her "Sopo", "Osopora"! Better still others call her "Zupora". It acquired several pronunciations as it appealed to the convenience of various tongues as long as you desired to remain in good relationship with her. Whenever Kasuwa brazed for a fight, she called her "Guma" in an audibility that invoked and elicited visible pains from Zipporah's facial expressions. She became grandpa's brother's wife helpmate as was common with our tradition. Children were gifts from God and were extended to the aged and barren women to assist them in whatever capacity to assuage the pains of their loneliness, childlessness and sense of sorrow especially in breasts that never suckled.

When mum arrived that evening, she was to me like every other woman but acknowledged as my mother. She stayed many days with us.

I returned from school one afternoon, it was a Friday and women were gathered around with my mother in the middle. She was at the centre of a drama. Some were holding her to an upright sitting position. I saw pains on her face but children were not allowed to come near their gathering. They drove us away. She sprawled on a mat with

both legs spread apart. She tossed her head from left to right while she groaned. They expected the baby to drop but he would not just come. They relocated to the back of the house where a shade had been cast by the wall of the building. She sat there. The labour was becoming delayed and protracted. Somebody suggested that Shigaba, grandpa's brother, mother's uncle, should be informed and brought to attend to her condition immediately. He came and in his mouth was busy chewing some object, observed her, touched her tummy and said,

"The baby is still far away. Let her be for some time. I will come and check her later".

He left and we found him taking his palm wine tapping materials and headed for the forest. He ignored all apprehensions and entreaties to stay back and attend to his patient. He only consoled them that he would not take time in coming and would soon be back. But they knew better as he stayed three hours long while mum groaned in labour.

When he came back, he marched to where mum was sprawled on her stool supported behind by two women. Nobody now cared if the children were there or not. Danger loomed for a woman in labour which was becoming protracted; only safe delivery now mattered. So we observed all the actions in our curiosity. He looked at mum in the eyes and shifted his gaze to the belly, nodded his

head in approval as if affirming to some invisible signs of timeliness. He went back to his room humming, probably induced by some palm wine. He came back with a substance he chewed in his mouth again. This he blew into mother's tummy, robbed some on her face and squatted in front of the labouring woman. He was not making incantations but was audibly speaking to the baby inside;

"Come out...! I say come out"!

He placed his hand on her stomach and went on.

"Come out! You have stayed too long! Come out now"!

He took a distance away from her and squatted again. This time he now used his forefinger, pointed at the tummy ordering the baby to come down.

"I say come down"! He brought his finger down as he spoke.

"Come down", he went on.

And spontaneously, as if obeying his command, there was the cry of a baby, a baby boy. The entire house went into a jubilant mood. They took the baby, severed the cord after tightening the lower part. Coming from the warmth of the bowel, they sprinkled some cold water on him; the baby cried the more, even as they washed him perhaps in protest to the harsh treatment he was being given as a reception for him in a world that is so unjust, unfair, and inhuman to the weak and vulnerable persons. When he stopped crying I

knew he had strategized on how to overcome, conquer and to triumph over the difficulties, unfriendliness, hatred, hardships, violence, poverty, incurable ailments and pretensions of man on earth and to live in love, peace and tranquillity.

Pa Shigaba went back to his hut. He had never failed in his midwifery profession and must be proud of yet another achieved feat. He became popular by these achievements within his environment and was always invited to deliver mothers of their babies whose labour were becoming protracted and uncertainty hung about their safety and that of their mothers. Pa Shigaba was on hand to bring smiles on the faces of such danger-prone families. He would come back with live chickens as one of his price tags or just a prize for his professional prowess.

He combined this profession with palm wine tapping activities and paid less attention to farm. Sometimes when we were free, we followed Shigaba to his palm wine depot, into the forest where he had cooking pots, oil, pepper and salt to cook his food and attend to his palm trees producing the best wine for sale in kegs. Shigaba would climb tall palm trees where we saw him from a distance in a sitting position like one big bird. He would scoop the wine from the pot he had set to collect the droplets from the tree into a keg and then lowered it with a rope. We would stay at the bottom of the palm tree on the ground to receive it,

loosen it and tie another keg where he still had more left up. Sometimes, the rope broke off mid way and the keg came crashing to the ground with all its contents. He would encourage us to salvage the spoils from wastage into our drinking capacity better than the spillage to the ground. Titus and I would help ourselves as much as possible to some doses of the spilling palm wine. At the end we turned tipsy and dragged our way home with detached palm fronds which we made broom bunches for our school handcraft.

Pa Shigaba often brought a complimentary keg home and got a complimentary purchase from grandpa and Uncle Shiloba.

Palm wine tapping was a seasonal profession since palm wine became adulterated during the rainy season because of droplets of rain water which seeped its way to the pot. Shigaba did a little stint on his small farm and drifted back to his palm wine business as soon as the dry season resumed. Once, he fell off a tall palm tree and broke his ribs. Every profession has its risks and so it is with the palm wine tappers. For about a whole year his noble profession was put at bay but he soon got back to the trees immediately he sensed he had recovered enough.

Some times when he returned back from "servicing" his palm trees in the evening, he was goaded by excessive connoisseurship to serenade his popularly known concubine, perhaps to settle scores with his only remaining wife after a

rift. Serenading was not part of the Bassa culture but when Pa Shigaba got induced with palm wine, would sing in praise of his love for the other woman as he saunters home in the evening. That night we knew he would spend most of his time with grandpa in his court and share his food.

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It was the eighth day; the baby was to be named. Nobody had the right to this privilege except my father. He came early that morning, took the baby and told the mother,

"This is Matthew".

Grandma almost chewed her tongue.

"What name was that? Umatuuu?" She had expected to hear such names as Zeichibu, Gata, Webiye etc.

"No grandma, they said the name is Matiyoo" The others corrected her.

But there was no argument about that. No one could change the name. Father had spoken and he had his reasons for naming his children with such biblical pedigree. When he named the last girl Zipporah, it was a tongue and teeth clashing pronunciation. Grandma protested and stuck to calling her Guma. But when the child grew up, she preferred the name given her by her father. Pronouncing it at your tongue's convenience was more comfortable for the intransigent girl. And now there was a *matiyoo*; Matthew,

the Gospel writer! Whatever were his intentions for naming one of his sons Matthew remained his prerogative.

Jewish names were becoming the vogue in naming children away from traditional names which distinguished them as “children of light”, “the people of prayers” and not the “people of the world”. Adult converts also picked new names such as John, Abraham, Thomas, Lazarus, Luke, Timothy, Michael; like our young uncle, to set them apart from the children of the world. Probably that was how my father too came about his name, Peter.

A more zealous group relocated away from their traditional settlement and formed another; christening such new dwelling as “Rome”, thus preventing their white garments from being tainted with traditionalists’ stains. So were those who took wives in the new religion. They were enjoined to get wedded in the church. On such days the grooms, usually dressed in suits whose sleeves, at times got to the tips of their fingers and the bride dressed in white lace material, and wore some seemingly over sized high heel shoes and walked clumsily as they dragged their way in a procession home for the reception with the congregation in escort singing *Halleluah Hossana* Hymn. Sweat poured from their faces.

Subsequently, after a month, my father came back with friends to “wash off blood from his In-laws’ hands”. He had ordered a lot of palm wine and entertainment for this

purpose as tradition frowned at the inability of a son In-law to saying a “thank you” for all troubles undertaken in the course of his wife’s delivery in her father’s house. This nonchalance could translate to a lot of consequences for the son in-law.

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## TWENTY

Sallah celebrations came twice in a year. I looked expectantly to the activities of our Muslim friends as they celebrated either eid-el-Maulud or eid-el-Fitri. Like Christmas celebration, each Sallah festival for the youth was a period of fun fare. They took over the same square in the market place, barricaded by twine rope, staked all around the secured piece of space and shaded the arena with palm fronds.

After a period of thirty days' fast, sallah came and called for celebration. Perhaps they had a better organised form of celebration than at Christmas or just because they simply had music stereos for their band that made an exciting difference. They looked somewhat more modern than that of the Christmas boys and girls who still used animal skin made drums. These were gotten by putting a fresh skin of an animal over the mouth of a broken earthen pitcher, tied firmly, allowed to dry before shaving off the hairs to make it smooth. They produced sounds differently according to their sizes as either lead band or back-up band when hit by tiny sticks.

