

AN EMPTY SHELL OF A DEAD RITE

THE ATMOSPHERE IS LIKE A MOSAIC. It is Christine. You feel as though you were right there when God descended on Mount Sinai. You imbibed the mood when the Holy Ghost descended on Christ at the River Jordan. The solemnity, that aura that encompasses initiatory rites to engrave on the mind an indelible memory of the most significant event of a lifetime reigns.

The Reverend Pastor Gonki Abonki is standing there on the elevated Holy of Holies in the ritualistic robes; the surplices' sleeves alone can clothe two widows. He has now descended from the Most Holy Place down to the lower platform, a step below the Areopagus where a basin of sacred water is set on a table dressed impeccably white. On the lowest floor is a line-up of eight parents holding five toothless, speechless, and innocent infants. They face the Sacred Place. The parents will take the oath on behalf of their ignorant children. The infants, some barely able to open their eyes to view the evil world around them, lie helplessly in the arms of their earthly hosts called parents who may be able or not to justify the grave responsibility of bringing up the children. The male parents, owners of the children, hold them for the ritual. The rule allows the mother of the twins to hold one of them standing by while the father engages the other in the rituals.

The Reverend Pastor reads out the citation; the charge, from the *Katekisema* booklet to the hearing of the candidates' proxies and to the congregation who are compelled to be witnesses to the oath. The parents too will affirm before the congregation of God's people their vows. It is before God, the Reverend Pastor and

men, a trinity of witnesses that binds on earth and sends the seal to heaven. The citation travels from Adam through Melchizedek and Noah to Abraham and finally arrives at Christ, also called the Second Adam. One member of the congregation has this phony feeling that what is taking place here and that which goes on in the courts of law have some invisible links. The Reverend Pastor is the “My Lord”, “Your Worship”, the judge and magistrate; the parents are prosecutors while the innocent children, framed up criminals, listen to the judge reading out their jail sentences before the commencement of the jail terms. Tears roll down freely from his eyes and he dabs it with a handkerchief.

There was a day Jesus Christ the Son of God and Son of Man rode on an ass into Jerusalem. He wept bitterly even upon a triumphant entry. He wailed. He shed tears. He lamented, O Jerusalem, you should have known this day. It is overt. It is clear but now hidden from your face. This soul weeps today for innocent infants. Born criminals in Adam without their asking, they will have to pay dearly to get free redemption through Christ Jesus. Pay with their bruises in ignorance when the parents execute the charge; pay with many things to the pastor when they mature or else the sacrifices during the days of ignorance become void.

Pastor Abonki, the holy and consecrated man is on the last of the four questions the proxies must consent to before their children will be brought into the covenant of the cult. He is asking, “Do you agree that when this child grows up, you will nurse it in the ways of the Lord and if you cannot do it yourself, you will commit it to another faithful person to bring it up? One after the other, you must answer the question beginning from the couples on my right. “Diogo!”

“I agree, so help me God.”

“Maria Diogo!”

“So, help me God!”

“God will help you only if you try. Tingil!”

“I will try. May God help me...!”

“Esther Tingil!”

“I will!”

“What do you say, Akaayar?”

“I rely on God for everything.”

“Elisabetu Akaayar!”

“May God help me to do it!”

“Kpojime!”

“I will do. So, help me God.”

“Grace Kpojime!”

“By the grace of God.”

There is short-crack laughter from the congregation in acknowledgement of the witticism of the *Gracian* pun. That being the last question in the series, he motions for the deacons who are also dressed in impeccable white to hold up the basin of water. As he holds up the first baptismal card, he proclaims:

“As they have all accepted, here is water, what will prevent them from being baptized?” He dips his callous and podgy fingers into the water and scratches the scaly tips thrice on each child’s forehead.

“Terngu Diogo, I am baptizing you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen!” The parents smile weakly. We have gotten the reins to muzzle and abuse our guest.

“Tyoughvihi Tingil, Mngu eren we baptisema ken iti i Ter... man Wan...man Ichighan Jijingi. Amen!” His parents cannot smile. There has been a bad omen. As the second scratch of the watered fingers sears across the forehead of the infant, he peals out a sharp shrill cry that makes even the people on the first row of pews strain their ears before hearing the third and final seal of

the incantations. The mother takes him quickly from the father and suckles him but Tyoughvihi refuses the bribe and bawls aloud. The mother takes him out to give way for the initiation of his twin brother. Some of the witnesses conclude that the boy may grow up to be wayward, rejecting the discipline and the teachings of the Church.

“Tarvihi Tingil, Mngu eren we baptisema ken iti i Ter...

Out of nowhere, a storm has gathered. The fury of the winds drowns the voice of the Reverend Pastor. Then it overwhelms the whole building, banging the doors and the windows. The building quakes, the sand in the wind’s convoy slaps, cowering people in the faces. Then the coup de grace; the storm lifts the roof taking the shelter several meters up in the sky. The winds crash the roof safely away from the building. The heaven being open, the rain now falls freely on the congregation as if it were a quintessential baptism cleansing the gathering of decades or perhaps, centuries of hypocrisy.

HOWLING WHIRLING WINDS

I WOKE UP THIS MORNING HYPERSENSITIVE. This Sunday is particularly chilly. My mental antennae probe for sensation in the environment. It is harmattan at its worst. It is December, the month of my birth. The wayward winds carrying dryness and cold are plying the east-west paths. They are dust-laden going west. Unlike the omnibus light fresh winds that go to the east carrying sunshine and rain along, they are west-bound with vengeance. I juxtapose that freshness, this dryness, that warmth, this cold, that bloom, this deadness that are poles opposed with man and his kind caught up in the war.

Now the sun struggles in high vanity until two hours after his usual wake-up time of six on the human timepiece, he manages to show a sickly pale face amidst the hazy sky. This is much, unlike the other season when the big red ball of fire blazes in the late hours of dawn, warming the hearts of early risers and gradually waning into a shimmering bright gold when the wind goes to the east to pay homage to the power of the Creator and Controller of the Universe. Now with the back to the source of light and creation, it carries with it the burden of ignorance, arrogance, and vengeance to the west. The wind whizzes in whispers. Now, human eyes can dare the god of the skies. Then all eyes cowered in his blazing presence.

The sound of the church bell, which is a butchered piece of rail leg hanging as though on the gallows and tortured by the sexton for obstinacy, now cries out for help. It comes in our direction in full pitch. Then, everybody needed simply to depend

on the sun for direction because the eastbound winds refused to be carriers of agonizing news to peace-loving ears. Nothing is strange. Nothing is new. New things are just the old recycled, following the mandate of nature and obeying her unbendable laws. Anything, anybody and any system that attempts or launches itself into the path of change as to wedge its progress is shattered and scattered into the void of inexistence. Yet nature must keep her seeds for the next season in the cocoons of the unfriendly and antagonistic one. One child is experiencing this season for the first time in its existence. For such, everything is new, strange, and either fascinating or threatening, frightening or entertaining.

Troupes of children come from the western end of our homestead in gay spirits to match their colorful clothes and footwear bought specially for the season. These are the colors of Christmas. If they can only ask questions and get proper answers. What is Christmas? The day the Savior of the World was born. What happened to the world to need a savior? The world had abnegated and bastardized the teaching God had handed down through the prophets of old, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Zoroaster, Socrates, Pythagoras, Elijah, Elisha and Ezekiel. This had held humanity to a mundane and shallow understanding of spiritual principles. The world had turned its back on the Creator and worshipped idols. Christ came to lead the whole world back to the true God who sits in the hearts of those who create room for Him. Did Christ achieve His aim? He did then. Now the residues of the ills that contended against His mission have waxed strong again and cloned themselves into various mutations of simulacra bearing the seal of godliness.

Humanity is again headed into the abyss of Hell. They have suppressed the true teachings. The teachings sought to strip man of his ego, bear the cross, and follow the steps of the selfless leader back to God. Worse still, man has turned his attention to self-decoration with positions, paraphernalia, and all sorts of ornaments steeped in false dignity. Even on the day meant to

remind them of the reason He was born, to fight evil, man indulges in all forms of self-abasement. Man has finally refused to follow Him. They have projected Him above emulation. They only carry His imaginary blood for occult practices and a license for indulging in hedonism. What do we do? Celebrate Christmas the assumed birthday of Christ the way He was born; low-keyed.

The children are going East to worship. They remind me of our times of childhood. We went to church in groups. We fought along as we went. There are changes though. They wear bright, frothy, ostentatious, and gorgeous clothes with footwear, head ties, ribbons, and neckties to match. In our days we only had the full length of our mothers' *wrappas* wound around our bodies and crossed at the neck where the two top extremes were knotted at the back of our necks. We were naked inside and barefooted. That never stopped us from engaging in physical skirmishes. Their fights have evolved from physical to verbal squabbles with an occasional wagging of a finger in the face of another to hammer home an argument. They arrive at blows less frequently than it was in our days.

Abokwase is one of the early ones. She plays *Akacha*, the hand-held rectangular instrument made by lining up straw-sticks on a framework and pouring either little pebbles or *Fii* seeds to make it rattle as the women and girls shake and press on it in unison. She is only eleven years old but has already built herself a reputation as a talented player. She is also adept at catching new songs quicker than her more mature counterparts. Abo and other rattlers are hurrying to church since they must sit on the first row. Mdevaan, my sister of the same age calls her from within the house to wait, so that they will go together.

"I won't, I won't wait for you, cheeky thing! What are you still doing inside the house? What are you still doing inside the house? You'll never learn to be fast," Abo replies. She heads on, increasing momentum and pace to her strides.

“I have already finished. I am only applying lipstick.”

“Then, give me the lipstick, and let me do my lips,” Abo’ says and heads into the room. They emerge, joining their mates. Mdevaan has a red-lipped Bible to match her *cosmeticated* lips, shoes, and handbag. The skirt and blouse design matches any red, blue, and yellow accessories. They leave. Waves and waves of children and adults surge through the compound to the church.

I know now. I have a different view from theirs. Some of them can hardly distinguish between a church service, a social gathering, and a market square. Some have thoughts that are more inclined to accept fantasies than realities, thoughts obsessed with going to heaven, but only lured into that desire by the assurances that their favorite food, fruits and snacks: meat, biscuits, bananas, coke, and cake as some of the songs proclaim, will be all there.

Or-kpen za sha Aondo

Aaa-eee

A hide ngu kaan ere

Aaa-eee

Kagh shon doo shamin

Aaa-eee

Nyam kpa ngi shamin

Aaa-eee

Ayaba kpa ngu shamin

Aaa-eee

Dead-man has gone to heaven

Aaa-eee

He has returned with this news

Aaa-eee

The place is pleasant

Aaa-eee

There is meat there

Aaa-eee

Banana is also there

Aaa-eee

Some, even at that tender age see church service as forums for meeting their favorite playmates, what they will be doing as adolescents; and meeting their sweethearts. In the compound, my younger nephews and nieces and other cousins are joining the stream of troopers on the path bisecting the compound into two equal halves. My sisters and cousins who are more conscious of the social underpinnings of church services are still dressing in their rooms in anticipation of the silent but keenly contested fashion parade at the worship. I look at them, shake my head and head for my room from the wooden bench under the mango tree under which I have just finished my breakfast of roasted yam and pounded groundnuts. I know that going to church is far from congregating to worship God, we rather worship tin gods seated on the raised platforms in front of our troubled sights. The idols called elders; we must worship. Temperamental and whimsical as they are unpredictable, they can make any wrong right and right, wrong as it pleases them. So, what do I do? I will rather stay at home than worship the abominable thing in the Holy sanctuary that God had shown Prophet Daniel.

“Tyoughvihi!” I halt and turn round with an ‘anything-the-matter?’-countenance. I anticipate and predict with exactitude every move of my uncle. “Are you not going to church today?”

“No!” I snap, precisely to avoid a long sermon and escape into the trap of my room. I hear the dragging of feet peculiar to Nyitse, my uncle, as he approached my asylum. I know a sermon is at hand. I contemplate taking it dumbly or telling him how I feel about the whole thing. I know also that if I am so frank with him,

he will interpret it as rudeness. No logic can sway the bigot in him. I decide to tackle issues as they come. I sit with my back turned to the door. I face the Eastern side of the room meditating on the varieties of pictures, posters, portraits and emblems I have on my wall as solid images of my mind-set. They are the most valuable collection that serves as tonic or inspiration and guiding principles of my life.

There is the near-life-sized mirror into which I peer daily on the pretext of dressing up, when I am actually only interested in gazing at the entity called Tyoughvihi. How do people see me? Without the mirror, I will hardly know anything about how I appear to people. I alone, however, know the intricate being within, his depth, his weaknesses, and his strength, which will take, people years of multi-dimensional study approach to unveil just an insignificant part.

The Cross with a Red Rose blooming at the intersection of the horizontal and the vertical bars, hangs next. The Rosy Cross and other crosses have meanings beyond a mere instrument of torture and a symbol of religiosity. The Cross is also a trademark for religious, cultural and social businesses that may ultimately lead to economic success. It is a superstitious amulet for protection against evil forces. For me, it symbolizes an invisible but heavy burden anyone who chooses to do the will of God must bear so as his soul and spirit will evolve into a beautiful blooming love for God and humanity.

Next is the framed picture of myself in academic paraphernalia of the gown and the square-topped mopboard. The mopboard being symbolic of the burden carried by any truly educated person. The burden of knowledge is a curse in an epoch of celebrated ignorance. What makes it a blessing is that it gives you a sight beyond the eyes. It is a burden trying to sow the seeds of such knowledge in an epoch of rot. Will they germinate? Will the

overwhelming grass of putrefaction suffocate the seeds into silence? Tyavgyer Fate's words comes to the rescue.

It is by giving that Our Lord Jesus Christ came and redeemed the world

He has planted the gift in our hearts.

If it does not germinate, He has planted; the fault is not His.

The picture makes me also wonder if knowledge confines itself to academic degrees, diplomas and certificates. Today, we have many PhD holders who know just a little more than they actually knew before getting into the primary schools. They are quick to tell you that they are lecturers with the State University. Have we not sacrificed knowledge on the platform of 'this -one-is-our-own?' Today, with students who pass examinations by fraud taught by lecturers employed by notes from Government House, what is the fate of true knowledge when scribbled notes replace embossed certificates and 'whom-do-you-know" replaces 'what-do-you-know' will man not become a hairy naked ape? These questions keep cutting into my mind like a chain saw. With the launching of Boko Haram to level down knowledge with ignorance, will it not be a crime in the nearest future to have knowledge?

There is a Zodiac plate summarizing the qualities and character traits of a Sagittarian; a fiery arrow released by the Centaur is flying southwards zest and aggression at whatever will become the target. The next frame is a Zodiac sign of Sagittarius with the quotation:

And I looked and behold, a white horse

He who sat on it had a bow and a crown was given to him
And he went out conquering and to conquer

Jesus Christ hangs next, not on the Cross this time around. He stares straight at a distant object. I always wonder why I should have a picture of Christ as a Christian when I should be the picture

of Christ. Did Jesus the Christ ever pose for any picture? Do we need a physical picture of Christ to remind us that He exists? Did He not say those who believe without seeing are the blessed? Seeing-is-believing, they say. Is this not just the reason why Jerusalem Pilgrim (JP), which is neither in the Bible nor in the Dictionary, has been created so that Christianity will be like Islam? Is it because government has been wastefully supporting pilgrimages in Saudi Arabia that we must force it to support tourism in Jerusalem, Rome, Egypt and Greece? Did the Quran say government should use the money from the commonwealth of infidels to sponsor the Holy Pilgrimage? Are these pilgrimages not vain worship if we do not observe them by scriptural injunctions? Seeing-is-believing has made many fabricate death, go to heaven and hell at the same time and return to tell children that they saw meat in heaven. Have they not built their faith on sand? I know Jesus now. I am a crazy sinner but He came to save me.

He said prostitutes and harlots would enter into the kingdom of God before the self-righteous people. He had secret disciples. He commended the boy who refused to go on the errand of the father in his face but later on went secretly. He also condemned the one who said he would go but on leaving, the father's presence went his way. He commended the tax collector who acknowledged his sinfulness but condemned the Pharisee who acclaimed his own righteousness. The genealogy of Christ is steeped deep in the line of documented sinners who repented of their sins. Rahab, the prostitute who aided the Israelites to defeat Jericho, Bathsheba, whose luscious body made David, the man after God's heart to kill her husband. Solomon married many foreign wives and worshipped their idols, Mary whose pregnancy was seen by Jews as sinful; through all these sinful and condemned people did God in His infinite mercy bring salvation to mankind.