The Sallah boys, as we called them, had it better to entertaining themselves with the Lps brought from the cities.

The artistes ranged from Chief Ebenezar Obey, Sunny Ade and Victor Uwaifor to some locally waxed albums. But the one that was the most sensational crowd puller was Sunny Ade popularly called King Sunny Ade. There was no party hit without the Yoruba King's music dominating jubilant dancers. His music was reserved for the crescendo, when the crowd of boys and girls had gathered and was then played intermittently afterwards to light up any dull creeping moment and the get-together would come alive again.

Between Chief Ebenezar Obey and King Sunny Ade, I had always found it difficult to choose my best artiste. My father had a turn table; he lifted the needle and placed it at the exterior end of the turning black plate. Suddenly, the machine, connected by some tiny cables to speakers, placed over a large unused water pitcher gave them a booming sound that exploded into melodious tunes of music. He had various Lps packed in his collection. They ranged from Haruna Ishola, the Akpala music Chief, who incidentally was my father's favourite to Isaac Dairo, a.k.a. I.K. Dairo; *zo mu tofi Bauchi!*. For me, Haruna Ishola's music sounded archaic, void of guitar instrumentality and was too dull for my entertainment. But not to dad, he sat there with his friends and sang along, acknowledging the lyrics of his artiste. When Haruna Ishola released his, *"Ile Oyibo, Otutu Mini Mini"* album, it became a great hit for our

elders, especially those who had been to Cocoa farms in the west.

There was also Ayila Omowuro, and even some Indian music, *la m-a-a-a-h, love in Tokyo* which I liked to listen to so much. They were many other artistes found in my father's collections. The Indian album was however, my sacrosanct music which met so much of my music desire and I could trade my hunger for it. Chief Ebenezar Obey; thrilled me with his "*Kete kete*" release. I would pick the Ketekete photo album and exhale the picture of Chief Ebenezar Obey, holding a donkey and smiling broadly alive, expecting an appreciation from me. "*Ketekete Moloko*"! Slow, with gentle beats; drums and guitar complementing each rhythm carried me to higher plains of pleasure, delight and entertainment even without understanding any of his lyrics. And then came, the enchanting *iwa ikako kpe aremi...* which drew me conclusively, to the kind of music I would listen to when I ever grew up. Ebenezar Obey it would be!

At either Eid-el-Fitr or Eid-el-Maulud, two characters mesmerised me when they danced especially to the music of Sunny Ade, the juju music king. At the hit of "*Ekilopo Mode*", *Mudi* and *Oil*, nick names, who incidentally were friends, danced themselves to frenzy. While Mudi was fair complexioned and shorter, Oil was dark and taller. They complemented each other in their physical appearances and added their dance steps to it. When they rose up to the

dancing stage, we knew we were going to be entertained. They picked their dance gradually and accelerated to a crescendo of gyrating dance steps, body twisting and sharp movements where every part of their bodies responded to the guitarist manoeuvres of King Sunny Ade.

It was hard to tell between the duo who danced better; *Mudi* or *Oil*. Most persons chose Mudi who swayed in gentle body movement, easy steps and displayed a natural talent for dancing. *Oil* on the other hand lacked flexibility, but displayed strength, tact and introduced new dancing steps for any change of guitar tune from the indefatigable maestro, Sunny Ade, to my utter admiration. These two sent us into cheers, thrills and ecstasy with young girls on their trail as they competed to out shine each other, getting us wonderfully entertained and exhilarated. We would watch the entire dance which mesmerised us into late night and wish for another performance the following day which knowingly, had been adjourned for the next Sallah festival.

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We trooped excitedly to Edward's house. We hurried along the road as we expectantly and eagerly wanted to see this new discovery. It was about six o'clock in the evening and the distance was not too far from our house, half a kilometre one would say. We found that other boys too

who were in surprise expectation against what we had heard had also gathered to see the wonder that was fast becoming our technological world. We were all curious and we made efforts to see through the window which Mr. Edward had generously and gleefully thrown open.

Somebody had told us at school that there was a radio, no a box, in which unlike the radio we had all marvelled at human voices which could be heard but could not be seen, this new radio was different. You actually heard and saw the people talk except that you could not touch them neither could they hear you. I had heard about a television but had never seen one. Before it was a fairy tale and we all came out each from his house to confirm the story and satisfy our curiosity.

As we hung out on Edward's window, peeping to see the box which now was emitting a blue light, sometimes on tip toes over shoulders and more often only one eye had viewing access to the box as the second was blocked by an equally desiring viewer; we tried to get a glimpse of the reality that had been told us. We saw only dotted tiny spots in miniature form all over the screen, there were no pictures and no voices came up. Only the hissing sound from the speakers attended to our ears. Some were of the opinion that it was drizzling inside the Television as such we could not see any pictures. But Mr. Edward in his earnest desire to satisfy our viewing curiosity, tried to adjust the antenna pole

erected outside for clearer signal reception and visibility. We watched him as he turned the long bamboo tree from southern position to the north, to the east and west with the hope of locating a good reception signal for our viewership. In vain he tried and finally gave up to the frustration he was being subjected with the poor reception quality and told us to go home that the television Station had closed for the day.

Tomorrow was yet another day, he told us invitingly as he shared in our plight and disappointments.

We were there promptly the following day. It was better! There it was! Some frogs and lizards were talking like human beings. It was a sesame street programme from Jos television station. We watched animatedly too as the news was being read. It was true what we had been told. Seeing human beings, which we couldn't see on radio, was a real technological wonder.

I didn't get to see television again until we got to secondary school. But here it was a film projector that brought my first cowboy film experience; brisk with the pistol and careless with life. The number of deaths recorded in that movie gave me an impression that only a few white men would be alive eventually.



## ***TWENTY-ONE***

The broad way leading to the parsonage was straight and about 500 meters off the main road. It was adorned with flowers and palm trees on either side at equidistance of 10 meters each from one another giving it an outlook that was exclusive and distinct. The road went directly to the front door of the massive storey building where Brother Conrad Con, would open the door to welcome his visitors even before they ever knocked. The parsonage was surrounded by several trees, a seeming forest that gave it a cooling atmosphere and freshness of air. Separated by that distance away from the rest of the village settlement, it became a serene environment for a white man's dwelling. The white man as we were told hated interactions with black people which he called distractions. This depicted the Western sense of Bro. Conrad.

"Yet he came for us. If he doesn't like us he should go back! Why would he see us as a distraction? I think he see us as his inferiors", objected one of the school teachers in one of their sessions of argument in school one day.

"How could he think of us inferior? My history class tells me that they are as mortals and cowards as we blacks are. Read about our exploits in both the first and second world wars".

“Let us leave him alone. He is entitled to his racial prejudice just as we are entitled to our own xenophobic reactions”. They argued furiously one after the other.

Conrad made sure that the leaf drops were never swept but left to dry. As soon as one stepped into the compound, Conrad heard your movement loudly betrayed by the dry leaves. Security, you might wish to say was his reason for not sweeping away the neem tree leaves that piled dried or just a life style. Thus, before you came knocking at his door, he opened the door and waited for you with his template question.

“Whant do youn want?” He would ask in his European French accent which made parishioners conclude that he spoke through his nose.

Bro Conrad took many of his visitors not only unaware but also abased them with a hospitality that was strange and uncommon to the tradition and culture of the people, if not to most African societies. A visitor or a guest to a house was first of all warmly welcomed, offered a seat, given some cold water to restore strength of one’s exhaustion from fatigue and then his host made inquiries as to the well being of those left at home. The host was never in a hurry to dismiss his guest except he was pressed for one engagement or the other. If the preliminaries were getting protracted or delayed, the host would ask “why, what brought you here”? It was rude manners to ask your guest on a visit to your home

without exchange of banter, “What do you want” as Bro Conrad would always ask irrespective of the familiarity and, of course, if he was not expecting your visit.

Uncharismatic Bro. Conrad, a Canadian missionary priest of the Catholic Church, short and stoutly built, would always ask us in demeaning routine, “what do you want” each time we went there to assist in keeping the parsonage clean.

“We want to work”, would be our chorus answer.

He would disappear shutting the door on our faces while we kept wondering if he heard us at all and what would be our fate. After a while, he would emerge with sharpened cutlasses and hand one each to all of us, leading us to a place he felt was in need of mowing.

The parsonage chores varied from one form to the other as was needed for the convenience of Bro. Conrad. Sometimes, we watered the flowers, at another time we trimmed them, packed sand or dug a rubbish pit when the incinerator collapsed. We worked till the evening’s Angelus when we scrambled to knell the 6: 00 pm bell. The huge bell was hung facing the road. It was knelled peculiarly at 6: 00 am, 12: 00 pm and 6: 00pm every day.

*Gbam! Gbam!! Gbam!* A pause!

*Gbam! Gbam!! Gbam!!* Another pause and

*Gbam! Gbam! Gbam!!!* The last pause!

This last pause was followed with striking the bell by number of hours of the day. In the morning the bell would be hit six times and in the afternoon twelve times. It went far and wide inviting parishioners to the “Angelus Prayer” and got non parishioners unofficially informed or reminded about the hour of the day. The bell was also knelled but differently for emergency summons which signified more often than not the death of a member.

At the end of our chores we were gratified with one item or the other which kept us itching to always “want to work”. Bro. Conrad paid us both in cash and kind. Sometimes he gave us a penny each, second hand clothing, cake, pamphlets or Holy pictures. He never repeated his gifts until after a wide circle of different gifts had expired. He had special reward for those he admired most. You had the privilege of going to work in his bedroom or of his holding you close behind him and rocking you to his members without being abusive. For those he disliked their manners, he lifted them above the ground holding both ears or smacked them hard on their buttocks as punitive measures for one misdemeanour. Afterwards he would dismiss us.

“Ge way: Ge way”!

The circle replicated itself the following day until our relationship became intimate, and we gravitated into Altar Boys, Errand boys and to a friendship which we cherished

and made us weep when he was transferred first to Canada and later to Zimbabwe on further missionary assignment.

During his missionary activities in Bassaland, Bro. Conrad rode on a *Mobile-let* to all the nooks and crannies of the land preaching the message of Christ, Jesus the Lord. Little did we know what he preached about; Jesus the saviour of the world. We accepted, after all that was the reason we went to church but more fundamental, Sunday was for us a holiday from school and farm work. It was a day we wore our best clothes and sang hymns with the choir. Nonetheless, the teachings propped us to attitudes which shaped our conducts later in life.

We attended morning Masses or service slated for 6.00am for which sometimes we had no idea of hour of the night or morning. Waking up so early, perhaps 4.00am, we would only discover that 6.00am was still a few hours away. We waited outside the church premises for time to slip by before the arrival of Bro. Conrad to commence the early morning service. We organised ourselves into a team to wake each other up, from house to house once it was approaching dawn; in the rains and harmattan, when the nights seemed longer than days, we arrived the church premises hours before dawn for morning Masses excitedly when we had a visiting priest. And we waited in the cold for Bro. Conrad and his co-priest to trek from the parsonage, about 300 metres to the church, light the lamps

in addition to the perpetual Eucharistic lamp. We also lit the altar candles for morning bible readings, worship songs that went croaky and prayers that led us to chanting the *Benedictus* antiphon. We were all part of a zealous group of converts, youths who desired to live a holy lifestyle pleasing to Jesus who died for our sins unaware of the intervening power of God's love and mercies.

We attended Benediction which was always in the evening of every Sunday. It was a solemn moment for reflective adoration that somersaulted us into a Spiritual realm while in Latin hymnology. As we sang the *Tantum ergo sacramentum...*, Godwin Okafor's voice went out hoarsely loud above others vibrating through the half-filled Church hall in a loose consonance with others. Mr. *Godwanya*, as he was popularly called by the natives, was sometimes faster and at other times slower without a rhythmic sense of self control. A feat of laughter usually dragged the Latin hymn to a grinding halt. He made comedy whenever asked why he always attended Benediction; he answered that he liked to sing the *Tan tum ego* song, "God give me *ego*, money"! He emphasised the money.

Sometimes we would weep quietly at Easter during the Stations of the Cross when Jesus was painfully tortured and agonisingly nailed to the cross. Sweet Jesus, Gentle Jesus, Innocuous Jesus; why did the Jews overtly manifest this act of wickedness on an innocent man who went about doing

good; curing all that were weighed down with ailments. And what sense of justice was there to crucify a man for daring to say He is the son of God? How does that amount to an offence under the right to speech. According to St. Paul in the Acts of Apostles 13:29, though they found nothing to justify His death, they condemned Him and asked Pilate to have Him executed. I used to wish I were Jesus; I would have blinded them and caused them to flog themselves silly with the scourge they had prepared for Him. But this was satanic thought as He had reprimanded Peter for thinking otherwise about His impending ordeal in Jerusalem to liberate mankind from the shackles of satan and his agents.

Nowhere else was the hypocrisy, prejudice and male chauvinism of the Jews more demonstrated than in their sense of justice as mentioned in a couple of places in the scriptures when they brought women caught in adultery, without the men for supreme punishment. It takes two to tango. They caught the woman and the man but took the woman for death sentence and left the man who probably had initiated the act!

Relatively, there was an incident during a Local Church Council Disciplinary Committee in which the churchwarden had reported the proceedings in a case in an out station where a member of the committee had insisted that a male member of the church must be suspended

because he had committed adultery repeatedly, a sinful act to that level which the Bible had called it **iniquity**. But Jesus was more interested with the sinner than the just man. How does this council's decision justify the call for repentance if all were righteous? This leaves one in shallow thoughts. There might have been no need for a church or pastors after all if all were righteous.

I often watched the Warder when he went for the Holy Communion. As he promenaded to his seat, we always felt like letting out a laugh as to how he twisted his mouth and got us wondering about the taste of what he had just received in his mouth. Was it a bitter pill? Why twist his face as if he had received a sour pill or just an insipid, edible substance? But other Communicants reacted differently. We were also delighted to watch him when he went for confession each time there was a visiting Priest. He came out in pious traversing steps as one who had encountered God and drilled to exhaustion, having been purged of all iniquities.

When we got baptised later in life and began attending confessional sessions we discovered after all, that it was only a moment of sober reflection for one's act of misconduct, pleading compassion and forgiveness to the all loving and good God. In one of the sessions, we took queues to be listened to at the confessional. We sat on the pews in turns. The queue was about twenty penitents. While we waited for

turns, I noticed that some minors of eight or ten years were also on the waiting pews and I wondered whatever brought them for confession. What did they know about sin; real sin. Perhaps they had stolen from their mother's soup pot, told a lie or refused an errand. Then we spotted one of them that was restless and disturbed the solemnity of the moment where sinners were willing to make amends with their Creator, in a conscience full of guilt. His prancing attracted attention and a Seminarian had to attend to him as he wept loudly distorting our concentration from our iniquities onto righting them with God. Upon enquiry, it was discovered that he was equally a penitent who had itemised his sins on a piece of paper, which unfortunately, couldn't be found any longer.

"My sins have been stolen", he wept louder.

As we laughed momentarily, we seemed to forget our sins too. Jesus has taken away those sins of ours. They were never stolen! He paid for them with His own precious blood and dear life that we may no longer be sinners but saved and no longer die but live.

But there was a pretty lady, young girl of about twenty years old who was not amused to the little boy's joke. Dark hairs covered her fair skin and her bright attentive eyes were fixed to a void. Her sensuous mouth spoke innocence. As I savoured her beauty I wondered what could have brought her here. Perhaps she had

fornicated I thought. And probably not out of her volition. A boy or even a man might have lured her into the act with some money, voodoo or simply taken advantage of her needy condition and she fell a victim of satan. A girl with a beauty like this; had more trouble remaining chaste in a world that was drowned deep in sexual appetite. Men would go the whole hog, occult means inclusive to have her. I felt pity for her. She should be more careful and prayerful in future to escape the long arm of men's sensual orgies. "Lord, forgive her", I prayed silently for her.

I noticed that an adult male had joined us. There were more young men than the adults. I wondered if adults do not sin anymore which was why very few were on the confessional pews. But what would have made an adult like this come for confession? He was quite a gentle man by his appearance and was not likely to stray from the path of eternity. Probably, he had stolen some government money and his conscience was pricking him hard; at least he had one or he was probably about confessing his membership of a secret cult. "Well, God listen to his plea", I half muttered.