After Christ, comes Bob Marley, Robert Nesta Marley (OM). He does not look into the camera. He is caught in a mood of lamentation for the New Babylon, the city of prostitutes and dirty

deals. The Babylonian society is an eyesore. He has for this moment forgotten the guitar still hanging, strapped to his chest, turned his mouth away from the microphone and with his mouth agape and one hand on his cheek, he wails aloud. I always feel he is singing the opening lyrics of *Mix Up*.

Well, it's not easy
It's not easy
Speak the truth, come on,
Speak it ever
Cause it what it will
He who... hides the wrongs he did, yea
Surely does the wrong still...

There is the framed picture of Tarvihi in full ceremonial army attire, the Number One Dress. His face carries a mysterious ambivalence of Mona Lisa. It actually registers neither a smile nor a scowl but both moods appear there in alternation and reflective of your mood at the time. I stick in the foreground the caption: Die, Revolutionary, Die.

My sister, Demvihin whom I have made a private goddess of universal love and peace and tenderness, comes up next. When I come to looking at this picture, all things lose their value. Not actually because she has left this make-believe world for the world, where good is good and bad is bad - though it still baffles me why death snatches the salt of the earth away so frequently. She died two years ago during childbirth. She was the most innocent of our siblings. Her death shocked the Hangman, the prosecutor and all of us to the marrow. His belief in scriptural absolutism suddenly slacked and he allowed us with our discretion.

The frame containing the poster color painting of Jennifer, my girlfriend stood with a shattered glass case. I had

framed it as a monument of love. I had also smashed it in one of my moments of frustration with unsatisfactory answers to life questions. What is love? Is it a commercial venture that trades in emotions and body sensations? Is it a hide-and-seek game? Is it a class trade by barter? Love also begins where there is money and ends where money finishes in very many situations. Though there is true love in one out of a thousand situations, the trouble is that many truly loving women get married to bad men while truly loving men are misled into marrying physically attractive women who are inwardly devilish, So, love always misses the opportunity to meet love. How sure will one be that even the good girls one meets are not hyenas just marking time under the skins of sheep? I know in its place should stand the picture of Nguveren, but only time will tell.

I shift to the Young Revolutionaries Plate. It features, clockwise from top left corner, Thomas Sankara, the Burkinabe, (37) Bob Marley, the Jamaican (36), Sam Okwaraji, the Nigerian (25), who is competing Bob in dreadlocks, Bantu Steve Biko, the South African (30), vowing to die a second time if given the chance. They symbolize the ideals of my life; Bob: inspiration, creative ingenuity, philosophy and revolution; Okwaraji: selfless service and sacrifice; Biko: resistance to oppression and dehumanization. I graft a philosophy between Biko and Okwaraji: Give your life in service to the people but die resisting those who want to enslave you.

Nyitse pushes the door in his characteristic brashness and throws off the curtains from the doorway allowing light to flood in. He suddenly cuts off the light with his huge gorilla frame as he stands in the way of the light. I pretend to be unaware of his presence.

“Tyoughvihi, are you mad? What is wrong with you? Just hear the way you answered me and now you sit with your back to me as if I were not here. What has happened that you are no longer

interested in going to church? I can't understand you any longer." I decide to use the opportunity of the question and the perplexity to sharply nib the sermon in the bud before it grows into an annoying bore.

"Do you think I understand myself that you seek to understand me? Do you think you understand yourself that you want to understand others? Every individual grapples with his own feelings. Sometimes after doing one thing, which you carefully considered, you regret the action. Sometimes, you change your mind the very moment you have made it and start the decision-making process afresh. How then do you wish to understand another person? So, most of the times, I follow my instincts and impulses. These impulses drive me in the direction I follow. I mean, I do not expect you to understand me."

"Then these impulses are leading you to the place of damnation both here on earth and the world to come."

"To you these impulses may be strange but I always do a post-mortem analysis on mine. So, though I do not immediately understand why at the moment, a careful and critical analysis of a string of these impulses and their results show me that they are tugging me towards the direction of freedom."

"You are already alienated from the people. You twins are disoriented and estranged. You have deviated from our family pedigree. You disagree with almost everybody and everything," Nyitse says.

"There, you are right. To be free from childish creations, from demonized philosophies, from bastardized teachings of great masters, one must disagree with many people who are themselves captive. I know I am standing trial in the face of society for rebellion and atheism. It also means that agreeing with the many against my conviction will amount to willingly walking behind the walls of the prison. As of now, something inside me pulls me from

darkness to light. Does the Bible not say that the many walk the path of destruction but the few take the path of salvation?”

“Hear you! You allude to the Bible as if you still believe in God. I keep wondering why a God-fearing child goes to the university and come out God-doubting. Do they teach you stark foolishness there? What do they teach there that makes you atheists?”

“We usually make the mistake of equating God with our religious convictions. The pastors and the Synod are not the same as God. The Bible too is not just a Christian book. It contains two religious documents, one for Judaism and another for Christianity. What I am sure of is that between the two books, people, pastors and synods have permuted so many religious beliefs alienated from both Christianity and Judaism just as Islam and Rastafarianism stem from there. Pastors carve out verses of the Bible, isolate them from the context, and stand on them to establish denominational churches and teach the doctrines of men. Any one of such churches to me is not a Church of God and I don’t feel guilty staying away from it.”

Nyitse stands dumbfounded. I cannot tell precisely what has stunned him. Is it my temerity or the facts of my lecture? I continue the onslaught to make sure I kill the spirit in him.

“You have asked me what they teach us there. They teach us a gamut of knowledge. Knowledge is power, knowledge is right, knowledge is truth, and knowledge is the root of all good things. ‘You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free’. Knowledge and truth combined is what I have acquired.”

He remains silently rooted at the door. I imagine he is painting a vivid picture of Tyoughvivi wriggling and writhing in pains, crying and gnashing his teeth and biting his tongue in the Great Lake of Fire.

“Now,” he seems to wake up from the reverie, “I surely know that destruction awaits you twins. You have become wasted efforts. See how your brother has been behaving lately. Now he has been demoted from Lieutenant to Second Lieutenant for insubordination and then dismissed from service because he refused to go to Liberia on an ECOMOG mission. See the huge money the rank and file are hauling from there. As a commissioned officer, he would have transformed this village with modern mansions. Because of foolish principles, he has schemed himself out of relevance.”

“So, you would prefer him fighting to kill the oppressed and suppress the revolutionary forces routing out tyranny there to make money and erect mansions on the bloody fields of Judas?”

“The most important thing is, when you get there, you know what to do. You either join the reactionary forces or join the revolutionary movement.”

“Just like they go to the Church first and decide to either join the forces of Christ or become advocates of the Devil, so I’ll rather stay away than be a double standard player.” I say this as he hisses and hurries to catch up with Gbamwuan to the church. I burst out with Talking Blues and sing it over and over with emphasis on:

Cos, I feel like bombing the Church

Now that I know that you know That

the preacher is lying

After a couple of rounds, I feel freedom really coming to me. I think of going to church only to behold the beauty of Nguveren, with whom I have become eternally bond in spirit. But since we did not prearrange on the tryst, I take my pen and start the story of our love in fragmented reminiscences.

LOVE LETTER-BOMBS

BETWEEN NGUVEREN AND ME, it has always been Sundays. It took us four Sundays to finally meet flesh to flesh. The whole drama started seven years back when I went to church on a day dedicated to the Girls' Brigade Week. She led a command performance, being a cadet with the highest academic qualifications. She also gave a special number that captivated the entire congregation. It was then that I made up my mind to arrest her as my girlfriend. I decided to be creative about it. People like new things as far as they are new and novel. That is why people go for trendy clothes even if they are pieces of cheap materials put together by top world designers.

These are the clothes that are reigning! The less literate ones would even write it as *raining*. This is the *star* that is *raining!* You would need to do much of syntactical permutations to arrive at the meaning; this is the style that is reigning or is in the vogue! I decided to approach with my own style and I had one week to choose the words. I decided to break the convention of letter-writing in books along with the language

Ditto

25 March

From: Tyoughvihi (Revl)

I think you deserve a clamping hug and a breath-taking kiss for that splendid and arousing performance in the church last week. It really stimulated me. I would like to hug and kiss you F.O.C.

To: Nguveren (Commander of the Saints)

My little sister, Mdevaan, just like any other girl in the church was adept at delivering such letters that only retired adults who had done same in their youthful days could suspect that an

affair was going on. She reported to me how she had delivered the letter. I had to know so that I could ascertain if someone was following the track of events. She said she had collected Nguveren's Hymnal and Bible to show her respect as senior member of the Brigade as they were leaving the church. She slotted the sealed note inside and as they parted ways, she opened the page, showed her the note, closed the book and handed over the books quietly.

"I'll see you next week," was the parting words which we understood was a promise that she was going to reply. I always had this feeling that girls of the kind of boldness exhibited by Nguveren must be social and romantic wizards hiding in the cloaks of church activities to display their talents. I discovered during the six days of waiting that I had a fascination for Nguveren which I had just unveiled and which was growing stronger. The reply came inside a symbolically dazzling white envelope after church service. I watched her during service as she ushered me to my seat. I did my best to predict the kind of response I would get. She was blandly official, ushering me in as she had ushered others and would be ushering many more. I tore the envelop, my hands trembling with excitement.

Ditto

1st April

Dear Tyoughvihi,

Your letter carried all the intensity of your feelings and delivered your message with precision. Thanks for the compliments but I think you rather need a girl's love and devotion

to help you appreciate a woman's worth. A woman is not a mere object of sexual aggrandizement and subsequent derogation. You also need the love of a woman to tamper your flaring mental energies that are about overpowering you and causing harm to society.

Yours sincerely.

Nguveragbo

NB: You may be a Reverend or whatever that Rev'l meant but I am not a Saint nor Commander of such. It is far beyond my sinful reach.

Her words worked on me like an anesthesia. Not on my physical body but any time I read her letter again, something like a frozen aura crept over me and held me spellbound. I felt I was walking into something beyond my comprehension. Where on earth had she got that commanding comportment with which she replied the letter. I figured that I was being entwined by tentacles of a love octopus which I had provoked. Mdevaan shuttled the messages.

Ditto

8th April

Saint,

Revl is short for revolutionary. I want to join the craze for titles. You know, JP2 means one who has been to Jerusalem on pilgrimage twice. I have also read from the Bible to understand that all true Christians were addressed by Apostle Paul in every opening of his letters as saints before rebuking them for sins or weaknesses that beset them.

If you believe any girl has the capacity to impact on my life or any other man the way you see it, you will be the right person who meets such qualifications to me. I think I love you. Sorry, I

love you.

-Revl

On that Sunday, Mdevaan was able to take the reply on my behalf during the evening service. More than three quarters of the congregation stay away from the service except for the dogmatic, the devout and those with appointments. Nguveren had promised a reply if Mdevaan would attend the evening service. She brought it to my pleasant surprise.

Ditto

8th April

Dear Revl,

I know you will one day be rewarded for stubbornness. To me stubbornness and obedience are neither vice nor virtue. Their moral statuses are determined by what one is reacting to. You may be stubborn to evil or obedient to it. That makes a big difference. I know that people call you stubborn and brash and I deduce that you enjoy upsetting them. Deep inside the recess of my mind, I respect you and hope that Pauline transformation will come on you one day to redirect your energies towards the right cause. I respected you right from primary school with your undisputed rascality because every act I witnessed had an underlying purpose and was creatively executed.

I am not desperate for men. I know that you need a woman to catalyze and regulate your life. That does not mean I must be the person to do that. Doctors diagnose ailments and prescribe drugs; pharmacists check them and dispense but sometimes it is nurses that administer them. Let me just be your romantic doctor. A good search will reveal the nurse and the pharmacist.

Thanks
Saint N.

The girl's wisdom and sermons coupled with the unspoken love I was reading between the lines were softening me from the inside. She was spinning the cobwebs of love that immersed me. I remembered now that even in those primary school days, she never taunted nor insulted me.

Ditto

15th April

Dearest Saint,

Are you the messiah or should I wait for another? I must confess I am more deeply entwined by the tentacles of your personality, philosophy, charm and love than you may guess or read from my deliberated and theatrical callousness. Why not allow me to come closer to you and show you what I have? You'll examine me more carefully and do a better prescription. The cure to my ailment may be simply the doctor's presence and a psychological touch. I love you and I know you will NOT GO TO CHURCH next Sunday under any excuse of your imagination. I will be coming for consultation right at your house clinic.

-Revl

Taking my request for granted, the 22nd of April was a very special Sunday for me. It was the day my kind shook the nation in a foiled coup d'état. I was prepared to meet a special person whom I had underestimated in intellect but my provocation had unveiled. The preparation was only at the level of making up my mind to face any unexpected challenges.

As I headed for the door, I heard a romantic giggling that was exclusive of erotic pleasure behind my house. I entered the room and slightly parted the curtains to peep through the window. I saw Ashikumbur the daughter of the Chief Deacon in a body-hug skirt and blouse made of see-through fabrics. Her desire for

exhibitionism strangled the biting cold. The tight-fitting dress etched out details of her underwear in tempting details. The tightening clamp of the blouse on the bra squeezed the superfluous breasts to the neck. The boy was wearing sagging blue jeans that he constantly had to pull up from falling down. They called it pants-down. Reuben was the last child of the Elder-in-Charge of Sunday School. He was fighting frantically to caress the breasts of the girl who was deliberately prolonging the foreplay game she was immensely enjoying with playful resistance. When she covered her breasts with her arms, Reuben would dig at her *number four*, and when she bent down, he would dig at her butts with a concealed stiff rod from his *number four* like a he-goat. She encouraged him with her ecstatic giggles.

“Ashikumbur Gbajur!” I shouted from the window, “What do you people think you are doing?”

They had not gone far from our homestead when the he-goat could no longer hold back his passions. They startled and checked themselves realizing for the first time that they were still not close to their destination. They started running after the numerous tracts that the wind had released from the bondage of the abandoned Bibles while they were pursuing their passions.

“And you shameless he-goat, if you are attracted to the church only by the boobs and butts of young girls, you better change temples. You are fit for brothels like Hollywood Hotel where sex and romance are the standing doctrines. Ashikumbur will be your host priestess there.”

“Shameless peeping Tom,” Ashikumbur countered, “who made you judge over us. Remove the log of wood in your eye before you’ll see the speck in another person’s eye.”

I locked the door and turned the movement chart on the door to read “OUT” and I headed for the Love Clinic. On the road, I met two women known by the whole church for chronic lateness

to church. They would always wait until the church hall was filled before they arrived. They would then enter and start looking for places to squeeze themselves in and in the process, attract the spectatorship of the congregation. They were always richly and seductively dressed, seeking admiration and patronage from the masculine market and praise or envy from their feminine counterparts.

Deborah Kyernum was clad in a flowing silk gown which the violent harmattan wind pasted to her body bringing out the clean etched outline of her secrets, showing the Alpha and Omega of her curvature in silhouetted desire. Priscilla Tyavkase was a buxom, she was wearing a Lace blouse. Her lofty headgear was made of the same Hollandis Wax material *wrappa* on her waist. In the war against imported material, the wind was fluttering the *wrappa* in the bid to strip her naked. She would transfer the Bible and Hymnal to the left and bend down to stretch the cloth in place then return the books. The wind intensified the war sometimes exposing her bleached thighs. She was a prize-winning gossip.

“How do you see? Ngunyi’s Heavy Rain is a ‘*mitation*. Ha! I will rather tie Arewa to my waist than make a mockery of myself with a ‘*mitation*,’” Priscilla said as she battled the wind to remain clothed.

“She does not change it. Today you will see her in the same ‘*mitation*,’ at Monday evening choir practice, at Wednesday women’s fellowship, at Friday prayer meeting, and at Saturday choir practice, it is the same *Heavy Rain*,” the silken woman added.

“And men have no shame. They pursue anything between the legs. Asongu is killing himself over her. I hope you heard that during the last September Bible Digging Conference, they were caught by her husband at Rahabi’s House.”

“Wretched woman, Rahabi, what does she gain from being the chief hostess to kobo-less lovers if not just a bad name?”

“Don’t you know that Asongu chases more than four women in this church alone? If he would buy clothes for them, his whole harvest for the year will go inside women’s bottoms. What have you ever seen on his wife?”

“Don’t you see how Martha’s son resembles him? They say he is very big like a horse and gives them what they want behind closed doors.”

“I don’t know while some of us are cursed. I wonder why some women are lucky to have men going after them even when they are poorly dressed and not as beautiful as we are,” the buxom sighed.

I greeted them. Their replies were deeper in the eyes than in their voices.

“And it is not that they can do it better. I think these clothes and ornaments we put on are putting the men off. They may be afraid of the cost of maintaining women like us.”

“Do we not just wear these expensive things to make us more attractive? My men know that I depend on my business. Even my husband knows that I fend for myself and support him. All the Safari sets you see my husband wear, he does not know the price. I bought three pairs of the latest jeans and pocket shirts for that university boy...I bought two pairs of kaftans for Francis. But they take it and start running away from you.”

“We are still young. Older, poorer and uglier women are getting attention. One day I will be lucky to get a young hot-blooded-son and I will take good care of him. God’s time is the best.” They burst out in chorus laughter as I overtook them and branched off to Agbonor’s house.

LOVE DOVETAIL

THE MOVEMENT CHART ON THE DOOR SAID: In, Knock.

From the room, I could hear some philharmonic melody of classical music in instrumental polyphony playing at a sedative volume. Handel, yes, the vocals tuned to sound like another wind instrument makes the entire piece supernatural. The piece suddenly grafts on Beethoven, recognizable from the dominant vocal that suddenly overrides the instrumentals and turns them into a background and punctuation marks for the voice that sounds like that of God on Creation Day lapping on the deep void to make the Heavens and Earth emerge from their nebulous shapes. The harmonious blend of instruments with the voice in pitch and pathos remains the quality of music since creation. As the world grows old, the sense of musical appreciation like other values also depreciates. The more computers possess the man; the more music dies in the creative faculties of man. True music is a healing balm and tonic to the bruised body and soul of the individual daily assaulted by disharmonious attitudes, words, and actions of others.

Man has carried his destructive activities beyond devastating the fauna and the flora, he has devalued religion and social relations. Now music has suffered corruption. He proudly plays discordant rhythms and calls them Discotheque, Rock and Makossa where wild spirits scream and shriek putting the mind and the body in disarray. Madness, war, violence, brutality, anger, hatred, lust and sexual promiscuity are direct

results deliberately harping on the strings of deviance, deliberately breaking nature's law of balance.

I too broke the laws of man at this point. Some man-made laws are meant to be skipped by some people; all men are equal before God but before man there is no equality in the eyes of the law. I turned the door knob gently and pushed the door like a confident thief. I was greeted by a sweet-smelling aroma that oozed from the room. It jumped at the opportunity of the opened door to escape from jail and spread the good news of harmony to the olfactory nerves of the wide wild world. The arithmetic of the music and the incense made a tug, pulling out the hidden person in me and leading him to a heavenly bliss beyond mere imagination. I opened the door just enough to make a passage for my body, a compact frame. I got into a room that was neat and orderly. On a neatly dressed bed was a book, just below the first of the two pillows. The book was opened close to the middle and upturned with the covers up showing the title: BEETHOVEN: His Spiritual Development. The musical notation on the cover left no one in doubt that the book was about a musical legend.

On the far side of the bed was a beauty that could be easily selected to cast for either Queen Nerta-tua or Cleopatra. Anytime I gazed at her, something inside me would tell me that there is someone inside that face that people would never see if they were not intimate with her. Now she was relaxed on the bed oblivious of my entry. Only time will tell when and how I would unravel the mystery behind that calm and commanding comportment. I felt that my place belonged to where the book lay. I felt an irresistible urge to remove the book and substitute it with my bodily presence. I however felt the strange sensation of someone watching my dilemma from behind. I had closed the door. The feeling persisted. I took a quick furtive glance behind me.

Nguveren was smiling at me with a what-do-you-think-you-are-doing countenance. There were also three Rastafarians,

one laughing at my childish pranks, another was not amused and the third was just musing. I recognized them as Bob Marley; the One Love proponent, Peter Tosh the Mystic Man and Bunny wailers, the fatherly.

Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher was confidently lecturing a circle of adherents and taking the sips of the Hemlock at intervals as if Nguveren, the music, the scented atmosphere and I were not the issue. This was the last of his everlasting lectures employing the questioning method. What is love? What is Justice? What is Truth? He had the confidence to take the poison, knowing that though his physical ugly body would die, his beautiful soul and immortal ideas would live on as long as heavens and earth do not pass away. He was taking this poison centuries before Christ the Son of God would be crucified on the cross for propagating the Truth from the Father.

Professor Ayodele Awojobi was speaking to a horde of pressmen on his way to and from the courts after one of those habitual cases after the hypocritical military regime. He had only a few more of such cases to pursue and interviews to grant. Evil times were fast encroaching on him.

Chief Gani Fahwehinmi was poking a pugnacious finger at something or probably someone not in immediate view. The countenance on the face read fury at the unjust, harsh, Hitlerite and vitriolic government, daring them to detain him over and over again.

The indefatigable fighter was followed by Bishop Desmond Tutu. I was surprised to see the Great Abami Eda, Fela Anikulapo Kuti showing off his tooth-gap as he bent over a microphone reeling out *Yabbis* that leaked from his basket mouth. Beasts Of No Nation (BONN) and Vagabond in Power (VIP) crazed into my mind. There was a blue rose blooming in the midst of thorny cacti and Assop Falls cascading down motionlessly without sound. A Zodiac

water carrier was pouring water on the ground to soften the hardened hearts of men.

I moved to the table and paused the tape. I knew the stop-button would make more noise. In spite of the precaution, she woke up snappily.

I looked her intently in the face as I carefully placed the book back.

“I think it will be good now that you have lost interest in the book because I got it from your rival, to move back to the chair to avoid trouble,” she said and I complied, “I insisted on paying him for it to clear my wheels. I paid him five naira to forestall any different motives. The things I need, I get them at the right time.”

“Things like me,” I thumbed my chest.

“What makes you think I love you? I understand you well. I like you. I respect you and have some hope in your potential for good. However, the word love is a serious commitment. Even if I loved you, it would be unethical to declare that. That will make you cheapen me before the eyes of your friends and consequently, before the eyes of society. If you love me, I will give you the privilege to declare it so that we test it. At present, you are not worth the love of any serious girl until you are refined.”

I kept mute. She watched me from the bed and waited for my response. I felt slighted somehow but I felt challenged as well.

“Where did you get this Beethoven?” I asked, holding up the book.

“Joshua, a young man in the neighborhood lent it to me. He came to visit his aunt and I saw him reading it and got interested.”

A sudden feeling of jealousy swept over me and I dropped the book with disillusionment.

“So, you’re seeing a stranger? You’ve fallen in love with someone you don’t even know too well?” I accused.

“That’s what is called prejudice. I hope you understand English. Passing judgment before you find out facts. You know you are not as bold as Joshua. Joshua toasted me and enticed me with a beautiful book. You had to write notes through a small girl who is apparently more intelligent than you...”

“Stop it! You know I did that to protect your image...”

“...from what? ...from your unworthiness to associate with a dignified girl. That means you need to move to the level where associating with you will no longer be a stigma.”

“You know I am capable of talking to any woman, married or unmarried. It is because of my love and respect for you that I had to become a coward.”

“We have gone beyond that now. I know you can do that but what made you ashamed of yourself is what we need to address. You are a deviant. If you are ashamed of it, leave it. If you think it is right, stand for it and be proud of yourself.”

“I am not ashamed of myself.”

“Then you are afraid of the people.”

“I am not afraid of anyone.”

“Then, you are not sure of what you stand for as to whether it is right or wrong.”

“It is right.”

“Then, why accept stigmatization from the people?”

“Would you accept me if I boldly stood to say I love you before the church?”

“If you proved yourself to love me, and you were worth it.”

“You would be seen as a bad girl.”

“There, again, you accept that you are a bad boy.” “I am not, but that is what the people think.” “Then you need to prove them wrong.”

“What about your image as a friend?”

“I am never in a hurry to win cheap approvals. I know who I am and no matter how long it takes, the truth about me shall withstand suppression. Do you think there is anyone in the entire congregation who has the moral right to accuse another? That includes the Pastor and the Elders.”

I was getting a clearer picture of my personality for the first time. I discovered that I still had a democratic approach to religious issues, which made me to feel guilty of rebelling against

what I felt deep inside me was wrong. God is not a democrat. He does not depend on the majority votes to succeed. The multitude never voted Him into power. He is a monarch and autocrat. He saved only eight people out of the whole of Noah's world. He saved only three souls out of two populous cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Many are called but only few are chosen. The chosen then, must be those who meet the requirements of holding fast to the instructions of God. Those who overcome persecution and rejection are few. However, they always say, Jesus said he gave them the power to bind things on earth. "Whatsoever you agree on and bind on earth, will be bound in heaven. And whatsoever you lose on earth, will be loosed in Heaven."

Does it mean the church elders can agree that fornication and adultery are no longer sin and bind it on earth and God will accept fornication as righteousness? I believe that when an evil king reigns, good becomes evil and evil becomes good. Then, people who speak the truth become the hunted. In the days of Ahab and Jezebel, Elijah and his godly righteousness became evil. Did that make Elijah evil in the sight of God because the prophets of Baal outnumbered those of God? Was Elijah alone because he felt he was alone? Jeremiah, was there anyone who agreed with him though he was right? Did Peter Tyoban not fall a victim of excommunication because he felt it was wrong to suspend Denen for reporting Elder Tyodugh to the Pastor because he took over another elder's wife? Have I not been supporting the evil status quo by simply refusing to be part of it but accepting the guilt of being a deviant?

"I have known you in name all these years I have been seeing you. Today I have known you better," I said.

"I am sure it is not in the manner of 'and Adam knew his wife and she bore a child'. Don't let the elders hear you. The word twist masters that they are, they will summon us to answer for canal knowledge."

I had never had the bliss I felt in the presence of Nguveren. I was relaxed without guilt; the guilt of staying away from church services, the guilt of staying with a girl in the room, two of us alone, the guilt of refusing to join the crowd to do evil.

“But why do you still participate actively in Girl’s Brigade activities and ushering work as if all is well?”

“Light must shine in darkness and darkness must not comprehend nor overpower it. That is what I do.”

“What do you say to rumors flying around that the elders and deacons favor you in selections because you’re in relationship with most of them?”

“So, you came for me because you learnt I was a prostitute? Do you patronize prostitute? Then you’ll be disappointed because I am not one. Almost all the elders and deacons have approached me for illicit friendship, and I turned them down respectfully. That is one reason they respect me and maybe, they are also afraid of me.”

“What of the ones you have accepted?”

“Even if I have never accepted any, I may choose to tell you that I have been dating this young man or that to arouse your envy and see me as a desired girl you’ll need to compete for. Oh, I forgot to tell you that I’ll be leaving for the States in less than a year’s time.”

“What for?”

“Training.”

I was not sure she was telling me a fact or pulling my legs. I did not know how to react without falling into her trap. I decided to cage my feelings in mute indifference to task her in employing better skills. A war of nerves ensued. She remained silent. We

engaged in eye wrestling to see who would blink, or lower a face and break the silence. She persevered.

“I am waiting,” I said with an exaggerated calm.

“How do you fancy the idea of a Reverend (Mrs) Nguveren Tyoughvivi?” she said with a nefarious air of seriousness.

“Will you marry me on the condition that I become a fake pastor and you become an unbiblical pastress? Is that what you are inputting? You know I do not have an iota of respect for these clergy. I hate the fraudulent and criminally pompous American-trained type. In my wildest of wet dreams, I will never share a bed with one.”

“Well, the plan is that after six months of staying in the U.S., I will be ordained as Pastor (Mrs) Nguveren Atim Vorbo. His plans are that we will delude the Synod into believing that we are going for training in Grand Rapids, Michigan but once we graduate from there, we will establish a ministry of our own.”

“Why are you telling me all these things?”

“It’s because you are so busy playing revolutionary but you are starkly ignorant of the schemes of the evil one.”

I was dumbstruck by this sudden revelation. So, there was more beneath the hypocrisy than meets the eyes! It has become a dog eats dog schemata! If not for the evil cloak of ‘whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven’, the same women will need to tear off 1Timothy Chapter 2 verses 12: I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man but to be in silence. They will also rewrite chapter 3 verses 1-2 to read, ‘This is a faithful saying: if a WOMAN desires the office of a bishop, SHE desires a good thing. A bishop then must be blameless, the WIFE of one HUSBAND.’

Just as homosexuals and sodomites stand ordained as gay clergy when the Bible says they are abominable before the Lord and shall not inherit the kingdom of God, it is obvious that they are satanic clergy. One wonders what has become the position of the much-acclaimed infallible word of God. Besides, that rogue that has used the pimping he does for the Secretary of the Synod, caught in the Synod Secretariat with another man's wife, to lobby for a slot on the scholarship scheme. Now money extorted from poor communicants will sponsor him to America to come back and lord it over an empire of the gullible. Romans Chapter 1 verses 20-32, the prize-winning recitation for which I had once received the standing ovation of the congregation at the Sunday School Conference came to my mind. I could picture myself at the age of eight, reeling out God's will to thousands of adults.

21 Because even though they knew God, they glorified

Him not as God, neither were thankful. But they became vain in their imaginations and their foolish hearts were darkened.

22 Professing to be wise, they became fools,

24 Therefore, God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies among themselves.

25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

26 For this cause God gave them up to vile passions, for even their women changed the natural use of the body into that which is against nature.

27 And also in the same way the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another,

men with men working what is indecent and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error that was due.

28 And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a depraved mind to do those things that are not proper,

29 being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,

30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents,

31 without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving and unmerciful.

32 Although they know the judgment of God that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only continue to do the same things but also consent to those who do them.

My father, the Hangman, who was a Boy's Brigade captain, had drilled us not only physically but also in the scriptures to make sure that, the scriptures were also memorized as a weapon of warfare against the devil. I was a member of the Boy's Company. Those scriptures that I thought I had forgotten long after my father died and the Boy's Brigade with him still came up at crucial moments.

“All arrangements have been made expecting me to get through with my final exams in two month and follow him to the U.S. They arranged behind my back. You know my father is somehow dictatorial. I am telling you this so that in the event I am overpowered, you'll know how to tackle the rot in the House of God.”

I could not read anything from her eyes. I could see seriousness interplay with a mischievous glint and I plunged myself mentally into oblivion where the music that was on continuous play ceased. I could not tell how long I stayed there but as I came up, I stood from the chair and made for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“Home of course!”

“What’s the meaning of that nonsense? If you get out of that door,” she warned, “don’t step your foot here again. I mean, that is the end of this relationship, a stillbirth.”

“Reverends of all materialists, I never knew you could stoop that low.”

I defied the order, and took the last steps to the door and opened it. As I took the first leg out of the door, I felt the pounce of a tigress at my back, shoving me back in and closing the door at the same time.

“And you call yourself a man!” she mocked.

I faced her all my suppressed anger drowned by the new discovery of her personality. I smiled and sat down on the bed this time.

“Since when have you become physical? Is that what they teach you at Girl’s Brigade camps? I am afraid you will make a husband beater.”

“And you, a wife nagger. I told you about his plans and you did not bother to ask me what my stand is nor did you tell me what you can do as someone who is also interested in me. I guess you are defeatist. My mother tells me that a woman does not turn down a marriage proposal until she has a good alternative. How do you expect me to tell the man off when you do not have the liver to

stand and tell me you love me. I am just getting close to you today. Be serious!"

"With or without a landing base, I expected you would not hesitate to react sharply to that kind of proposal."

"How many women will not jump to the opportunity of marrying an Americana pastor for the privilege of boarding a plane to Washington even for just one trip? I am a girl for God's sake. Your hatred for the clergy has consumed your sense of reasoning. I know when the issue of the clergy is raised, you will say one plus zero is ten."

"True, Nguveren, the clergy are not something to even joke about. This has become the most inhuman profession, such an anti-human and deadly business that I have fear for it. Green snakes are most deadly in green grasses. When it comes to dealing with them, I prefer dealing with the military and armed robbers."

I fell back on the bed with my feet still on the ground. She lay on my chest, looking into my eyes. In her eyes, I always saw the confidence of a square-based pyramid rising high in the sky without the fear of tumbling on its side. In times of social storms, upheavals and uncertainties, a look in her eyes would cease your alarm. It is not only this confidence that resides there but an overflowing river of awareness. Her eyes were piercing and soul-searching as well as eloquence in speech. She stood and went to the cassette rack, picked an unlabeled one, ejected the playing cartridge and slotted it and cued it to play.