Three more counts to my turn. I must now get concentrated and I decided to place my sins in order of their gravity choosing those words that would assuage the weight of them. Sin was sin! I reminded myself.

From the entrance an elegantly looking lady walked in but looked less sober and joined the queue. She must have

been married. The ring on her finger said so. She wore a purple silk fitting garment which must have cost a fortune. She was beautiful by my assessment, and I knew that she knew she was beautiful. What could this one have done? My mind raced to her. Cheated on the husband, misused house keep money or may have engaged in an extra gossip session? They do a lot of that each day anyway. At that instance I shifted to the first position. It was time to concentrate more on my own sins than bother on the sins of others. We were all sinners after all, seeking to make our ways right with God our creator whom we have painfully so offended by our unfaithfulness. And to avoid the occasions of sin, St. Paul, the great apostle had thus admonished in his letter to the Philistines, 4:8-9, to always ponder on those things that are good, those that are pure, Just, noble, Lovely, Praise worthy.

As I knelt before the confessional, making the sign of the cross, the Rev. Father blessed me with the same but compassionate and an holy one. I uttered almost inaudibly, "Father I have sinned, Forgive me"

As he listened to me reel out my sins including the ones I had confessed before and the ones I imagined had been committed to make the list longer for a truly penitential boy, I felt lifted and justified. But when he handed me the penance, I felt he didn't understand my communication to the effect that the sins committed were

unintentional. “What does it matter anyway, they have been committed”, I consoled myself. I went home filled with joy having reconciled with my God.

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At periodic times the Prefect Apostolic at Idah, who we called the Bishop, would come on an apostolic visit. It was a time of feverish preparations; cleaning the church, making decorations, choir practice, and preparations for confirmation and even bringing the traditional ruler to welcome our revered visitor. When we went for his installation at Idah, Bro. Conrad generously took us along with him. We sat at the back of his pick up van as he drove to Idah. It was a wonderful excitement for us to see Idah, the powerful seat of Attah, the paramount leader of the Igala kingdom for the first time.

At one of his visits, a carrier was prepared to lift him from the entrance of the mission road to the parsonage. He dropped from his car and sat in the carrier and four men each at angle lifted Monsignor Grimard to the parsonage amidst pump and pageantry; local drumming and gun explosions in the evenings he was treated to traditional dances until he left. At such times Bro Conrad would take snapshots which he processed himself in his studio.

A man of many gifts, Conrad singlehandedly constructed a bridge across the *yimoa* stream that formed a gulf between us and the Local Government administrative seat. He effected repairs on his pickup van, he designed and constructed his furniture and repaired his generating sets; he printed his books, typed his sermons, baked his bread, repaired his refrigerator, radio, camera, typewriter and photocopier. Bro. Conrad Con was an enigma; an engineer, electrician, photographer, carpenter, baker, tailor and phenomenally endowed with the strength of a bull. We watched him lift a drum of oil into his pickup van where three able bodied men were unable. He was rated to possess a single bone in place of both the ulna and radius which endowed him with such lion strength. He was simply a workaholic; working all day, restlessly round the clock in all departments of human endeavours except for an hour or two of his siesta.

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“In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy spirit”!

Charismatic Father Jude began the Mass this Sunday morning with a big sign of the Cross stretching from his forehead to his groin region and across his broad shoulders.

“Amen!!” The refrain was expectedly very loud.

The parishioners knew what to expect each time Fr. Jude was on the saddle of the altar. He was not given to friendly inanities you might say but was not foe of any. He attended more to his religious duties than dabble in the creeping parish politics. He counselled those in spiritual need just as he would for those who simply required his attention. His Co-priest, Fr. Huwe, parish priest was involved in all sorts of pastoral activities; from societal groups to Church committee on the proposed new Church building. He was a sharp contrast to Fr. Jude.

On this Sunday morning, unexpectedly, Fr. Jude turned out for the Sunday Mass. It was a pleasant surprise when he emerged from the vestry having told his parishioners that he was going for an out station Mass. The congregation knew what to expect from him. The penitential rite came through after introductory formalities. Fr. Jude took his entrance Antiphon seriously, meditating on each word of it. He believed as a Rev. Father, each Mass he celebrated, for him was a life given opportunity to re-enact in a bloodless manner, the memoriam of the sacrifice of Jesus who offered his life for all mankind. The agony he went through was too much for him to ramble through the celebration of the mass. And that is why he rarely says his mass in Latin to carry every one along. We all sat down for the first reading, followed by the Responsorial Psalm and the second reading.

"The proclamation of the gospel according to Matthew", he said as he marked the Bible and himself with the sign of the Cross on his forehead, lips and heart area of his body.

"Glory to you Lord Jesus"!

"Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 14: verses 13-21". It was a familiar passage of the Bible. The feeding of the "five thousand men, to say nothing of women and children..."

"And this is the Gospel of the Lord"!

"Praise, be to you Lord Jesus ". We responded.

Fr. Jude took us through the passage as never heard before. I had listened to the passage several times. But this Sunday's by Fr. Jude gave us a different perception, laced with fun that filled us with laughter. Perhaps it was the interpreter's talent that made his sermon more comic by his choice of words to describe the event in this place of withdrawal by Jesus and his disciples. But the Rev. Fr. Clinically defined the character we are made in such hour of need as was the case with the crowd that followed Jesus.

"This is what he is saying", began the interpreter as they spoke intermittently with the Rev. Father.

"After John the Baptist had been cruelly decapitated by Herod, Jesus took his disciples to a lonely place to mourn him. But the people wouldn't just let him be. They followed him!" He paused for the Reverend Father to continue.



“That is what happens to you when you are a good man, especially when you are rich. Anywhere you go, the people will follow you; you want to sleep, they will knock at your door; you want to eat, they are waiting for you to finish. You can’t even be alone with your family. No wonder, some like the politicians resort to telling lies; “tell them I am not at home”. But not with Jesus! He knew they came with problems only he could solve. So he attended to them; he cured them of their sickness and diseases in spite of his bereavement. That is what is expected of you. Don’t run away from them. Do your best, attend to them!” Some persons adjusted their sitting position to get more of this hard truth.

“He said”, the interpreter went on.

“Having attended to them till it was getting dark, the disciples approached their master to send the people away to go and buy some foods for themselves. They were not concerned whether they had money at all or find the food after all. Their major concern was if they didn’t disperse them, when they began to eat their evening food, some of them would come and beg them food that was not even enough for themselves and they would starve that night”.

The congregation laughed!

“Yes! Selfish People! Even when Jesus protested and asked them to give them something to eat themselves, none of them offered anything, except for one innocent little boy

who took pity on the crowd and decided to offer all that he had at the price of his own hunger. The adults began to hide their rations thinking of their stomachs only. That is why Jesus would emphasize, unless you behaved like a little child, you will not enter into the kingdom of God. Just imagine, the little boy readily brought out his entire ration of five loaves and two fish. Read the other gospels and you will see what I mean”. He paused.

When he resumed his voice was a little sober. He digressed to the letter of St. Paul to the Romans 8:35, 37-38.

“St Paul admonishes us that nothing can separate us from the love of God even if we were troubled, lacking food or clothes. The crowd, in spite of their condition, sick and without hope of food remained glued to Jesus but the disciples almost backed out because of food for the crowd. In Him lies the sufficient provision for every situation, need and worries. Let me ask you brethren; what will separate you from the love God? Food, money or what”?

We sat in rapt attention. It was vintage Fr. Jude; never sparing his word.

“The first reading says: come, even without money and buy. The Psalmist says: the Lord will give you food in due time. So, why worry?”

“One other important implication of the boy’s generosity is that in that giving, there was multiplication.

As long as you kept yours to yourself there will be no increase. Pray for money, without giving, your prayer bounces back to you as to what you will do with that which you have. The foolish but generous boy gave all that he had to the ministry of Jesus and had a reaping reward that was in abundance, twelve baskets full; read your Bible! Jesus could have brought down manna from heaven as he did in the desert but he wanted to demonstrate the art and miracle of giving and sharing”.

“Brothers and sisters in the Lord, you have heard the words. The challenge is yours. The God who multiplied five loaves and two fish is still alive to multiply your generosity both to the Church and the individuals you come across along your ways in daily life. Ponder on these even as we recite the creed; our faith. I believe in God...!”