"Now, far from being a joke, the man came here last Thursday and spent the whole evening coaxing me into marrying him. Listen to this." She started the tape and came back to the bed.

The reels roll for a few seconds, there is a rattling as a voice speaks from a distance and gradually becomes louder. He must have been away from the system when the recording started.

“Why are you so difficult and different? I can take care of you more than any man you know or who is disturbing you.”

“I am a very demanding girl. You may not have what it takes to make me contented.”

But your parents have already given you to me. You know your father must approve the person you will marry. I feel we can make it together with love and determination. I am their favorite at any time.”

“With my Higher National Diploma, I prefer marrying someone with a higher qualification not one with an Ordinary National Diploma holder who cannot future his education in Nigeria, unless in a back street college in the US.”

“I love you. Love bears all things. Love endures all things; it bears no grudges. I will take any insult from you. It appears rascals like Tyoughvihi may be your choice but strangely, he shows little interest in women. Who else...? Tsenongo has a fiancée. Tivseer is married unless you want to be a concubine. The elders and deacons are only going to use and dump you like the condom they will employ to avoid an out-of-the-wedlock-child scandal...”

She looked into my eyes again.

“He shows little interest maybe because he is disgusted with the sexual promiscuity that has become an accepted norm in your church. Please let us not continue with this. I am sorry but you can take this message to Daddy: Nguveren cannot be given to any pastor trainee as a Christmas gift and on my scale of preference, no clergyman is listed.”

The bastard had the rotten guts to call me a rascal, what he could never do in my face. When they see you, they would greet you by your great grandfather’s name, which is the highest mark of verbal accolades among our people.

“That is what they say at first but do the direct opposite as gifts start coming in,” I said.

“Who?”

“Pastors!”

“Lie!”

“Liars”

“Lie!”

“Pastors and women!”

“What happens?”

“They double-speak!”

“I always mean what I say.”

The voices on the tape continued. The man was saying, “... a clergywoman and a clergyman’s wife, you just sit there and the church members, wards, servants fall over one another to minister to you. They supply your needs from foodstuff to cooking utensils, they farm for you, they harvest, they supply bags of melon seeds, baskets of fish, and bags of locust bean seeds. The church sets aside two special Sundays every year for monetized farming for the pastor. Beside all these, we shall have a monthly salary and healthcare allowances. They will do easy and difficult chores for you just because of the spiritual guidance given to them...”

“Who will give spiritual guidance to whom? The blind leading the blind are destined for the bottomless pit! Those who really seek true spiritual guidance know that the clergy of today are as empty as a sucked-out orange. They need the spiritual guidance they claim to offer. With your infatuation with material well-being, how spiritual are you going to be? What has God to do with a dirty and greedy Mammon?” Nguveren’s voice asked.

“Just imagine the United States of America, USA; the expensive cars, limousines, air flights to the big cities in the world, the comfort and the huge amounts offered as tithes

collections at crusades, personal gift from rich families, worship...Reverend! What politicians seek; we will get. We will dine with governors and presidents. In fact, I have set my eyes on becoming the CAN President of this country..."

"I suspect America is the Heaven they preach about in the Bible, it is the imaginary Hakuna Matata, peace and bliss. But as far as I am concerned, you are a mere day dreamer. Pastoring a church of forced labor and extortion has not been as easy as you are painting..."

"You should have asked him if he was aware of the violent skirmishes and court cases between the clergy and the congregations..." I cut in.

"Shhhh!"

"...where communicants passed urine inside communion cups and stool inside bread trays used for the Holy Communion. It is not far from here. Thirty-naira fare will take you to Pilakyaa and you can ask anybody for confirmation. Was it not why Pastor Gonki Abonki became crazy and obsessed with taxing the communicants? He made them buy two Peugeot cars, one for himself and another for Mama Atese Gonki. He wanted his own replaced with a Mercedes V-Boot. Did the communicants say, Lord thy will be done? He connived with the Treasurer Deacon and bought two, one for himself and another for the Deacon. When some key members protested, he stopped them from taking communion and for your information, the next communion service..." The tape stopped automatically.

"Another old pastor who refused to go even when he was five years past retirement was hauled out of the church dock and called was *Areopagus* by the angry congregation for keeping church monies in his private savings account and some in a fixed deposit account to accrue the interest to him." I said, wishing we had all the exposés recorded on tape.

Nguveren explained that the recording cost her one of the most valuable tapes she had in her collections. She pressed the red button when the desperation made the young pastor to rave about the room, moving from one end of the room to the other and from one wall picture to another. This could pass for a drama rehearsal.

“If I related this to you, I bet you will not have believed me. He said because he loved me and wanted us to enjoy together, he would not hide his plans to me. I told him that I loved living well but the last thing I would do will be to consciously cheat people in the name of God.”

I had plunged myself headlong into love with this girl from a prankish letter. Every woman likes holy-businessmen who sports suits, ties and expensive shoes and changes them like a chameleon, walks like an angel afraid of treading on ants. These angelic steps are actually the stalking of chameleons to surprise ants and the kaleidoscopic changes of clothes and shoes attempts at being all that they are not. They make coats and suits professional attires graded to the ranks. The Supreme Coats are those thick jute materials worn by the old General Overseers, Chief Superintendents, Bishops and other names associated with proprietors of the man-owned churches. The Appeal Coats, those worn by the younger, overtly business-minded American been-tos or Wanna-be to attract women and attention. The *kwei-kwei* pastors who refuse to come to terms with the reality that they have failed in the motivational talk church business wears the Magistrate Coats. They live from hand to mouth trying to fleece ten kobo from a seven-man congregation, stubbornly waiting for a miraculous breakthrough that will see their brand selling worldwide. The trainee pastors wear Upper Area Coats as a mark of recognition.

Aspiring pastors like Atim Vorbo go for the Grade One Area Coats. There is *Koti-Yogh* also known as *Yogh* for short. These are coats worn on cold nights at wake keeps. Only the mentally

deranged wear them in daytime. The imbeciles imagine that the best thing ever to be is a clergy. The seams of such coats sag and bulge like sandbags. When two apes wearing them shake hands, one watching cannot resist the urge to laugh on seeing two coat sleeves kissing.

The latest hairstyle is high punk since Afro went out of the vogue. This was the hairstyle ruffians wore to upset the old school who believed that punk was still a mark of the social outcast. It was so offensive that the adherent called it '*M-tse-or-ke-tswar-ga*' or *I-don't-lodge-in-anybody's-arsehole*. That is the trademark of a modern pastor.

“Do you want me to believe they will compel you to marry that imbecile?”

“I know my parents very well. My mother has started complaining that she would die with only water in her stomach because I have refused to accept this marriage proposal that will bring fortunes in her life. My father has not spoken, but once he does, he will hardly change his mind. I am not sure I love you. Neither am I sure you will love me but you have come in at a time I need you. Let me use you. We will negotiate after you’ve made the man himself loose interest in me.”

“A friend in need is a friend in deed. What will I think of myself when you use me and dump me like a rag?”

“What will Jennifer think if you suddenly dumped her for me? We still have a lot to iron out but let us cross this bridge first. Without crossing it, my marrying you will not be an option to discuss. Even for the joy of frustrating a clergyman alone, I am sure you will do it. If you love something, let it go, if it comes back to you, it loves you too. You may then have a love dovetail.”

“I will do anything for you to prove that I truly love you. Your marrying me and frustrating the pastor are just fringe benefits.”

She hugged me tightly and even made to plant that tantalizing sacred kiss on my lips but changed her mind quickly into a peck on the cheek. Then we heard voices outside. The church service was over and we were too indulged in our escapades to realize how time had gone. Incidentally Nguveren's mother, Tabitha Agbonor and two of her siblings were back from the church with Trainee Pastor Atim Vorbo, on their trail to see Nguveren who must have been reported not well at the church service.

“Nguveren, you have a visitor. If you are too sick to come and take him to your room, I will bring him, get your room in order,” Mama shouted. We exchanged glances.

“What kind of visitor is he that must come to my room?”

“You will know when you come out.”

“It may be your Trainee Pastor husband,” I predicted. She just ogled at me and went to the door, stretching the curtain.

“You are right. Look at him sitting on the veranda in a raffia-spine chair with his *yogh*.” She did not laugh. I came and peeped from behind her. The man was inclined in the raffia-spine chair with his fingers interlocked at the back of his head. The Bible and the hymnals were on the ground by his side. She turned and put her arms caringly on my shoulders, looking in to my eyes. “Tyoughvihi, I want to tell you that I love you. For now, to avoid an early fuss, just go through the window, I will arrange another meeting. I do not know what is wrong with my parents. I told them I was not interested in this man,” she said in hushed tones.

“That is another set up for you to call me a coward. Go through the window, for who? The Trainee Pastor, who is the thief will come in through the door and I will leave through the window. Read John Chapter 10, verses 1-5 if you are not aware of the implication of what you are asking me to do. I thought you are not ashamed of being associated with me. This is our chance, go and

bring him in, let me confront him for calling me a rascal,” I said in the same hushed tone.

“Nuguveren!”

“Mama, did you not say I should put my room in order?” she looked at me. For the first time I could see the towering square-based pyramid stagger in the wind. Her plump lips parted slowly as she made efforts to say something. She closed them quickly. “You came here to disgrace me! Now, the stage is in your hands, direct the drama.” She dashed out.

DARING THE DEVIL

A HERD OF THOUGHTS RAN AMOK ON MY MIND. Several impossible options came to my mind on what to do to the numskull on his stepping into the room. I thought of giving him a blinding slap, directly in the face. I also considered giving him a bear hug and making him scream. I ruled out the alternative of sitting there like an *atoki*, the effigy used by farmers to scare off the birds and apes because he could take it for cowardice. I rejected the option of dragging Nguveren and romanticizing with her as that would bring her to more disrepute. I went back into my history for a strategy. I took Nguveren's towel and spread it under the bed, which was high enough to allow my frame slide beneath it. I released the bed cover and allowed it to fall as if the bed was undressed.

Ten years before now, it was for me the greatest survival strategy. Whenever my father, the Hangman or my mother, the Prosecutor, threatened me, I would sneak to the backyard, climb through the window of their room, and hide under their bed. A manhunt would start from our room and spread out to the neighborhood. Sometimes they found Tarvihi, my brother instead. He, as usual, would be unaware of my whereabouts saying he had left me in the house. We had come to resolve that it was useless exposing each other to escape punishment since the Hangman would always find a reason for punishing the two of us for every offence. He could say Tarvihi refused to caution me so he was an accomplice or I had not reported Tarvihi when he committed the offence so I had abated the offence. I would hide there until they would search all the probable places.

Then I would sneak out through the vertical bard of the burglary proof by cramming my body through it. They never realized that one's head is the biggest part when considering maneuvering. Once your head passes through an obstacle, the entire body can be made to pass provided the same narrow space extended vertically or horizontally up to two and a half human head-width. Once out by dusk, I would climb any of the trees behind the house and spy on their plans and map out mine to dodge them.

I never made any mistake of going to places expected of me. My father's details never left out likely places. My mind therefore always worked on the most unlikely. With my mother, the unlikely places I chose were the places she considered too likely and anticipated I would not use them. My father was entirely a different thinker. He had the capacity to track your thoughts. If your war strategies fall into the thought patterns of your enemy, what a wasted effort and resources that would be!

I hated flogging and to the Hangman's keen canes, no child was immune. I was too young to develop the mental capacity to cut off the sensual effects of the lashes from reaching my mind so I brought in every idea and effort to avoid a single lash. Sometimes it took me over two weeks of daily thinking and action to pull through a period of exile. This entailed waking up before dawn from my birdie sleeps and taking to out-of-the-village distances. I became a known fugitive in neighboring villages. Sometimes someone would report that I had been seen at a particular location but everyone knew that I wouldn't be found in the same place where they had seen me within the next hour or two. I made my return legs by dusk, which enabled me to pilfer on people's farms for cassava tubers, garden eggs and oranges. When groundnuts were ripening, I would branch in, harvest a couple of stands, and tuck them in my armpit like a professional drummer, eating and singing quietly to myself. I grew fearless of the nights. I took to hiding during the day and operated at night like wild cats.

My brother Tarvihi was more tolerant to flogging but sometimes when the sentence passed by the jury of the Prosecutor and the Hangman stiffened, we had fun running off together. This time we could join fishermen and the dragnet groups and follow the river to distant places. When two of us were involved, our mother sent emissaries to locate us and compel our father to bring us back on the conditions of amnesty.

I heard footfalls of Nguveren and the shoe-noise of the Trainee Pastor following behind. The rhythmic language of the shoes gives the congregational spectators a spiritual satisfaction; the glitter of its polished leather attracts the loud clapping and ovation of the underdogs when the pastor ascends the pulpit. The rhythmic knocks on the face of the floor attracts a uniform swiveling of necks that turn back if the pastor wears a pretentious humility to sit among the crowd and springs from there to ascend to the high place. The necks that swivel in uniform like a multi-lens video camera, pick the legend from the legs and escort him to the podium. Half of the lenses are colored orange with admiration and love, a quarter is colored green with envy. The last quarter is colored red like the revolutionary's neckties. It is from this quarter that the dissidents and the rebels against the apparent swindling of the gullible members come from. They know the political economy of religious fraudulence rooted in tithes, levies and compelled offerings and the dialectical dynamics of the ambivalence of Bible verses. They know the manipulative skills of using language to besiege and enslave the minds of the greedy as well as the gullible.

The host pastor would say, “put your hands together for the Great Man-of-God! I say, put your hands together for the Lord!” A tremendous clapping that makes the clapping of thunders and of the heavenly host when God succeeded in suspending the globes and the galaxies in balance sound like a click of the camera follows this. When the tin god climbs the stage to the pulpit and the glitter of the shoes comes to the sight of even those who were blocked, his

ascension receives a standing ovation dwarfing the one, which greeted the ascension of Christ to Heaven after accomplishing an unparalleled feat of single-handedly defeating the Devil. When God at the rebellion left it to Angel Michael and the other Heavenly Hosts, they could only manage to roll Lucifer over the edge of Heavens, sending him crashing into Adam and Eve.

“Man, you trapped yourself down here. Do you know how long the moron will stay? Your throat now itches. Do not cough! Hold your breath. You are lucky there is no dust under here so you will not be sneezing. With patience, you will hear from the horse’s mouth.”

The footsteps entered. The shoe-talk grew louder and advanced. The owner of the legs possessing the shoes crashed on the bed and heaved a sigh; a sigh of mounting tension and anxiety. He heaved another sigh of indecision. The bed threatened to crumble under the vibrations of the reverberating heaves. The strong wooden floor on which the mattress rested, called *Katako* came to my rescue. I saw Nguveren’s heels near the table placed directly by the window at the backyard. She apparently looked through the window.

“Nguveren,” the Trainee Pastor spoke with a tremor in his voice, “come and sit down with me.”

“I don’t want to sit down...with you.”

“Come on, you are just staring through the window. Is your mind that far from me? I command you to come and sit down in Jesus’ name.”

“Nobody dictates to me here in whatever name. I told you never to set your foot here in the name of courtship.”

He got up and I could see the shoes as he moved farther from the bed. They were not very neat. It appeared only the

ordained and collared ones parading the Mtse-or-ke-tswar-ga punk style could afford the posh and polish.

“Ngu-ve-ren!” He dragged the name imploringly, “Why are you doing this thing to us? Why don’t you love me?” The voice had totally broken down with lustful infection and sounded like a tape reel forced to play on weak cell power.

“I can see you are possessed. Take your hands off me! I am struggling to behave like a girl through your short stay in my room and it takes dosages of patience to do that. Don’t trigger the man inside me.”

“You don’t even want me to see your face?” He pleaded and went on chanting the America mantra, “America, America; where all women dream of going; the land of splendor and plenty, where cars run like water, luxuries of heavenly kind. For a man and woman of God, everything is free! ”

“So, you know there is nothing appealing about your personality? You are a bat, confused about being a Protestant Orthodox or Pentecostal pastor. I want to get married to a man for his true personality; his intangible qualities and not for the cars and places, he is associated with. don’t touch my shoulders again.”

I heard a scuffle around the room and took advantage of the noise to shift position and push the broom under the bed out into view. The skirmish became as keen as that which ensues when a strange dog meets a strange cat. I heard the pushing of the table and the falling of the radio and cassette player. I saw a hand picking up the broom. I heard three strokes of the broom land in quick succession.

“When I told you not to touch my shoulders, did I mean you could touch my breast?”

I felt the urge to get out and hit him myself. What I had restrained myself from doing throughout my long stay in the room,

had been illegally done by the imbecile. The fight shifted from the room into the open courtyard and gave me the opportunity of getting out of the prison. I peeped through the curtain to see Nguveren in hot pursuit of the Trainee Pastor with the broom poised to descend on his back. I saw the man, like children playing, doing a flight for his life.

There are two sides to the life of every human, actuality and drama. Man dramatizes some aspects of his life to create a false impression about himself in the minds of his fellows. Sometimes situations force him to come out of the shell of drama to live out the reality he considers unbecoming of his personality. Fleeing and panicking in times of danger brings out the real person of the assumed personality. Man does not have any dignity if he does not live right. Every pomp and pageantry we see on display is just drama. The real dignity of a man lies in his integrity. Dignity does not lie in wealth. It does not lie in beauty. Dignity does not lie in political power. It is not in the superfluous clothes worn to cover nakedness. The dignity of a man is in being true in all things, whether rich or poor. So, who is a dignitary?

He is that hardworking poor man who has remained poor yet does not cheat nor steal. A man may know that he has nothing to offer humanity in spiritual, moral or intellectual service. He may still want to get the financial and social rewards accorded to such that build society with these virtues. He then must dramatize dignity. He propels himself into reckoning by wearing heavy clothes, cheating his way into wealth and acquiring all the paraphernalia of comfort but feels naked and empty within. A coward can challenge a valiant in public only to dramatize that assumed image but will go behind the back to be the real person by begging and bribing his opponent to save himself from embarrassment.

My father told me a story of a Jukun man who was engaged in a scuffle with a Tiv neighbor. The fight ensued when the Tiv

man went to confront the Jukun neighbor for a trespass the latter had committed. Suddenly the Jukun man's wives appeared on the scene as his fans. Knowing that the Tiv man will definitely throw him, the Jukun man whispered in his opponent's ear, "Allow me to floor you and I will give you this big she-goat that is passing by. If you floor me, my wives will both desert me. Look at it; it is heavily pregnant, please." The Tiv man complied, the wives celebrated with ululations but the vanquished went home with the spoils of the war. Crises are like wind that blows the feathers off the anus of the chicken. Crises test the dignity, manliness, cowardice and emptiness of a man.

"Nguveren, what do you think you are doing, pursuing a mouse?" Mama shouted from the kitchen. With that shout, the Trainee Pastor zoomed into the kitchen, like Adonijah fleeing from the wrath of Solomon after demanding Abishag, the beautiful Shunammite. Mama rushed out brandishing a live faggot after Nguveren who started retreating to her room. As I saw them heading towards the room, I snappily moved back to the table, sat on the chair and rested my chest on the table. I backed the door, facing the light from the backyard window. I posed as if a TDB student caught unawares by natural slumber as he tried to cheat sleep in preparation for an all-important examination. I used the towel I had used under the bed to drape my shoulders. "Wait until your father comes back to teach you a lesson on respecting dignitaries."

"Aaaa-i-gh, Jesus!" Nguveren screamed on approaching the door and ran back into the courtyard. I imagined that Mama had burnt her with the faggot fire a hell fire punishment rehearsal. I heard the panic of scampering and rushing from the doorsteps fade into the courtyard and I tiptoed to the door and peeped out to see Mama, Atim and Iveren, Nguveren's twelve-year-old sister all gather around her and chorus with concern, "Nguveren, what is it?"

“There is someone sitting at my table.” She had forgotten that she left me in her room and inadvertently blew the trumpet against me. I was wearing a purple shirt and yellow cardigan, which I draped with the towel to make it appear, hung on the chair. I never envisaged that my head, which I kept low on the table, would be visible.

“But there was no one there when we were there.” The Trainee Pastor said, puzzled.

“Maybe he entered through the window,” Iveren suggested, “let me go and see.”

I darted to the door and hid behind the pane. Only a daredevil girl would be bold enough to enter the room and comb it for an unknown alien. Iveren ran up to the door and stopped abruptly. She shoved aside the curtains and glanced hastily and fearfully into the room.

“Mama, there is nobody.”

“But I saw someone,” Nguveren stood her ground.

“Maybe the incense you burnt in the room attracted some goblin,” Iveren suggested.

“Shut up!” Nguveren shouted.

“So, you burnt incense in your room?” Mama asked.

“Yes, I sensed the aroma but thought it was the scent of pomade,” Trainee Pastor Atim collaborated.

“Keep your mouth out of this! What is your business in this matter?” Nguveren snapped.

“Nguveren, so you purposely attracted evil spirits inside your room? What do you want to bring into this house? You know that those Indian incenses and candles attract evil spirits. I first warned you when you started borrowing Indian cassettes. Do you

want to join *Cherubi Cherubi*, those people who wear white garments, walk barefooted, and drink people's blood?"

"Those are baseless rumors illiterate people peddle," Nguveren countered.

"Shut up that toad entrance. How can they be baseless when everyone believes them? Are you not gradually becoming like that Tyoughvihi who suddenly stopped going to church with the belief that what all of us believe is wrong? What is this education doing to these children? You now know more than your parents do. Nyitse was just lamenting how his nephew has been behaving. I am strongly suspecting you may be in league with that spoiled brat."

"Mama, you are slandering a lot of people who have nothing to do with this."

"Go ahead and report me to them."

"Mama, I must be going but I think you should calm down and lower your voice. Your neighbors are hearing you," Trainee Pastor Atim chipped in.

"Please, sit down," Mama pleaded, "If Nguveren has chased you, her father and I have not. You see the food that is on fire was specifically for you. This useless girl feigned sickness to stay at home and did not cook the afternoon meal but she is now strong enough to chase around people who have come to pay her sympathy visits."

"Mama, your food is always my food."

"Then eat this one to prove to me that you are not leaving out of anger over what your wife-to-be has done."

"I will do that next time. I will come purposely to eat your food. For now, I have to go and prepare for evening service."

I saw him leaving with an aura of shame enveloping him. His cheeks, carrying the burden of anguish, weighed down like two maize sacks hanging on both sides of an encumbered donkey. His strides deviated from the arrogant pace of a horse to the knotted trot of a donkey's legs failing to carry him at the desired speed from the spot of shame. Mama saw him off with a trailing monologue as Nguveren made her way back to the room.

“Other women are lucky to have children who obey them. Maybe the hospitals I visited when I was pregnant with her spoiled my daughter. But other women are still lucky with these medicated children. If I had known, I would not have taken the pills when I conceived the useless girl...”

I pushed the door closed as soon as she entered. She got startled but had apparently remembered by then that she had left me in the room. She sat on the bed exasperated. I joined her, and held her in a cautious hug. She pushed me off gently and lay on her back, staring at the ceiling. I lay beside her still clasping her right hand with my left in an interlocking spur.

“So, you are capable of such fear. You are only a woman after all.”

“I have never underestimated your capacity for caprices but you took me unawares with this gimmick. Where were you when the man and I entered?”

I pointed under the bed.

“When will you grow up, Tyoughvihi?” she asked, smiling. “Can you imagine yourself, an undergraduate and a prospective husband and father of children, going under the bed like small kids?”

“Undergraduate you said! Undergraduates can always go under!”

I did not see anything strange in that. I could not fathom why my being an undergraduate and a prospective husband and father would rob me of self-expression and living my life to the fullest. I wanted to live my life without assumed airs of dignity. I enjoyed living my life in tune with the circumstances. When Buhari packaged Umaru Dikko, a former Minister of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and Chairman Presidential Task Force on Rice Importation like a dog bought by the Calabar for Christmas, for exportation in a crate was he not a dignitary? If people have their own way, Tsenongu Agaku, the NPN Chairperson for the entire Benue State would not have broken into a run when the police accidentally discharged a teargas canister into the J. S. Tarka Stadium where the party was holding her congress meeting. He did not just run for his life but also to the great amusement of motor park touts. It was fun to watch dignitaries engage in the race for their lives with their swollen tummies tossing from side to side like pregnant swine. The situation demanded just that.

“Leave me as an undergraduate out of this matter. I am a human being conditioned by circumstances which I accept as they come just like the kids in their innocence do.”

“But children do not have a sense of shame.”

“I choose not to have a sense of shame just like them and save myself the stress adults build up in their psyche.”

“You heard what Mama was saying about you and I. Very soon people will start wagging their tongues with gossip.”

“Woman palaver, what do we have to do with public image? Are you aspiring for any political office? You wished we could upset the pastor-aspirant and that show made a good riddance to bad rubbish. Do not bother yourself. You promised me you would stand by me to be myself.”

I know there is always someone who really understands you. Others may have inflated or blurred impression of your

personality. Public image is never the true picture of what one actually is on the moral podium; it is a hotchpotch of other people's realization of the absolute form perceived from various perspectives. Others must see you as an absolute evil even when your intentions are pure. Those who worship evil will deify you especially if you are a prototype evil that answers their craving for a departure from the boring archetype. In a society where the people are predominantly and arrogantly ignorant of real values, pleasing them will mean championing stupidity. What crime did the poet commit to warrant Plato advocating his ostracism from his Ideal State? His imagination was too fertile and capable of creating a perception in the people that could lead to their questioning and finding fault with the status quo that needed a sheepish followership. Adolf Hitler with his entire propensity for evil enjoyed the overwhelming support of his contemporaries until he met doomsday. I stand for what I believe in daring devils and bidding the world to revolve around me.

Three categories of people exist in society, those who use a fertile imagination and take the pains to put their feet in the shoes of a victim of public ridicule. They try to dig in the validity of allegations against such a person before passing judgment. The second class does not care about what one actually is. They accept every human being as a social animal bound to make mistakes and interact with him. The third class is always combing the nooks and crannies of one's character to find an ugly spot and use lenses to magnify the spot.

“Mama will soon be back. I will go out and engage my sister in the kitchen. I don't want to see any apparition when I come back. This is not time for romance.” She hugged me and pointed to the door but went out ahead of me.

THIS ROT FOR AUTOPSY

I COULD NOT PLACE HOW LONG it took me to reach home on the clock. It could have been within a twinkle of an eye. *Aberabatsu*, the lunatic had strayed into a furnace, and before he had realized it, it was his funeral. I walked home a cat in the bag of my thoughts.

The tragedy of man is his failure to think. Thinking has five dimensions. You can think high, deep, wide, wild and fast. People who engage in all the dimensions make professional thinkers and successful careerists. They are the philosophers; sages who chart new courses and convince others to follow. They may cause upsets at first. They may be tagged rebels but sometimes long after they suffer persecution and die, the people worship them for planting the ideals and watering it with their lives.

Thinking high goes beyond building castles in the air in the name of vaunting ambitions. One avoids indulgence on sensual or base ideas. The subjects of thought hinge on elevated and society building concepts, issues of life that do not put the thinker alone in focus but the general welfare of society; humans, flora, fauna and the prospects of things not yet brought into existence. He seeks to unveil God, His will and purpose.

Thinking deep involves getting to the roots of a matter, especially of the complex nature. The thinker should never be in a hurry to arrive at any conclusions. One must never scratch the idea, jump to conclusion without considering other likely options. One considers a lot of other possibilities and probabilities before reaching a viable conclusion.

Thinking fast requires clarity of mind acquired from experience. The ability of the thinker to use his experience, quickly identify the apt alternative, and dump bad cards even before they fully come up. It takes a shorter time to isolate the odds from even. It requires placing several ideas on the mind's clipboard without losing sight of any.

Wide thinking can also be termed prolific or versatile engagement of thought in variety of subjects and issues of life. The thinker does not restrict himself to issues that concern him or his professional calling. He is not quick at asking questions, he finds his answers by following his mind's process of investigation.

Religious dogma, fear and social norms have done havoc to the fifth dimension of thought, muffling it in a high percentage of humans. They have clear-cut and rutty patterns beyond which is a taboo or sin for one to veer. Thoughts have chain posts. Thoughts therefore have ambits around which they must revolve and rails they must run on. The moment they derail, the thinker must quickly force them back to the right channel. Thus, creativity and imagination suffer strangulation in the hands of those who should nurture them. Wild thoughts are the only creative assets God has bestowed on man. For instance, Jesus was born and circumcised. The writer identified him as a male Jew. We also know that circumcision is not an empty ritual compared to the de-tailing *Kegites* practice.

The circumcision was not cutting off the fingernails. If you want to establish the organ the operation was performed on, many will condemn you to hell fire. If you venture to imagine that when Jesus was at the house of Mary and Martha, the latter was preparing food for someone she was hoping would end up marrying her and got jealous when the sister sat with Jesus while she cooked for them, condemnation will not pass you by. This does not mean that Jesus was sinful but that the women around him were and capable of thinking carnally. He was tempted in all ways,

yes, yet He did not sin. Wild thinking involves letting loose the thought drive to leap bounds and conquer the unexplored regions of the mind. This is artistic talent, adventurous thoughts flaring on the mind scenes while people see nothing outwardly. It gives one confidence that makes him an attractive enigma.

My thoughts dwelt on the past, the present, the future. They dwelt on people, personality and dignity. I thought of survivalists and existentialists. I meditated on maturity and childish wisdom. What could be the relationship between maturity, dignity, and survival? Could not immaturity be a modus operandi in the survival warfare? The most hunted man who refuses to surrender must put dignity last on his list of priorities. Saddam Hussein knew this better. The enemies captured him inside a hole, a furry, bearded rodent. The world conqueror, Adolf Hitler finally conquered a bunker. They abandoned the dignity of convoys and fanfare. They shunned the pomp of red carpets. The gorgeous clad of year-wage worth of clothing and calibrated paces measured by the swing of golden swagger sticks become of no value. Sirens and the praise-singer's *Kakaki* are stifled to silence. Can the existentialist afford the costume of superfluity, a three-piece suit on top of briefs and vests to participate in the dignity drama? The survivalist and existentialist are always clowns, comedians, and the *Anchanokupa* dancers of no intent creating fun by the clothes they wear as basic needs.

Can a threatened man have the time to put a tape to every stride he takes and show off dignity when danger trails him? Who will exhibit himself knowing well only his corpse will be on the next showcase? Who is that wretched or disgraced rich man who will parade himself on the street knowing that scorn and sniggering awaits him? He scuttles and hustles past the stage even before spectators catch a glimpse of him. Why do presidents and governors with all the stolen wealth and power no longer indulge in the road show in spite of the heavily armed security apparatus at their disposal? Power should win admiration so Queen

Elizabeth II and J.D. Gomwalk would have school children and the citizenry line up on long stretches of outskirt roads to welcome them into town. The gloved hands waving at inconsequential crowd faces would make them a special breed as they waved at us from open Jeeps. Why do Buhari, Babangida and Suswam jump with the dexterity and alacrity of patched-buttocks baboons from one bulletproof jeep to another when Okorocha hugs and shares spoons with lepers? They drive hiding in airtight bulletproof cars besides wearing bulletproof vests to protect their fearfully palpitating hearts.

When the *Atemtyo* rioters went out against the tyrannical NPC leadership and their treacherous grassroots stooges, dignity evaporated on the sight and sounds of spears and chants. The nooks and crannies where children play hide-and-seek and play infantile sex games called *chokombirimbi* became the refuge for dignitaries. Wives of a local chieftain rolled him up into a bundle of roofing thatch. The feet that he had used to direct orders at his subjects because they were beneath using his fingers, defied the cover. And by those dignified feet, the avengers were led to the strange thatch. They set fire on it and the dignitary escaped to his death. The hands that were too dignified to point at the poor subjects lost the borrowed dignity as one fell on top of the other in quick succession pleading for mercy.

IT IS NOT AN EASY ROAD

IGIVE THANKS TO THE LORD, the highest farmer, who selects the best of His seeds and preserves them above the fireplace, under steady heat to get us preserved against the harsh weather conditions and the destructive pests we will encounter when we germinate. I thank the Omniscient God, the Potter for the furnace treatment of His pottery works that we are. He prepares for use on latter working fires of life. He toughens us against adversities, leading us through the deserts of life to stand.

The clergy who preaches against the evil of subjecting imaginary righteous men under the rod of the wicked are like the judiciary consumed by the same fire of justice they stoke. The chosen one must pass through chastening to purify him from the dross of life into a glittering vessel. We must pass through the hell of hatred like Joseph to sit at the right hand of Pharaoh and lift our enemies from the pits of hell in due course.