As the congregation rose for the creed, side comments trailed his sermon.

“This is talk-o”! Someone joked.

“If I had, I would give”.

He got a quick response from others.

“As long as you eat, you have something”.

They laughed at the emptiness of their jokes in the aspect of giving as the creed recitation drowned all other distractions.

The celebration of the Mass continued with all solemnity.

## ***TWENTY-TWO***

The number of years in the primary school calendar had been reviewed to six instead of seven. Consequently, in class six we sat for the common entrance examination into secondary school. As it was the final year, a lot of tragedies we couldn't help had prevailed; not all that began the race finished with us. Some dropped out completely from school opting for other walks of life; some went back to farming preferring to join the Cocoa farmers in the western part of Nigeria which was becoming lucrative for impatient youths in search of money on the fast lane and being in school was much delay in actualising their penchants.

Others however, dropped out due to ill health while some had died. Another set of people like my beloved Maria, went to other schools. Yet, others failed their assessment qualification for the next class and either repeated or simply shied away from returning to school.

Of fundamental concern however, were those who ran away from school because of the cane. I belonged to this group when I got to class five. I took ill and lost about three days out of class. My classmates saw me in the stream where we usually took our bath in the evening and intimated me that our teacher, Mr. Oriade had been asking about my truancy in which case, if he found me I was sure to acquire some sore buttocks. They made me more terrified when

they had claimed seeing the slender bamboo canes in wait for my arrival. That won't be necessary, I told myself. No canes would find my tender buttocks. I resolved that until Mr. Oriade, our teacher, was either transferred from the School or moved to another class, I would not resume school.

Days went into weeks and weeks heaped into a month; Mr. Oriade was neither transferred from the school nor was he removed as our class teacher. I stuck to my resolve. All entreaties from Uncle Shiloba and grandma to get me back to school proved abortive. I didn't disclose to them my reasons for staying away from school. However, I joined my mates in the evenings to play games at our local field but always kept clear of Mr. Oriade's paths.

One morning I thought I had had enough of this hide and seek game with Mr. Oriade. I dressed up for school daring the worst to happen. My mind was now narrowed to the worst form of punishment and disgrace I would receive. My spirit and body died instinctively and insensitively to the ordeal that awaited me. I sat in the class with my mates as Mr. Oriade entered.

"Good morning, Sir!" We chorused as we stood up on our feet.

"Sit down!" He responded courtly.

As we sat down, some mischievous eyes began their glances towards my direction hoping that Mr. Oriade would

follow the trail of their treachery. He didn't. He went straight to the business of imparting knowledge to his pupils. I sat and carried on unmindful of whether he had spotted me or not.

"Simon Peter"!

"Sir"! So he had spotted me after all.

I sprang up and stared at him. I would not allow this Yoruba man, from Ondo truncate my education. It was too late now! I had the determination in me to face the worst punishment and there was nothing anybody could do about it. My decision was resolute.

"They said you were ill. How do you feel now"?

"I am better"

"Good! You will take over from Kolapo as the Class Monitor". He said tersely. "He has been inefficient, incompetent and lazy. Make sure that noise makers and vernacular speakers are booked and brought to me". He turned to Batunde Kolapo.

"You will hand over the duster, basket and other items under your care to Simon Peter. Am I understood?"

"Yes Sir"! Kolapo and I responded.

At break time, I took over as class monitor, a position I held until we got to our final year, class six.

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We stood on the assembly ground where Gbenekeme, Michael Musa, Moses Duniya Shigaba, Jumai Umaru and the rest of them that we idolised took their stand. It was our season of senior boys. Though the class had thinned down to half, we met those who were repeating class six and those who wanted to rewrite their common entrance examinations joined us in session too. Of peculiar interest however, was that Mr. Oriade still became our teacher in this final class.

The final year result was determined by the scaling formula of "Good", "Average" and "Weak" in Mathematics, English and General studies/conduct. A "Good", "Average" "Good" was considered fair enough but we strove for an all round "Good", the triple "Good". If, for instance, one had been involved in bad conduct which attracted some disciplinary action against him, he was sure to lose a third "Good".

At the final craft assessment, I made a mat from corn stalk and brought it to school as my handcraft. My mates laughed me to scorn, jeering and taking bets if Mr. Oriade would not flog me with the cane as my first part of the assessment. Mat! Others had gone to the market to purchase for themselves brooms, baskets, frames and other beautiful items as their handicrafts and still included money to shore up their scores, here was I with a thick corn stalk mat.

We took turns to enter the class with our crafts for assessment. I went in with my long corn stalk mat.

"What? Kparata"! Mr. Oriade burst out in disgust and disappointment.

As he managed to suppress his anger he asked again,

"Who made this for you"? He inquired scornfully.

"I did"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes Sir"!

He examined it for a moment and a smile flew into his face. Then he said,

"Drop it at the corner there".

The hand craft results were announced almost immediately. We were all seated in class expectantly awaiting the results. I had after all made my craft with my own hands. I hadn't bought it like my mates had done with money. I had no money anyway. The aim of school craft was to equip one technically for a vocation to meet one's economic needs in future. If the mat was not well made there was room for improvement after all. So, What was my offence anyway?

"The highest score is 80% and that is Simon Peter."

"E-e-e-e-h"! The cheers that followed this announcement were involuntary and died down simultaneously out of shock and disappointment.

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As the session drew close to an end, Mr. Oriade announced one afternoon,

"Who wan be Rev. Father?" He spoke in Pidgin English, throwing glances around the class and finally settling at my direction.

"There is an entrance form into a seminary school at Lokoja. Interested candidates are hereby advised to go to the mission house for further details". His eyes settled on me.

"Simon Peteru"! He now addressed me jokingly in his generic Yoruba form.

"Won't you apply? And you will be doing ...*in spiritu dominus...!*", he added teasingly, laughing at his own joke joined by others. But nonetheless, I knew he was demanding for a response from me having always stood in defence of my faith and the church. Oriade had casually asked one day in class,

"Why do Christians like you use paper to clean up your *nyash* after visiting a convenience? Do you ever get clean down there"? I knew he was stating the obvious. But he added rather teasingly,

"I think you people are dirty. How many pieces of paper would you use to wipe off...? And you must moist those pieces otherwise they might tear off your members". They rest of the class chuckled. Very few people knew

there was an invention like the tissue papers which were softer and skin contact friendly.

“Sir”! I began my defense. “We use our hands to eat; it’s clumsy and irritating using a hand directly down there. That is why we use papers and on the farm we use fresh leaves”. I had no idea as to how I could have put my objections better. Mr. Oriade laughed derisively at my seeming repugnant remarks and analytical innocence. Honestly, he had a way with his pupils that made their memory of him fondly and indelibly adoring for some, and frightening for others.

I shook my head in a “no” sign reply. I had never thought of it. I wanted to marry when I grow up and run a family like young uncle and his wife but not a wife like grandma’s friend, old with a wrinkled body who always called me her *husband* each time she saw me. I wanted a pretty damsel of a wife like my Maria.

I was however drawn into the interview by sheer coincidence. I had sauntered as usual into the Mission house premises, venue of the interview on that day. Bro. Conrad whisked me into one of the rooms and handed me the question papers. I think he must have formalised the arrangements with the examiners who came from Idah and must have paid the fees too. The oral interview took place after two weeks interval of the written assessment.

The prefect Apostolate, Msgr. Grimard, who represented for us the Catholic Bishop of Idah Diocese, equally a Canadian Priest, conducted the interview himself along with his secretary. Bro. Conrad joined in at intervals to listen to the proceedings. The interview took place in the living room of the parsonage. There were only three candidates for the interview into the St. Clement Minor Seminary at Lokoja; Pius, Titus and the last to be interviewed was my humble self.

“How are you”? Monsignor asked me

“I am fine my lord”. We had long been taught how to answer a Bishop; though I never took the interview serious as a conscripted candidate, it was the wrong moment to display ignorance of common Catholic Church’s etiquette having been an altar boy for that matter. I wondered what the next question would be. The ‘Bishop’ went on,

“What is your name?

I told him.

“Who will pay your school fees if you got this admission”?

This question took me not only by surprise but also got me into a shock. When we wrote the exams it was purely academic and now I was being confronted with who would pay my school fees. Who had told them that my parents were indigent? Was there any chance they could sponsor me? It was improbable that my father would be

able to pay my fees. My uncle, my father's younger brother, who was a primary school teacher in one of the villages, perhaps might take up such responsibility. To think of help from my maternal home was prospectively not feasible. Yet my chances of gaining any admission depended on my scholarship or sponsors. I took the risk.

"My father is poor. He won't be able to pay my school fees. My Uncle, a Teacher, might wish to pay for me".

They all exchanged surprise looks and thereafter dismissed me. The interview was over. I left the parsonage with a mindset of failure in the interview. What credit would it have amounted to if I had told a lie and couldn't make it to Seminary School anyway? I felt more comfortable I had made my position known, albeit the blunt way. If any of them thought of getting me a scholarship that would be a welcome extension of missionary charity.

The issue of what I would do with my life after primary school worried me since I might not get a scholarship to secondary school. Perhaps I would pick up an appointment as a pupil teacher, save some money and afterwards proceed to Secondary School. The idea of being a teacher weighed heavily against my reticent nature.

Two weeks later Bro. Conrad called us to the parsonage and congratulated us handing each, a copy of his admission letter and a prospectus that reeled out a long list of assorted items to be brought along to school. The list of

items included cutlasses, cutlery, blankets, bed sheets, mathematical sets, exercise books, plates, various sets of school uniforms in pairs (class, outing, games and compound uniforms) all in different colours, some in short knickers others short and long sleeve shirts; sandals, canvas, torch light, lantern and a school box to cut the list short.

My father was excited over my prospects for the admission into Secondary School not minding that it was a Seminary where Reverend Fathers were groomed. He promised to get me to the school. I was happy and excited too. We began the process of purchases. At times we got stuck when money was lacked. At last he sent me to his brother, the teacher for his assistance.

My uncle, Mr. Ruzoma, Abu, as he was popularly called, was a primary school teacher. When he wrote either on the black board with the chalk or with the pen on paper we marvelled at his style. He was a left hander. Sometime in the past when he visited home on school break, as we gathered one evening in the compound amusing ourselves, he sauntered into our midst and announced while looking unto the sky and towards the hills as the white clouds formed together,

"This is cumulus cloud! When it turns to cumulonimbus, it will result to *Orographic* rainfall which would be good for the leguminous crops."

“Good evening Sir!” We responded acknowledging his presence and scientific weather projections. Afterwards he went on,

“This is what we call Agricultural geography”!

He went on further to tell us how he found the subject interesting but disliked the map reading aspect of geography; interpreting the contours, curves and scales. But his teacher would not let him be or hear anything of such apathy to the subject until he got it right.

After getting few things on the list, we ended up picking some old items instead of buying new ones. And one of such was my school box. My father had an old beautifully constructed wooden box, with a long in-lock key. He had travelled severally with it to *Badu*. In his desire to get me to school, he was willing to part with this precious wood work. I was proud of him and elated in my possession of this well polished wooden box. I often saw him enter his sanctuary, an inner room, where he kept his precious, valuable belongings out of prying eyes, taking the long key with him and coming out with a beautiful set of either a *dansiki* dress or a flowing gown, *agbada* whenever he wanted to travel.

When it was time to commence school, the older boys like Isaac Duya, from our parish, Sheria, chaperoned us to lokoja and to the school compound. We picked up our bus from Sheria to Shinktaku, where we would board a ferry to Lokoja. I had not been to Lokoja but I had heard a lot about

the city; the ancient city of beauty with storey buildings, smartly dressed people and young boys and girls in school and others who hawked wares at the harbour. The water in the river was full. It was September. When we had reached the confluence where the Benue and Niger rivers meet, we saw the colour mix of brown and blue of this intercourse that flowed in fast riotous struggle for supremacy down the South to the Atlantic Ocean. I was not afraid! I had now learnt how to swim in deep waters after that baptism in *Yimoa* stream that almost claimed my life.

The ferry lowered its basement at the Lokoja terminal. Getting down the ferry was getting into a new world. There was commotion all over the entire arena. It was so noisy and rowdy that Isaac Duya warned us to keep in toe or get lost, if at all we didn’t miss our items even on our heads. Vehicles lined up ready to board the ferry to Shintaku from where they moved to Ankpa, Otukpo, Makurdi and other places. The hawkers shouted their wares,

“Bredi re-o”!

“Omi re-o”!

“Biscuit re-o”! And all the “re-os”

The motorist shouted their destinations in hoarse voices as they beckoned to their prospective passengers.

“Okene-Okene-Okene”!

“Ilorin-Ilorin-Ilorin”!



“Kabba–Kabba-Kabba”!

“Akure–Akure-Akure”!

Movements were swift as disembarking vehicles sped past the hilly harbour road while intending ferry passengers filed in.

Eventually we got a taxi that took us to our school gate. Some students had arrived a day before us. I picked my box on my head as others did and I discovered for the first time that I was the only one with a wooden box. It didn’t matter to me. It was my prized item. My father had emptied it of his clothes just to let me have it. As we got to the middle of the school compound, I heard some boys shout aloud.

“The ark of God, here comes the ark of G-o-d”!

“This is coffin”! Another boy said in a louder voice.

And they mocked me! Some of them laughed derisively pointing at my box. I wondered at such manner the boys displayed; the sort of discipline they had, taunting a colleague they never knew before now. And where did they come from anyway? They never knew me before now, yet they had this temerity to ridicule me! Isaac Duya encouraged me not to be disturbed.

“Stupid boys”! He cursed them as he consoled me.

Although some of the boys came with suitcases and echolaccs, I really never thought anything offensive in

possessing a polished wooden box, solidly more secured than the zinc boxes some had. Until then I was proud of my box.

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St. Clement Junior Seminary, Adankolo, Lokoja was the ground of my formative academic years and discipline which were at their best. Although I spent just two terms in my first year, I had learnt quite a lot about the school system. General Assembly was conducted fortnightly with Rev. Father John Onaiyekon being the Rector. Stories flew around about his academic prowess both within and outside Nigeria when he was in Rome; how he could speak six international languages. Our subjects among regulars included Latin and French Languages. The Latin language which had been pronounced dead was the original language of the Church. So we began to acquaint ourselves with phrases such as: *nemo dat quod non habet*. No one gives what he has not. *Vox populi vox dei* – The voice of the people is the voice of God. We crammed them where they were becoming academically unfriendly. There were no options to these.

The day started at about 5:30 am when we swept and washed. 6: 00 Am., we went in for morning Mass. 7:00 am, classes 10:00 am breakfast. The “Angelus”, which lasted only 5 minutes was compulsorily observed at 12: 00 pm.

We closed lectures for one hour lunch at 2.00 pm. A compulsory moment for siesta followed; prep 3:00 – 4: 30 pm. Games or manual Labour came next. By 6: 30 p.m., dinner. 7: 00 p.m. night prep. 9: 30 p.m., evening prayer and lights out by 10.00pm. Saturdays and Sundays had their distinct programmes of an outing or a social night respectively. On our social nights we either watched films or watched a drama group display on these weekends.

As upcoming seminarians we were being propped into social and moral life that tilted towards celibacy that was less pronounced. Since it was purely a male institution, females were seldom welcome into the premises except they were mothers, aunties, nieces or sisters. But we were allowed outing once in a month to refill exhausted tea items, or other items that were not available in the store run by the school. It was an opportunity for us to go out there and see what Lokoja looked like.

My first outing took me through to the major road and the cenotaph where two heavy machine guns whose long barrels, facing the north stood by the road. These were relics of colonial wars of conquest and suppression of the people against their will. I ran quickly away from the menacing barrels with the fear that they could explode any time and bring down the entire place to pieces along with me. We had been told how these weapons could wipe out an entire village. I did not want to be a victim of the white man's war.

I trekked down and crossing a small bridge, found the famous CSS bookshop and the magnificent Anglican Church, an edifice of stones that stunned me to thorough amazement. It was the largest building I had seen and it reminded me of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the personality of the first African Bishop we had learnt in our social study classes. I was not done with yet. I walked further down and there was the market square at the bottom of a tall hill called Mount Patti like the one we had climbed at grandpa's farm where Kondo had ended in tragedy while we narrowly escaped from that precipice.