I still pray that God forgive them for their intentional and unintentional malice. Therefore, I forgive my tormentors. I forgive my father, the Hangman. I forgive my mother, the Prosecutor. I forgive Reverend Pastor Gonki Abonki, who in his ignorance twisted the Bible truths and principles of God to serve his base, material cravings, plucking breast milk from the toothless gums of the suckers, shoving them from behind, and pushing them violently out of the tender reach of their confused parents with criminal admonitions.

On my way home, I slipped down the lane of reminiscence to the timeline point when I was nine years. My sense of discernment had sharpened to tracing the sources of my problems. The relationship between the Christian children and their parents in our society differed significantly from the heathen. While that of the non-Christians was a bond tied with tender cords, ours was a chain-bonded parenting. Of course, the worldly Christians still deviated from the norm to protect their children from abuse from neighbors and their satanic children. All requests for our needs were made to our mother, the Prosecutor. Whenever it required the actions of our father, the Hangman, we passed it through our mother. This unwritten code became the safest way of dealing with the Hangman. We only felt the presence of our father when we committed an offence that required stiffer penalties. Whenever my mother had a quarrel with the Hangman and I had to go direct to him for my needs, I choked with apprehension and indignation. I chewed words and stammered before him in a mournful tone. The obedience to the Biblical injunction; fear your father and mother elicited hostilities. Pastor Gonki Abonki posited that parents had to be ruthlessly tyrannical to suppress any form of waywardness in their children.

One afternoon, when I was seven years old, the devil himself influenced me to skip the routine prayer before food and eat an unsanctified meal of pounded yam and *Akpochegher*, seasoned with *igyo*; caterpillar. I believe childish anxiety was the devil. On this evil tempting day, the Hangman invited Chile our neighbor and a boastful pagan to share in our meal. Chile never cared about provoking the sensibilities of the Christians in their exaggerated holiness. He would jump at any opportunity to prove the folly of Christianity. My father had the notorious habit of inviting every passer-by to come and rest under the *Akindé* tree under which we ate all our meals. I usually felt irked. I found it hard to cope with this resting passer-by phenomenon. My father

would implore and even badger every passer-by into resting. My gladness knew no bounds when the passer-by declined.

“Your food is always mine but for now, I have just eaten.” They would say. I love hearing those words.

My countenance would brighten. Otherwise, I would eat sulking and casting malevolent furtive glances at the resting passer-by. Out of the anxiety, I always forgot that, by tradition, every woman had back up calabashes of food to absorb the shock of unexpected visitors. I usually counted the balls of pounded yam or rounds of whatever food the passer-by molded. Afterward, I contrasted them against the number Tarvihi and I took. I could do this with the skill acquired from the Bible school, which the villagers called *Babel School*. I could beat all my mates at the Shiva game. Shiva is a chess-like game or draughts played by two players.

“The man molded big ball of food like that three-kobo *kolو* that Agera bought for his son,” I would compare the food balls to a plastic football with no intent to exaggerate.

The Hangman was another omniscient observer. Because Tarvihi and I had a habit of engaging in nonverbal communication during such meals, the Prosecutor decided that one of us had to go on exile, to stay with our aunt who had no child. That was how we spent our early childhood apart for the next five years. Whenever I decided to checkmate the passer-by by making my balls bigger, they would be stuck in my throat. My father rewarded me with several knocks on the forehead.

On this particular evil day, my anxiety was as taut as a new drum. My patience dried to the last dram. As the Prosecutor pounded the food, the Hangman and I sat under the *Akindé* tree under the tense atmosphere of a brief Tom and Jerry truce. As I built relishing picture of the palatable caterpillar soup and pounded yam, the Pagan appeared. I had built the relish to the climax. I dejectedly mumbled some inaudible greeting and gave up

my raffia spine chair to the Pagan as custom demanded. I impulsively headed for the kitchen to alert the Prosecutor of the Pagan's presence.

"Come back here, foolish boy," the Hangman shouted at me, "the kitchen is not meant for men."

At last, they brought the wooden bowl for washing of hands, outrider for the food train headed out of the kitchen. The food, a shimmering white pregnancy protruding above the rims of the calabash bowl followed riding on the clay-dish carrying my favorite soup. The caterpillar soup-men and the *Akpochegher* soup-women hugged in the oily matrimonial bed. Demvihin placed the wooden bowl for washing of hands at the feet of the Pagan. He washed his hands and passed the bowl clockwise from the adults to the children. The Pagan began eating the food even before the Hangman announced the prayer. I half-heartedly closed my eyes as I heard the sound of molars crushing the caterpillar and the glottal heralds of the food heading for the stomach. I peeped at him through the slits of my eyes. His blatant condemnation of Christian habits of long prayers, which made one salivate like a dog, convinced me more than any religious argument.

The Hangman's prayers were unusually long and winding. He would first thank God for the spiritual food that very few had the privilege to enjoy. He thanked God for the bodily food. He thanked God for the rains and sunshine that symbolized his blessings on both sinners and saints alike. He acknowledged God for the skills and strength to farm. He appreciated God for making Ikyambeikehyoughur, the skilful hoe-handle carver. He thanked Him for Nyikwagh, the blacksmith and his excellent hoes. He prayed that God would give more food, especially the spiritual kind to the vast Utimbeku clan where people were enjoying the abundance of the bodily food but starving in the spirit.

Midway into the marathon prayer, I peeped through the eye slits to monitor the progress the Pagan had made. I almost

screamed. The Pagan had aborted the pregnancy below the brim of the calabash. I abandoned the prayer and joined the Pagan after fighting the urge to carry the food and shift the camp. When the Hangman said a lone ‘Amen’, the food-ball citizenry that missed the blessings was capable of winning a landslide victory in a democratic election.

Like a thunderbolt, the Hangman struck my face with the back of his mighty left hand. The lash relegated me from the squatting position to sprawling on my belly like a toad. The last food-ball I had molded for the day escaped the wrath, rolling away on the ground. It was the first time I was defiling the prayer session, so I could not tell what had made the Hangman so angry. Was it the pace at which the Pagan and I had devoured the food? Was it the sin of eating ‘*un-amened*’ food? When I found my feet, the simultaneous upsurge of tears, indignation and surprise choked the breath out of me. I stood dumbfounded with my mouth agape gasping for air. I released a terrifying bawl that brought the Prosecutor and Demvihin scampering confusedly out of the kitchen with un-mouthing food-ball-men in their hands.

“Shhh, close that toad-way,” the Hangman threatened further with a raised hand as if to strike me again. I knew that defying that command would attract heavy belaboring. Sobbing would also be considered as an offence, so, I closed the walls of my mouth, damming the mounting tension as phlegm leaked through my nostrils. Tears rolled down freely from my eyes. My chest, inflated, heaved to a bursting point like that of a porcupine fish angled out of the water. After the meal, the Hangman still gave me random thrashings from *Akindé* canes he compelled me to climb the tree and cut for my own thrashing. There was no escape for me.

“You will not taste any food today,” he ruled.

Each succeeding lash of the cane increased the hatred I had for the cane and the urge to resist what I considered indoctrinated maltreatment. I had lost the dignity of a child and the comfort of a

warming sleep. I slept most of the nights hanging between forked trees like a baboon.

CHRISTIANITY OF CRIMINALITY

MY EXPERIENCE AS A RELIGIOUS GUINEA PIG climaxed with my promotion to primary three. I refused to be a meek lamb that goes to the altar without bleating. I struggled and kicked like a he-goat with a big amulet dangling between its hind legs. I jumped and struggled with the hope of snapping the ropes. From my primary one up to primary two, the government had been responsible and responsive to the duty of educating the citizenry. The Education Board supplied textbooks in English and mathematics to all schools and the headmaster kept the pupils' text in the office. During English Language and Mathematics lessons, the class monitor and one or two others would bring them out, share them out for use, and return them after use. As we reached primary three, government rascality and leader-centered governance emerged from the bud.

The parents, who still paid taxes, had to pay for school fees and buy all forms of learning materials. The schools had to get new infrastructure. The community-imposed taxes on all adults; those who had wives or reached the age their peers had married paid these taxes. We had to buy everything including "Going to Kano, the Primary Three Reader", which was the lure of every pupil going to that class. The enchanting stories of *Toma and Tani* and the songs that had become popular school songs made the book a must-get. Our seniors with an air of you-have-not-seen-anything-yet sang these songs. This was my opportunity to close in on the Ukelle on their mountainous hideouts.

I had come home from school with the need for the book on my mind but the request stuck to my throat. A few meters to our homestead, I heard the Hangman and the Prosecutor engage in a hot philippic.

“That is very unchristian,” said the Hangman, “I think you are just wasting your time going to church.”

“I won’t walk naked... I won’t walk naked because. ...”

“Jesus said, if we must follow him, we must forsake our wives, children and all. For me, the maintenance of God’s house is my priority.”

“I can’t kill myself or walk naked to worship God. Atese Gonki, who is the wife of the Reverend, ordained to serve God has over fifteen pairs of Hollandaise Wax *wrappas*. The pastor and his wife should walk naked first.”

“Then, I will help you. I will confiscate those boxes of clothes, the whole of the three boxes of English Wax, Satin and Korpion Lace, Brocade, Hollandaise and Nigerian Wax. Must you change colors everyday like a chameleon before you know that you are clothed?”

“You will do that only if you are mad. Don’t even attempt it.”

“You call me mad?” the Hangman snarled. He transferred the cutlass with which he was trimming the stubborn carpet grass called *Kirikiri* to the left hand and advanced with his greatest artillery weapon for an onslaught. The Prosecutor apparently unshaken broke into a church song about the war between Christ and the Devil.

The Hangman was a workaholic. He would leave for the farm as early as the path was visible in the light of the dawn. He worked assiduously and diligently defying the harsh sun or heavy

downpour. We had to sneak away sometimes and leave him when we felt it was better to endure the canes than the weather conditions. By two or three o'clock he would leave the farm and on arrival take on other chores like compound cleaning. Like all DRCM (Dutch Reformed Church Mission) which had strong Boer ties, the Hangman had Orange and Mango Farms.

The Dutch who had forcefully captured farmlands from the Africans in South Africa encouraged converts to have a solid base for government direct tax (poll tax) and the Church indirect tax in form of tithes, levies and church budget quotas. They exaggerated the relevance of the utopian farmer to the economy. They told the Hangman and other converts, the story of a wise man who on his deathbed called three of his children to give them an all-important parting word.

The wise man had called his three children and asked them to fill three sacks with sand. He asked them to leave the first sack intact and reduce the second sack by half. The third sack, he asked them to spill the sand into three quarters.

“Lean them on the wall,” he instructed them. The sacks were monumental reminders of the lessons of life he would pass on to them. The full sack was the income of the farmer, he produces food, consumes it to his satisfaction and sells the leftovers to the businessman and the civil servant. They scramble for it so he maximizes his profit by selling it at whatever price he decides. With that income, he carters for his other needs. The half sack is the trader’s income. Although he cheats a lot of people and makes money, half of the money goes for food so he keeps only half of his income. The third sack is the income of the civil servant. He collects his salary, buys food from the farmer and buys other necessities from the trader. So, he is left with only a quarter of his income.

With this fable, the Dutch succeeded in making all their converts farmers, farmers of the category that would not aspire to

go beyond the Bible school curriculum but resign to farming as soon as they could read the Bible. While half of the farmers' wealth went to intermediaries who were crafty enough to buy off their produce at harvest. They sold it at giveaway prices. The traders cart it away and hoard it to sell it at thrice the initial cost. The Dutch cannot easily cheat the trader with his profit-oriented mindset. However, since he does not engage in any activities that disrupts the plans of the Dutch, he gets the second place. When he successfully cheats and his conscience plagues him, he comes to donate generously to the church to bribe God to forgive his sins.

The intellectuals among the civil servants who ask many questions before complying with a divine order could not be easily manipulated. The Dutch ascribed to the civil servants the status of poverty negating the fact that permanent secretaries, directors of boards, governors usually came from this class. The parents and youth who had never travelled out of the villages believed whatever the Dutch told them. Perhaps the legendary farmer of the Dutch fable was unrealistic given my father's experience.

The Hangman had farms. He had a citrus farm measuring three hectares. He farmed rice. He farmed groundnuts and soya beans. He intercropped sorghum between these legumes. There must be a yam farm with cassava intercropped. He had slave-labored the entire family on these farms for years. He occasionally hired farmhands too. One of the reasons for separating Tarvihi from me at an early age was for the offence of looking at each other during work, chuckling and planning escapes from work. Our elder brother Terhyde went with Rev (Dr) Pastor Agbum Abenga (JP2) to receive the ideal Christian discipline at Nachigh-Bali after his primary education. Demvihin and I stayed with the Hangman and the Prosecutor.

I sometimes wondered if the Hangman's workaholic tendency was a bid to prove the Dutch right or escape from the Prosecutor who presented an extreme contrary attitude to the

dogmatic acceptance of the twisted biblical doctrine. The Hamitic Hypothesis, which the DRCM harped on, kept my father drudging on in acceptance of the punishment meted on our father from Noah. He trained us to brace up and bear the sins of Adam and Eve and those of Ham for looking on his drunken father's nakedness.

“Esther, you call me mad?” the Hangman sustained the advance with the weapon poised for an attack.

“You too, Satan rides on your back, the acts of anger, fighting, quarrelling, theft and fornication...” The Prosecutor continued the popular church song. They were adept at turning worship songs into innuendoes capturing the attitudes of whoever they wanted to attack. I heard a thunderous slap.

“Does the Bible teach you to obey and submit to your husband or to challenge him?” the Hangman headed for the *Akindé* tree to fetch a couple of canes with which to administer a generous dose of submission on the Prosecutor. Nyitse, whose house was just a few meters away had heard the exchange of philippics and came to intervene. I sneaked into the kitchen and took my dish of yam pottage. I gorged it down. My hunger had intensified with the fear of the provocation cascading to me.

When the Prosecutor came into the kitchen, I silently shifted position from near the fireplace to the water pot and continued eating, avoiding the sight of her. Deep within me, there was the surging desire to place the request. I battled with the fear of the pecking order. After my food, I tried to present my request. The Hangman had rebuked me several times in the past for late presentation of requests. Request needed to arrive early to allow for planning before the deadline. With my tone between the weeping child and an imploring beggar, I made my requests known.

“Mama, we have to buy *Going to Kano*.”

“What is going to Kano?” She asked more out of curiosity than interest.

“It is an English Reader for Primary Three.”

“Why don’t you tell that to your father?” “But Mama...”

“Tell that to your father, I say. He is the one who sells all the farm produce. Go to him and tell him your problems,” she snarled.

I did not have a decent school uniform. What I wore to school was a gift from Terhyde. It was a brown khaki jumper over worn-out shorts that had two patches at the buttocks. The village tailor had made matters worse by patching it with a red cloth. My classmates called it *anondoakya*; the varnished buttocks of the baboon.

“But Mama...” I paused expecting her interruption. She kept quiet, “won’t you buy the book and uniform for me?”

“Where is the money? Why don’t you go and tell your father? He sells all the yields from the farms.”

“Look at the money that you and Baba take to church on Sunday. Last Sunday, he donated ten sacks of oranges and paid the fare for transporting them to the market.”

“You see, that is why I say you should ask him.”

“Mama, where do you get the money to buy your own clothes?” I asked blandly.

“You will end up like your father. You will not buy clothes for me even when you start earning your salary. Go to your father and ask him to buy you books and uniforms. Do you answer my name in the school?”

“When it comes to paying *Sonodi*, giving money for offering and farming in the church with money, you and Baba go as many times as the deacon calls out the several church groups to which you belong.”

I took my fishing lines and went angling. I came back with my catch in the evening to see Pastor Gonki’s motorbike parked outside. I quickly crept into the kitchen. He was tutoring my parents about what the Bible says about setting a good example for the children. I hated dignitaries, no matter how polite they pretended to be. Gonki was a bull that trampled on the glass cup of your feelings. I hid in my room. If he saw me, I would be compelled to go before the Reverend Pastor, make a degrading stoop with palms clasped and slotted between my legs in reverence.

The Prosecutor came from the peace talks and pounded the yam for the evening food. Pastor Gonki always selected the time. It was always a dining and talking session. He never finished his long talk before meals nor visited after meal hours.

“You are lucky today. You caught a lot of fish.”