I came back to the school compound exhausted and hungry. Other students too were now returning back to the school compound. A scandal almost broke out. Wale, one of our classmates, came back into the school with a lady. While some guessed it was his sister others thought otherwise. Wale was a big boy from Kabba with all randy and dandy lifestyle. He didn't enter the hostel with her but let her stand outside in a discrete position. She kept visiting at intervals but was not allowed into our mainstream compound activities and they talked discretely away from the students in secluded corners.

One day Wale stunned us in the class with a behaviour that was rather unwholesome. Two American teachers who were probably on sabbaticals and taught the higher classes were out there in the open. One was male

and the other a female. Classes were in session and all was quiet as we waited for our next subject teacher. It was on a hot Tuesday afternoon. The two Americans found a shade under a tree near our class and underneath this tree, they held unto themselves exchanging kisses. We all trooped to windows view point to watch this duo in a Romeo and Juliet embrace. They went on for more than five minutes. Wale screamed, probably in voyeuristic ecstasy but in a sensation that sent us reeling with laughter to the ignorance of the two lovers who departed the scene with locked hands. We ended the first term.

During the second term, I woke up one morning with heavy scales on my eyes. It dampened my sight a bit. In the afternoon, it formed more scales, blurring my sight. I struggled to keep my eyes clean from the misty substance and to manage a fair sight. My class mates kept distance from my irritating sight. I managed to end the term with them. At home all medical attention to normalise my eyes and sight proved futile. I gradually degenerated daily from recovery into blindness. At night the lantern or any light took the shape of a dome. At day time, mist, perpetual mist hung everywhere and human beings took the shape of objects. I was going blind! I remembered Gadoh.

My father had travelled to *Badu* but my grandfather, Abu, worried and concerned about my optical problems, called me one day and gave me a concoction in a Calabash to

deep my eyes wide open; morning, afternoon and evening for a few minutes each session to get my sight back.

After one week, my condition deteriorated. That which I had thought would bring remedy to my condition proved to the contrary. I kept remembering Gadoh. I became angry, took the calabash and its contents to the backyard, and smashing it hard on to the ground, I cried out, "God why should I go blind?" On the third day of my Mosaic anger, I woke up and there was an epiphany. I didn't see the usual mist that was my optical blighting. I saw people a little bit more clearly than the previous days. I chuckled inside me but not yet worth celebrating in case I relapse into the old condition and perhaps get worse. I had learnt that a state of numbness was not the absence of illness. So I waited patiently, the patient that I was, for the evening to confirm the shape of any illumination. I looked up to the sky, to the sun and the perpetual rainbow that shadowed the sun was no more there but a blurred brightness. Evening came, the large dome shape of light shrank into a miniature sharp light. As the days went by, my condition improved and I began to see properly. I began to read again.

In spite of my restored sight I had lost an entire third term due to my partial blindness which kept me at home all through. When I went back to school at the beginning of first term of the second year, it was not to continue my

education but to park my remaining items as we always took only those items we needed at home during holidays. There was however, a debate amongst the subject Teachers as to whether I should be admitted into the next class or not having verified my health disabilities against any absconding and truancy. My form master went through my first and second term results and discovered I had grades in both first and second terminal assessments that could qualify me for the next class. He recommended my movement to the next class. But sadly enough my uncle had declined my scholarship unless I went to the Government Secondary School where school fees, was almost less than half what was paid at the Seminary. I opted for the latter without the benefit of my interests in 1977 as I had no choice in the matter.

I wouldn't know if I would have made it to the priesthood or veered off as many did if I had continued my education at the seminary. Some out of serious contemplation eventually made a detour to the celibate catholic priesthood. A vocation not easily ventured in life except with serious commitment to the oath of that Office. Would I have made a good priest if at all I had proceeded to become one?

Ones destiny has a way of charting its course! Would I have been committed to the oath of celibacy and keep out of

scandal to proselytise the good news in the person of Jesus in truth and spirit?

## **AFTERWARDS**

It was during the second term in Government Secondary School, Oguma, my father sent for me one evening and informed me that he was ill. Since he was not bed ridden, I took the matter light to heart without the premonition of death on my mind. I didn't know that death was lurking by the corner. By my assessment, it was a mere malaria attack. I did not bother to see him the following day.

Two days after this encounter, I was woken up by 6.00 am that my father had given up about an hour ago. I was devastated! I rushed to the compound. Many persons had begun to gather. My Mother and her mates were in their rooms wailing loud, all of them sprawled on the floor. I didn't know what to make of the situation. I looked lost in the wailing atmosphere. I was lost indeed. Whom would I consult with from now onwards on crucial matters or when I found myself in a dilemma? He liked to pet me with delightful gifts and showed me around his friends. These privileges were now all gone and might never be enjoyed anymore.

Since I was still too young for such matters, nobody bothered me about any burial formalities. Honestly, I did not know anything about burial arrangements and customs. My uncle, Ruzoma was in school for his pivotal training to qualify him as a professional teacher. They sent for him and all burial arrangements were made when he arrived. My worst moment came when I was invited to wash my father's remains as my final show of love and last respects. I looked at the lifeless body of a man that was full of life, strength and energy but now speechless, stiff and tossed by fellow men as they willed. He was laid to rest amidst all his friends from far and wide. Some of them promised to come and see me and if I had any problems they would be at

hand to assist me. I didn't get to see most of them until death too took them away.

As I left grandpa's house for my parent's house that early morning, I never went back to them again. I only visited them as often as I could. Grandma was broken hearted as to who was going to take care of me. She kept my portion of food each day and would pick quarrels if I failed to show up for my meals. She wished that I would stay more with her but my mind was made up now and the hunger for my father's house zealously consumed me without any alternative. Though I had relocated to my father's house upon his death, I still maintained affinity with my former house members. She prayed for me on each visit for God's divine protection and guidance over my life.

In 1983, when I went to tertiary school, my contact with her began to disintegrate and dwindle but my first port of call on holidays was the home of my maternal grandparents who took great delight in seeing me. She scrutinized my height and felt the loss of flesh. She also observed my newly acquired habits; changes in style of walking, swaggering from left to right, shoulder tilting style and other copied acts. Grandma would scream and bring me to instant order.

"No no...No...No...No...! Walk straight! Why lean on one side of your shoulder? Is that what they thought you in that school? When you get old you won't be able to correct

this position. The bones would have hardened... No...! Wear your shirt properly! Why are you pulling the collar to the left? Knot the button and don't tie your shirt"! She would quarrel and I obeyed just to please her.

I still did her farm work and would be gratified with my cassava porridge delight during holidays. Each day I visited them, I spent more time with grandpa; setting his couch, relocating it to a better shade and getting him a live coal to light his tobacco. He told me stories of his father, how they farmed, how he married my grandmother, how they fought wars and told stories about manslaughter. Afterwards I would buy him his medication; *Shadam*! *Shadam*, was a derivation from the name of a village in Igala land where Christian missionary personnel usually came from to distribute drugs to sick persons within our locality. *Shadam*, was no more than *Dapson* tablets administered for epidemiological ailments especially leprosy. This had effectual potency on itching skins and according to my grandfather it improved eyesight especially for the ageing people. He appreciated my company profusely as his grandchildren, Uncle Ndazhaga's children whom he never imagined would grow up to meet him alive, now deserted him even in his state of partial blindness for one errand or the other. At one time I gave him some money from my scholarship. He profusely appreciated this gesture and he blessed me prayerfully saying, "You will find what you want

in life! God will keep and preserve you! You will not lack! *Ozomoyikwo* (ancestors) will be with you...!”

As time went by he became incontinent and had to be cleaned up. He was awfully grateful to my devotions to his condition and care while he painfully lamented the agony of ageing in such destitution, praying and beckoning on death to take him away from this accursed world.

It was in the morning, one chilly early morning, after the Christmas and New Year celebrations, the news filtered to me that he had passed on during the night in his sleep. Grandpa, wodi died in January, 1991. He had lost complete sight. What a gracious circle he made in life. He went back into childhood; to be led about and aided to a sitting position. He walked with the support of a stick.

He was buried next to his brother, Pa Shigaba. His death was a sharp contrast to that of my father who at the time of his death was much young, energetic and at the prime of his age, so to speak and had left behind a large family of sons and daughters too tender to cater for themselves.

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I was already in my second year as a Civil Servant when, one evening in Makurdi, a friend who had gone visiting home quietly dropped the message; my grandmother had died and had been buried a few days ago.