“When it comes to eating them, Baba gives all to passers-by and tells them not to bother about me.”

“That is traditional and Christian generosity combined.”

“Why is it that when I passed through Pastor Gonki’s compound on my way from school, he does not ask me to join his children when they are eating?”

“Kpash! Shh!” She whispered. “Don’t you know that he is the one talking to your father now?”

“I know.”

“Besides, he is a servant of God and we have to feed him. He feeds us with spiritual food.”

“Why is it that in our memory verse of the first Sunday school this year, is saying a different thing? Acts 20:34-35, Paul said: Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided...Remember the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

“You won’t understand what the Bible is saying there until you grow.”

“Then I will stop going to Church and Sunday School till I grow up enough to understand.”

“Try it and see what your father will do to you.”

“I understand that Paul said, a lazy person should not eat. That is why I go to fish after school and go to farm on Saturdays. So, I want to understand this one too.”

“Go and ask Pastor Gonki and your father. I am a mere woman. Take the washing hand bowl to the parlor.”

I put the scraped fish on the wire mesh hung above the fireplace, washed my hands free of the fish redolence and carried the water.

“When you go there, remember to close your eyes when Pastor Gonki is praying.”

When I took the water, Reverend Gonki was lecturing the Hangman on the need to give to God.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. His only begotten Son he gave to save the sinful world it says. Why can’t we give everything to the glory of His name? The book of John or is it Peter, says we should all walk in his footsteps. Job gave his children and possessions. Abraham sacrificed Isaac his only heir, Jehoshaphat gave his only daughter in fulfilment of the vows he made to God...”

“It is true, Christ said that birds of the air have nests, foxes have holes but the Son of Man has no resting place,” the Hangman collaborated.

“It is true. Always remember the oaths you took upon the baptism of your children and your ordination as an elder of the church.”

I set the water on the table and stood, avoiding the eyes of Pastor Gonki who tried to hold my gaze.

“Tyoughvihi, why haven’t you greeted Pastor?” the Hangman barked.

“I greet you,” I said, flashing my face at him snappily to direct the salutation towards him.

“Is that how to greet a familiar and important person?”

“He didn’t even attach ‘Pastor’ or JP as if I were an ordinary person.”

“I don’t know what to do with this stupid son,” the Hangman bemoaned. The fire in his eyes put me on notice that I was mentally booked for a wound-nursing lesson.

The Prosecutor and Demvihin brought the food and the drinking water. To God be the Gloy, Gonki said a short prayer, yet I could not resist the temptation of peeping through the slits of my eyes and making gestures at the food. I actually touched the food to see if the Pastor would react. He rarely closed his eyes. In the church, the other children and I always peeped through our fingers splayed over our faces to look around during prayer. I always discovered that he never closed his eyes during the blessing of the offering or when he was praying some long prayers written inside *Katekisema*. I however ran out of luck when after the prayer, I made the first move to attack the pounded yam.

“Ingye!” The Hangman brandished a slap. I stopped, startled, leaving my finger marks on the belly of the food, “How many times must I tell you that adults and especially the person that prays, breaks the food first? Don’t you know that it is against Biblical injunctions?”

“Luke 22:19 says: ‘And he took the bread, gave thanks and broke it’. It did not say ‘and Peter or Andrew broke it’,” Gonki admonished.

I indignantly watched them eat the food until the Hangman barked. I ate sulking.

“Open your mouth properly,” he barked again. He disengaged the head of one of the Tilapia fish and put the trunk in my hand. He shifted three catfishes to Pastor Gonki. He ate only one Tilapia and the head of mine. Gonki gorged his down like a hungry beast. The Hangman usually punished severely anyone of us, the children, who talked with food in their mouth.

“This son of yours needs proper training. I have been telling you this for long. You have to be sterner with this one. You know the case of Eli. He was not stern enough in disciplining his children and that led to a family tragedy. For this one, his buttocks are resistant to canes, they need *Koboko*, the one with four tails to be administered on his back. From what I have seen, he loves food so starve him if the *Koboko* does not work.” Gonki talked with food in his mouth.

“Do you know what he said to his mother this afternoon?” the Hangman asked Gonki.

The pastor’s mouth was too full to utter a sound. He only shook his head. The full cheeks brought to my mind Doola Anikpa, the trumpeter. Doola never wore new things on his body. Some people often quipped that whenever he bought something new, he would exchange it with people with used ones. Doola’s slippers, perforated because of overuse looked like the number one bicycle

spanner. His mouth was spectacularly slimy with saliva, slobbering like a snail. Now Pastor Gonki made a spectacular show as he battled with his overloaded mouth. The lingering image of Doola elicited an explosion of suppressed laughter that sent particles of food from my mouth flying towards the pastor's face. I quickly barred the laughter, with my hands covering my mouth.

"I'll slap you there!" He turned to Gonki, "What you said is not funny. He said that when it comes to taking money to the church and making church uniforms, Esther and I have money but when it comes to buying books and school uniforms we don't have."

"Kpash, you are cursed in this house with a child that wants to take the place of God. He wants you to serve him first. Remember the children of Eli served themselves from the altar before God and the Almighty unleashed his vindictive wrath on them. I wish you handed him over to me as a ward. I would have trained him up better."

My father, the Hangman was gullibly zealous in following any Biblical injunction or advice from a Man-of-God. However, he would not yield me to the pastor in spite of several requests. He said I was most likely to bring the name of the family to disrepute in the house of the clergyman than take to reformation. The experience of Terhyde, our elder brother, in the house of Pastor Agbum Abenga made me rather believe that he learnt some few lessons. My elder brother's stay in the house of the Man-of-God was characterized by regular flights to the city of refuge, our home. He came with incredible stories, stories that sent the Prosecutor weeping and swearing that Terhyde would not return to the Sodom and Gomorrah. The Hangman would insist that he had vowed before God to give the child to a better trainer if he could not train him.

"When Esther told me that, I was shocked beyond words. I even forgot that she had offended me earlier in the day. You know

my wife appears troublesome but she is faithful in the area of bringing up these children in godliness. I hope we shall bring them up in submission to the will of the Almighty.”

From that day, the Tom and Jerry game between the Hangman and I intensified. The Hangman became the hunter and I the game. No matter how consistently I stole and burnt the cowhide whips, new ones with more tails kept coming. The pastor had suggested singed guava canes. I had no option but to adopt guerrilla tactics.

THE VICTIM

TERHYDE WAS A HANDSOME TEENAGER, athletically built. He was the type women who had discontentment with their husbands stole into their rooms and cuddled. He was a hunted male. Female adolescents made him the envy of pedophiles that mitigated their offensive behaviors by trapping overexposed under-sixteen girls with budding breasts. They wrote him letters. They sent him gifts. They clustered around him. He was a quiet, intelligent and an unassuming boy. This was his defense when some jealous teachers attacked him. There were stories making round in the Utimbeku Clan of how Mr Kusugh, translated as 'electric fish', who lived up to his name by shocking pupils, brought disgrace to himself when he sought to victimize Terhyde.

"It is not the boy's fault. The girls keep harassing him. Can't you see he appears embarrassed by their advances?" Mr Vakaa observed.

"I rather think he pretends. He savors every bit of those endearments," Mr Kusugh said.

"Have you ever intercepted any single letter originating from him? I have intercepted seven from girls even older than him," Miss Akuraga said.

"I hope one of the letters did not originate from a teacher?" Mr Kusugh said with a dose of malice.

“No, rather it originated from a primary five female pupil a teacher I know has been sending on needless errands. I have made up my mind to stop the vendetta the teacher has been meeting on Terhyde and the girl.”

“Someone is getting personal here. Remember we are teachers. I would rather you stopped this argument,” Mr Vakaa said, “I will get the headmaster to investigate this.”

“Yes,” Miss Akuraga agreed.

“No, it has not come to that,” Mr Electric Fish backed away.

“The children have suffered undue punishments for too long. I have made up my mind.”

He was just nine years old when Shimmar scandalized him. It was a Dogo Market Day. Terhyde and I were at home while the Hangman and the Prosecutor were at the market. We were playing *amenama*. This memory game tasks one person to close his eyes, turn his back and track the number of seed on a line picked up while singing a song. Shimmar was a teenage wife of an octogenarian farmer neighbor. Her husband, Gberusu Kyabibi was a very jealous man who monitored every movement of his wives. Village young men knew his vindictiveness so no one dared to step in to perform his failed duties. As she returned from the market earlier than most people did, she met us at play. She asked us to accompany her to the house and collect the measuring bowl, the mudu she had borrowed from the Prosecutor. On arrival, there was no one at home. She gave us the *Kwosai* she had brought from the market and asked Terhyde to follow her in to collect the bowl. We were still savoring the bean cake outside when we heard her giving instructions to Terhyde.

“Hide jime teghelee, oon va ase!

Draw back slightly, yeees! Come! Draw back slightly, yeees!
Come!

Draw back slightly, yees! Come..."

This gradually climaxed into a fast rhythm and reached a crescendo where the pace geared into a frenzy.

"Come! Come! Come! Come..."

We rushed in thinking she was calling us to help catch a rat she found in the room. She scampered to her feet and pleaded with us not to tell anyone what we had seen but we were just children. I did not know when I told Anzongo the entire story.

Terhyde was a haggard looking boy with rashes and bruises from whiplashes all over his body. He carried an aura of a child from a poorly supported orphanage. He was however full of intriguing stories. I learnt for the first time that the pastor's children also played erotic games. He told me how Sekav, the pastor's twenty-one-year-old school drop-out son had impregnated Mchie, a female ward in the pastor's charge whose father died serving the church as a cleaner.

"Sekav always called Mchie into his room to eat rice and chicken, a special dish his mother usually prepared for him. He would give her his tea, mangoes and bananas, which we do not have the privilege to share with the pastor's children. We eat only twice a day but the pastor's children eat at will. In the morning, we took pap made from millet that had overstayed in the store. This was only after the morning function at the farm before we went to school. In the evening, we took cornmeal, *tuwon dawa* with dried okra, gbodi. This was also after the evening session of work. Pastor Agbum always reminded us of Apostle Paul's command to the Galatians, "He who does not work, let him not eat." On the farm, each of us was assigned a portion of work to do. The pastor's children, nine of them, did not work. They only ate. We, the wards had a strict schedule for doing everything from fetching water to grinding pepper. We washed dishes, bathe six of the younger grubs, and swept the rooms and the big compound. When it was

my turn to grind pepper, Mchie washed, Amor dealt with the mortar, Vivian and Ayua handled the rooms and the compound. I think we were nothing but slaves.

“Mchie kept entering the room until she became pregnant. The pastor gathered all of us, excluding his children, and commanded us to speak the truth about our affairs. He said he suspected me. I swore by the Bible that I had no affairs with anybody.

“At last, Mchie confessed that Sekav had been sleeping with her for three months in a row. When all attempts to make Mchie retract her confession failed, the elders summoned her mother and suspended her from partaking in the holy communion. The elders said she had failed to give her daughter proper training.”

“Terhyde, do you not sleep with the pastor’s children?” I asked.

“No, but I want to tell you something. Don’t tell it to anyone.”

“Ok, but make sure you don’t tell another person too because if that person tells another, you will think it is me.”

“You know, Pastor’s fourth child is a girl. Her name is Salome. She is a bit older than me and has already developed small breasts.” He lowered his tone. “I did it with her twice. First time was when her parents travelled for *Sonodi Meeting*. When Sekav took Mchie into his room, Salome also called me to follow her into hers. She asked me to bring out my manhood and try it on her groin to see how it would have fitted her if she were a boy. When I brought it out, she grabbed it and told me that she wanted to marry me. She is a very beautiful girl. That is the only thing that makes me want to go back to the parsonage.”

“Terhyde,” I asked, “how does it feel? Is it like warming oneself by the fire during harmattan or as pleasant as eating one’s

favorite food? I hear adults calling their spouses honey and sugar. Is that how it tastes?"

"I can't express it. It is not only pleasant when you are doing it. It is more pleasant when you desire it. It is however a little disappointing when you succeed. That is why, I think, people want to do it over and over again."

The following day, the Hangman took Terhyde back like a recaptured prisoner. We feared for him but I secretly envied him.

A FULL CLAY-DISH OF BEANS

ONLY FICKLE-MINDED LISTENERS take stories as pastime and they pay the price for disbelief and disregard for coded instructions. Anjie had a grandmother who had a treasure box of folktales. He however had contempt for all heathen stories and preferred reading the foreign stories in the Holy Book. He gave heed to sweet prosperity prophecies and ignored the stories deeply rooted in his culture, which explore the character of the society in which he lived.

Now that he was in the net, one of the songs sung to accompany and give color to a particular story came to his mind.

Nor Kyor Abyako ooo

Kohol aji oooo

Bagu gba ke kper ooo

Bagu gba ke kper a ooo

Kohol aji ooo ooo

Bagu gba ke kper ooo

Nor Kyor kohol aji ooooooooooooo!

Elephant, the hunted, son of Abyako

Safeguard the eggs

The monkey is in the net.

He could only visualize Aya from the faint and blurred memories and hate himself for not always sitting down to grasp many more of these richly didactic stories. He could not remember

one, which brought himself disdain and came back with such freshness after he had neglected its lesson and found himself in an inextricable net.

“Do you know why blind men hardly trust men with sight?” She asked the children.

“No”, they chorused.

“Kwagh-hir wam yo ajov ii ishwa ooo!” She chanted the opening of the story.

“Hoo ooo anjov ii ishwa ooo”, the children responded

“In my tale a fairy steals beniseed” she repeated “Hoo ooo, a fairy steals beniseed”

“One of these every-days,”

“What happened?”

“There was a blind man named Ageba who lived with his brother. His brother had an ill-mannered wife called Channeer. Like vermin, she hatched her children in quick succession. Anytime Buusu, her husband played with the head of his penis around the ears of her vagina, she brought forth one or two squealing imps. She had nine children who were born on the heels of one another that you could sample any two or three and they could pass for a set of twins or triplets. These imps had excellent appetites even when they were sick.”

Ageba was guilt-ridden whenever he had to depend on his brother’s family for a living even before the imps started coming. He had decided to engage himself in the making of baskets, wicker fish traps and reed mats from which he supported the family. This turned out to become a major source of support for the entire family. But Ageba rarely had enough to eat when meal times arrived. Channeer was as mean as she was stingy and dirty.

One day however, to Ageba's consternation, his own share of breakfast was brought to him. Not only was this an aberration from the zero-one-water routine, the quantity of the food also shocked him. *Ahuma*, the hard- brown specie of beans is a kind of food that even a small lump can swell up when the stomach worked on it. *Ahuma* must take several hours to cook so the best bet was to cook it overnight and pound it in the morning. It was seasoned with grounded benniseed or groundnut, palm oil, salt and pepper. Ageba attempted to lift the dish of beans, but the dish weighed him down, he had underestimated the weight of the food.”

“Is this for me?” He asked for assurance.

“Yes,” Wakyoga, the most talkative of the children answered.

Ageba's first thought was that a stone must have been lodged in the dish and the food heaped on top of it to give the visitors who were talking at the Ate, the impression that the family was taking good care of him. He thrust through the helping of *Ahuma* with his finger but the finger went unobstructed and hit the bottom of the dish.

He wondered, “the people talking at the Ate, don't they eat beans?”

“He weighed the beans repeatedly, pondering over the motive behind the game that was been played on him. “What happened?” He wondered since he was not used to being served as early as he was served that day, he set aside the beans and waited to solve the puzzle before eating. “This bowl of beans...if I eat it, my ears will tingle with great news.” He turned the beans into an empty dish which a neighboring woman had brought food for him with the previous night, he hid it behind his back and called the children to come and collect the dish. Two of them came with utmost curiosity.”

“See, the foolish blind man has finished the beans that Angyer urinated inside!” They exclaimed.

“Mhn-hun! I said so.” He then called his brother to come and share in the beans the wife had served the blind man.”

“In fact, Channeer was carrying Angyer in her laps while dishing out the beans and he held his small penis up volleying the stream right into the biggest share of the beans meant for bigger elves. The woman’s evil mind decided that the contaminated dish was best for the man with no eyes.”

Anjie had never allowed his grandmother to finish any story before rushing into the house to read the Holy Book so as to spite her, he considered his grandmother a worldly hearten.

Now, the sight of Mbasen and her imbecile daughter, who looked like extra-terrestrial beings sent Anjie reminiscing and cursing himself for disdaining the old sage and the story times.