He couldn't understand why I broke down into sobs. That my mother, my 'real mother' whose warmth, care and cuddles, that protected me from the cradle was no more.

I wept the more, bitterly on realizing that I had sent her some money for her Christmas which she couldn't use. According to my mother's report, at that time she was too weak to appreciate any happenings around her but they had prevailed on her to understand that I had sent her some money and ensured that she clutched the money praying for me until she gave up. I wished I could have sent her more money, and timely too, if only I knew.

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Uncle Shiloba is still alive but aged. Over-stressed by farm work, he walks bent down. When I visited him and offered him one of my flowing gowns and topped it up with some money for his palm wine thirst, he broke down in tears for a long moment reminiscing the past; "the small inconsequential boy who was a nuisance" and now creating some happy moments for me, I thought. It has become a routine for me to always visit him with one item or the other as time permits each time I visit home.

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Young Uncle Ndazhaga kept his yearly *Badu* trips until he finally relocated to *Badu*. We were first told that he settled in Oro, Kwara State and later moved to Iseyin in Oyo State. He came back after many years of sojourn in Yoruba land. He married more wives; one he inherited from his late cousin Abraham, Pa Shigaba's son as permitted by custom.

Kasuwa, his first wife became a proud mother of five boys at three births. Her first pregnancy produced a set of twins; both boys, Yizo and Mejida, the latter also called Francis. If he completed his training in the seminary, he hopes to become a Reverend Father. Kasuwa's third pregnancy equally produced another set of male twins.

Kasuwa became very fond of me eventually. She engaged me in long discussions which extended to her matrimonial squabbles. I found this strange enough as young uncle couldn't hurt a fly and why she chose to treat him the way she did. Sometimes she asked me to admire her outfits and give her compliments in kind and cash. After a stint outside with another man, she returned to young uncle but this time she had acquired some weird behaviour. She became an alcoholic. When I visited home sometime ago, she had died. I was sad that this once vibrant and boisterous lady died too soon. I grieved her passage!

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Gwatana grew tall and became huge in stature but couldn't get to refine his character. Like others, he too went to *Badu*. Hard working though, he took to a life of debauchery. He was drunk every evening from illicit gin. He went in and out of prison for misdemeanours; pilfering a chicken or a goat here and there. Once he attempted suicide but was rescued by heavy dosage of palm oil which neutralized the *Gamalin 20*, a chemical substance he had swallowed.

At another occasion he had a disagreement with his father, Shiloba in the evening; he felt he had it all. He told everybody he was gone and took a dash to the flowing stream that night. We went after him. He had wanted to drown himself. He struggled to break loose as we restrained him and pleaded with him not to die.

There was a respite in his life. He got married to a pretty woman and relocated to *Badu*. After many years, he came back with three beautiful children and his wife. One day as I went home on break, we chatted about the good old days with friends, I found out he had died some months earlier. I had not visited them as used to whenever I was at home. Why nobody deemed it necessary to inform me so late bothered me. I had a feeling that he had finally "rested" from the turbulent life of this world as it led him. I mourned him silently in heavy grieve.

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Kondo, true to it, resisted all persuasions to go to school. Encouraged by his mother, he stayed at home and did the best he could to make ends meet. He took over his father's hobbies; he became a nocturnal hunter with several mishaps of exploded guns and inflamed gun powder which incinerating his skin at one time or another. He caught fish like his father in the ponds, the forest where we had all visited. He tripped into palm wine tapping and became a leader of tappers.

Kondo got married to two wives and as at last count had become the proud father of thirteen children. He became a drummer at the Aguma's palace entertaining him and his visitors; a position he found powerful for giving him the opportunity to be close to the Aguma. This turned him into a monthly wage earner.

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Moses Duniya, the indefatigable goal keeper, relocated permanently to the west, *Badu*, after a brief stint as Bro. Conrad's Cook. He got married to his heart-throb. He thrived well until a hit and run vehicle in Yoruba land felled him in 2011.

His elder brother, Musa, who had been sentenced for manslaughter returned after thirty three years.

Needless to say he roamed the streets of Sheria endlessly, the now growing and expanding town in search of his family compound which had relocated to another position within the village. He had become a stranger to his own town. He had to be led to his house. He seemingly never changed in appearance and stature. He never aged. He secured a job as a security guard with the Local Government Council.

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The Roman Catholic Mission, RCM/LEA, Primary School, Sheria had since become a ghost of itself. More blocks of buildings have been put up by the aid of the Universal Primary Education programme to accommodate the surging population in primary school enrolment. The large Melina trees which formed the shade for our food vendors have been felled down, laying bare the entire shaded compound. The school football field which adorned the football stars of yore days had taken a dehydrated outlook. The goal posts were no longer the expectant arrays of fast football shot. The entire compound looked haggard for a once beautifully intimidating floury school environment in a flurry of activities for school children, teachers and School Officials.

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Ruwo Sheneni, many years after, I went to the stream, which had now taken different diversions and space, immersed myself in the water and felt the cool flow beneath sweep through my body. It was a wonderful experience. Out on the surface of the water, I inhaled the cold breeze of the ignorantly flowing current, reminiscences of the past came flooding through my mind. When I got back home, I thanked God the waters did not drown me in my innocence. The Spirit ministered into my mind that the one who was used to salvage me on that fateful day, when I could have drowned was still alive and that I should show kindness and appreciations to her.

I found her after a little search and she struck me as one ageless woman, looking as young as she had been when she rescued me from the brink of death below the cliffs in a flowing stream. But she was now becoming weak with grey eyebrows and a wrinkled skin treacherously manifesting her ageing. She had married and given birth to two children. Even in her disability God still gave her a husband and fertile womb. She thanked God profusely for remembering her. And she prayed for me too; for longer life and wellbeing.

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Dangara Gunu, many years after the civil war ended, he came home. But he could hardly find a home as all his house members had relocated to another settlement. But

the ex-soldier would not follow the company of his parents. He stayed in dilapidated buildings and enjoyed the benefits of his military pension which came to him regularly. He however couldn't control his lifestyle after military service. He was always drunk with illicit gin, *ogogoro* and in one trouble or the other.

Dangara Gunu found it convenient to practice kleptomania. Consequently, he was in and out of prison for either stealing a goat, ram or even a chicken. It was quite funny that some of his theft cases were deliberate plans of having a place where he could get free food while his exhausted pension began to accumulate as he remained in prison custody. He went for a long stint in prison having stolen a goat and no one had seen him back since then.

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Thirty years after, I had the privilege and honour to host a prophetess, a woman of God. And she had some shocking revelations for me. I listened to her, rapt with attention as she went into memory lane that spanned more thirty years. I had never met her until only three years ago. She neither knew my village nor anybody that was related to me.

"There was a woman you farmed for". She began somehow wondering if her utterances would make meaning to my memory.

“But you didn’t collect money from her”, she continued.

This was stranger than fiction.

“Yes”. I agreed in complete affirmation and she became relaxed and more comfortable on that platform to proceed.

“Two nights ago, she stood between you and some two persons that wanted to attack you”, she said with a pause.

“Your past justifies your future. For saving her under the torment of labour, sun and rains, God has used her angels to save you from your enemies. I don’t know when you did it but this is what the Lord showed me. Keep up the good works!”

She had told me several strange but true incidents about me which she had never been privy to.

God works in mysterious, wonderful and awesome ways!

I will plant it on the high mountain  
It will sprout branches and bear fruits  
-Ezk. 17:22/23

The Just will flourish like the palm tree  
And grow like Lebanon cedar  
Planted in the house of the Lord  
Still bearing Fruits when they are old  
Still full of sap, still green  
To proclaim that the Lord is just  
-Psm. 92

## ABOUT THE BOOK

The formative years of a man's life constitute a comic drama and a quintessential sense of innocence, errors, funs and risks in human growth. The book tells the story of the early life; the first twelve years of the author in a narrative that typifies the cultural graphics of an average Bassa family. The Cradle; full of childhood inanities, early school, early church, early struggles, early wits... The story peaks with the author's first year in the Seminary and what happened **afterwards** to his earlier environment!

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shaba Abu hails from Sheria, Bassa Local Government Area of Kogi State and works with the Code of Conduct Bureau. He also authored *The Niger Migrants: The Changing Phases of Bassa Society*.