Mbasen was a blazing torch at night and useless in the daytime except when she stayed in dark corners. She was useless where the sun shined. She could not write the letter ‘O’ which had a close resemblance to zero and a ball of pounded yam. She could not handle Abya, the small hoe used to weed the farm, nor the pestle to pound yam or millet, which are a routine for every girl expected to be a homemaker one day, because her hands became softened because of the bleaching creams she used. Her skin, which was as tender as an overripe cashew fruit could rot on the farm if exposed to the scorching sun. She had an insatiable craving for lengthy batteries, which she guided into herself through the rear end. She seemed to despise the average sizes, which could glide and slide out without friction and sought sizes that could hook in permanently. She had once made a Freudian slip that she preferred the manner of dogs to some men.

Any time she chanced on someone with a king-size manhood she would insist on fixing it into through the back. Apart

from bleaching herself white to appeal to the aesthetic expectations of fickle-minded men, she also had a great sex appeal. Men consider bleaching and use make-up by women as a trademark for easy-to-get women. So, ugly or beautiful, charming or repulsive, high class or low class, men knew that it was just a matter of cash. Adom, the hunter, knew that most women could not resist fresh grass-cutter meat and cashed in on it to partake in the enjoyment even in the bush. All these were the training she received as a girl from her mother, who feeling that she had trapped herself in marriage and could not use what she had to get what she wanted, decided to coach her daughter so that they would share the proceeds.

When Anjie saw this blazing beauty at the MIM Conference at Sev-Av, where Christian youth converged annually to display their Bible cramming, choreography and paramilitary dancing skills, he could hardly keep himself on earth when this angelic being danced and heaved her huge breasts up and down. He clung to her as a last hope and never let go even when Mbasen dragged him on the ground until he became dusty. Mbasen never saw anything good in Anjie that made him think he deserved a priceless jewel like her in spite of the enslaving love he showed her. He was not handsome; not rich but always trusted in God to the irritation of Kangona, his prospective mother-in-law.

However, Ngutor, a cretin was rich and endowed between the legs as a stallion could be. Mbasen had discovered this treasure when her imagination on how deformed his battery would be made her to voyeur on the imbecile while he was having an unguarded bath in the stream. She started scheming for Ngutor, who rather found the whole affair strange. At first, he feared that she would cut his battery for a moneymaking ritual. Nevertheless, after several dogged attempts, Ngutor recalled the adage that says, 'A soldier dies in battle' which young men used whenever they were warned of the dangers of contracting HIV/AIDS through indiscriminate sex. Mbasen was worth his battery. Girls that were

not half-attractive as she was were always giving him their unsolicited assessment of his ugly looks. They openly expressed disgust when he muted the idea of marriage. He made up his mind not to resist any longer when she asked him to escort her up stream where the community got drinking water. After the first trial both discovered that, they needed each other and kept helping each other regularly.

Kangona found to her utter frustration that her prized daughter was becoming too friendly with a cretin. She discovered again that Mbasen was sleeping in the afternoons, spitting carelessly and vomiting in the morning. She was also getting a lean neck. Kangona was worried. She called Mbasen into the security of the bedroom.

“Mbasen, you are pregnant”, she said squarely. Mbasen could not deny it.

“Who is responsible for this?” Mbasen was speechless.

“Won’t you tell me?” She kept quiet.

“Mbasen, are you not the person I am talking to?”

“I do not know,” Mbasen replied.

“So. you don’t even know that I am talking to you? Do you want to kill me with shame? I say, who gave you this pregnancy?”

“I said, I don’t know.”

“So, you have tried so many sticks that, you cannot even tell the one that cut inside?”

Kangona has forgotten that she had also encouraged Mbasen to take male visitors into her bedroom and talk to them hours on no end almost every night. Mbasen reminded her as much.

“So, I said you should do it and carry a child without knowing the owner, Stupid thing!”

Mbasen knew the owner but was afraid of the physiognomic and financial ugliness of the owner. The situation forced Mbasen to prove that she was not stupid.

“Why, of all people, should it be that cretin?

Anjie got the unexpected good news when he received a message that Mbasen wanted to see him. This news sent him singing songs of worship, glorifying God for the rest of the day. He slept snappily, was awake long before midnight, and preoccupied himself with counting the raffia palm rafters in wait for daybreak. He started before cockcrows and the second cockcrow found him very close to Agayo’s homestead.

The first person Kangona saw when she opened the door to her room that morning was Anjie, to her great relief. She embraced him warmly and Mbasen doted over him too. To Anjie, all these were miracles and grace of God coming true for him as it was his greatest desire to marry Mbasen.

To his greater surprise, when the extended family members raised the issue of the bride price as was the tradition, Kangona protested against the high amount of money demanded. Anjie, however, was overwhelmed with elation that his desire was coming to pass, so he went back home and returned the following Saturday with members of his family to pay the bride price to the last penny without negotiation. He wanted to prove himself as a worthy son in-law. He even borrowed money to do a church wedding.

Anjie could not believe his eyes when he saw the dowry that Mbasen’s family presented on her wedding day. They ensured that everything that was needed in a house were provided including a king-size mattress, a room divider, standing mirror, expensive boxes filled with clothes, baby bathtubs and many others items. The wedding was the talk of the village.

However, the first nuptial night was a deep frustration for the bride. While the groom was savoring the pleasure and ranking himself the luckiest man on earth for marrying an angel, the bride was brooding over the great disappointment at the size of the battery, she would have to contend with for the rest of her life. Two weeks after the highly celebrated wedding, Mbasen, dissatisfied with her husband's sexual underperformance set out in search of a more befitting battery size.

INSANITY

THE QUICKEST SOLUTION WAS SUICIDE. It kept looming large on my mind. I thought of the parting note I would write telling my friends the reasons for my decision to end it all. I have cut this futile cycle to start all over. The possibility of their seeing my suicide note was doubtful. Even as I lay on my bed, I could hear the aggressive exchange of gunfire across the River Buruku, less than five kilometers away. I knew definitely that some of the rattling voices were theirs. What irked me most about the whole show was the thought of finding myself trapped in the hole like a rodent once the enemy crossed the river.

I found in the middle of the inter-communal conflict, but was forbidden to fight; I was a long-distance arrow not to be used for small hunts. My service to the community was only to use my pen and mind in intellectual warfare against her enemies. This position of seeing the action but been denied participation when one's age mates were at the heart of it loosened a few nuts in my sanity. They would come home marching victoriously sometimes carrying the corpses of the fallen heroes. I wanted to be a hero like the others who gave their lives for the community. Was this the kind of feeling and sense of patriotism that lured Christopher Okigbo to the war front? I would ask myself.

Adzuh rode past on his rickety motorbike. Besides my intense hatred for old automobiles and their cringing cacophony that bores through my forehead into the brains, the sound rekindled my suspicion that some evil schemes with the aid of technology are constantly hunting humanity.

Nguveren! If only they knew what she meant to me, or they knew and deliberately worked on seeing me mad. For the first time in my life, I got a girl who confessed love for my intangible effects. Moreover, she was right here and at the end of every session of my academic battle, I would finally come back and release the safety catch of my emotions, loving without the fear of love antics. I hate hide-and-seek love. They blackmailed and framed her for stubbornness and accused her of being part of her employers so they transferred her. They knew too well that she refused to do it in the name of the Lord. I loved her *coconutism*, softening to inner convictions and stiffly resisting external whims and caprices. That is what they called stubbornness. They had preached to her against falling in love with an ugly poor boy and offered to fix her up with the pastor's cousin. Some came behind as individuals after they had left as a group.

“Are you that cheap?”

“What do you mean?” she asked

“Give me too”

Now, I am between the devil and the deep sea of moral sin and insanity. The true sin of doing it with wives of younger men at the time they were at the war front. Iveren is particularly notorious for her appearances. Only this morning, she came for the third time in two miserable days.

“I saw your wife. She came here looking for you with her long neck,” she mocked.

“Is that meant to be a compliment or an insult?”

“No, no! But I am sure you won’t actually marry her.” “Your husband has gone to battle and people would talk if they saw you here,” I warned.

“I’m used to their talk. Why did you deceive me? You sneaked away without waiting for me in the town as you promised.”

I kept quiet. The best way out of this fix is to travel back to Jos where Ngoundu had asked me to stay and read for our pent-up exams. However, Jos too is a battleground. To get around the town you must learn how to navigate the nooks like Beran Daji paying a visit to Beran Birni. Baba too told me just yesterday that the crisis has wrought him of all finances and cramped his business. The conflict over land has consumed both wealth and souls. I would have to wait until it was over if it was to be over.

“You have rioted at school and you’ve been sent packing to come into the waiting arms of war,” Iveren changed the topic, giggling with mischief.

“We only demonstrated. I mean, they demonstrated.”

She let the statement pass; maybe her mind was pondering on another idea. I cursed the fasting Muslim students and the freshmen for the completely insane act. I hated narrating the story as I hated being associated with the uprising itself. Why start a protest so that even when the demands are met, you change the demands to another set?

“Like our people from Taraba who ran away from the Jukuns to come home to fight their brothers, Mbashian in a place where they hoped to have peace; you have moved from crisis to crisis and can’t find peace. These insane crises and greedy clamors for land are all over the place.”

“Yes, how frustrating,” I replied, “frustrating!”

“It is hot here; you have fans there,” she said, attempting to interpret my unease. Her talk and continued tempting presence were killing me. Sometimes I hate someone prompting me to talk.

“That’s why I wish I went back. Here, there is no light and no money to buy dry cells and cartridges. I do not listen to good music, except the rattling rapping of Guitar boy; death music. They have money to buy all these firing cartridges.” I replied.

She giggled and fingered her lips.

“One good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pains,” I echoed Marley.

“They don’t dance communal dances and inter-clan *Kwagh-hir* competitions any longer. They only fight,” she said, still giggling. She fondled with her fingers as one would with knitting needles.

“When Guitar boy hits you, you drop dead. Moreover, our politicians buy cartridges for us to fire at each other. You know that we support the Horse and Mbashian voted for the bird. These politicians are lunatics. The members of parliament use the constituency development allowances to fuel crises.”

“The Bible prophesied it all: Brother will rise against brother; father against son; nation against nation and general acceleration of other evils,” she said parting her legs to reveal dazzling white undies as if to prove that all sins and evils were only a righteous fulfilment of the Holy Book. My head whirled into a stupor. I managed to assemble a confusion of thoughts: These people can cause even wars, deaths and instigate evil just to make the word of God true when it is already true.

“It is truly hot here. Why don’t we move the chairs out to the mango shed?” I suggested.

That did the magic. She left finally. I moved a chair as fast as someone would wake up from a nightmare and sit up to forestall a return. I took it under one of the mango trees’ sheds behind my room and sat with my head in my palms contemplating. Nguveren was not here and no magic could bring her back. I hated the

bottom-peddlers here, these nymphomaniacs. I felt the hate ramming against the walls of my sanity and threatening to shatter my reasoning. If only I could listen to good music, it would soothe my soul the way it soothed Saul.

I started singing Sun is Shining as I drummed my chair to the beat. After a session, I laughed out loudly. The whole business of singing and drumming made me feel like Tsegeri the lunatic, beating his sides and commanding an unseen battalion of soldiers. The guffaw objectively spontaneous and unprovoked made me feel more insane as it echoed in the hollowness of my mind, lapping against the chaotic void. I must ask people their opinion of my sanity. If they confirmed my insanity, I will commit suicide. Then, what happens when maniacs diagnose the psychiatrist in their ward to be a lunatic and decide to treat him with the injections given to dangerous patients?

Will I differ from these lunatics committing genocide to conceal their lunacy? I cannot have people pointing at me as I sit or move: Look, that is the madman. He calls himself Prof. He went mad because.... The yearning for Nguveren came so strong; whining and scratching like a dog scratching against the door of its prison. I had to release the craving before it tears my senses to shreds. She was still very far out of reach. In absence of any good thing, you do a bad one. No, I did not subscribe to that philosophy. My shirt clung to my frame tenaciously. I resolved to tear the symbol of my captivity to shreds. However, that would still mean to ignorant onlookers as the unveiling of my long-hidden insanity.

Then, Mama came with her tirade, accusing me of my father's callousness and about my being brought up by him to see her as insignificant. As a parent, she saw nothing wrong with holding a key to my room and getting in and out of it at will. She saw nothing wrong with pipe-smoking visitors sharing my room and sleeping on my bed. I had told her that at my age, I needed some privacy. As she talked, I sat mute and mentally projected

myself to the end of her tirade. The end came at last. She had her way unabated and was rather disappointed that I did not fuel her monologue with a response.

“Come and see.”

She led me to the thatched hut which served as a barn and store for crops.

“I told your father to mend this,” she pointed to the rafters, “but he only went about gossiping about me. Now the termites have finished eating the thatch, very soon they will start with the rafters...and the house will crumble...”

I looked at the rafters. Termites had started working on them from the inside and they had already lost their shapes. The roof would cave in any day.

“When the rains come, where will I keep the yams, corn and cassava?” she asked and left without another word.

Blacksmiths, grinders, drummers and other multiplex chaotic noisemakers invaded my wavelength. I did not know how to do it. My father was quite busy with meetings, scheming and planning the war strategies and logistics. My friends were involved in the execution. If they were not at the war front, perhaps they might have helped. Mama forgot all these but not the fact that it was shameful for one’s mother’s barn to crumble.

I had a halter ready for such situations. I went into my room in a dizzying stupor and rummaged the sides of my travelling bag for the rope to hang myself. I found it; I found the *Bic* pen I had bought for two naira. I probed further until I found four sheets of foolscap sheets. When students run out of fund, they run to Mama Put to eat on credit under the ‘Book-Me-Down’ policy. I decided to book my insanity down.

DIVINE RE-(DE)-CEPTION

ANNANGAI JANGO, ISLAMISED as Abdullahi Hammadu was a typical Bororo herdsman. He loved Fura da Nono of the famous Fulfude song; he cherished *Kindirimo* and *Dekyeri* too. Above all these, he loved women. He composed songs about them in all the languages that he spoke and would sing them as he grazed the cattle. Whenever he came across a group of women or girls, he would sing the blue songs with great deliberation and at the crescendo; he would skip about and scream in ecstasy, striking the ground with his *sauru*, the cattle-stick. He did this with the same intensity with which he struck it on the cattle's buttocks. This would form the beats against which he executed his erotic dance.

What he loved best about women was entering the house through the gate between the twin pillars. When he peeps at the gate, he stroked the gateman to a shuddering surrender. This was the theme of his latest composition.

“This Fulani man has a bad voice,” one of the women said.

“Like an incubating hen,” another said. They laughed.

“I never thought Fulani men could sing,”

“This one can. Annangai has mastered the Tiv language up to the idioms and proverbs,” a third said.

His mastery of the language was one of the reasons why the women condoned his obscenities. They were fascinated by Fulani herdsmen; some weird human beings between the realm of men

and fairies, as they saw them, speaking the language of solid humans.

However, Annangai, with his unbridled lust like a great flood in the wake of heavy rains, overflowed the banks of the women's tolerance with his galloping audacity. One morning as he was on a reconnaissance mission for pastures on the banks of River Buruku, he espied on Kpenjilen, cleaning the leftovers of what her womb had eaten the previous night in a squatting position. He did not stop at veering; he composed a song about it there and then. He also danced to it in the presence of the subject of the song. He nailed himself by staging a dance drama as he executed perfectly his stick-beating rhythm. However, this time his greatest crime was composing the song in the Tiv language.

Kwase sha Tibi

Pan mnenge twani ee

Ee tswani ee

Ee tswani ee

Ee tswani ee!

The most lewd and immoral Tiv woman can talk about the tender stick, the balls, the goalmouth, but will never make mention of the snail-head. The gatekeeper is sacred. She hates hearing mention of it from even her husband. It was beyond human imagination therefore, for Kpenjilen to hear this from a Fulani herdsman. But Annangai was not just a Fulani herdsman, he also broke another rule, instead of only mentioning it, he sang about it and in a high-pitched tone that it echoed among the *Nyinyagbev* shrubs. He went beyond that to sing about it when other women came to the river. When they heard this, their admiration for the herdsman evaporated and fizzled out into a steaming hot hatred. They stood still and blinked deliberately to wake up from what they regarded as a bad dream. But when they opened their eyes,

Annangai was still there smiling at them and winking his left eye at each of them. They took it that Annangai was demanding that they should open their legs for him to see. Most tonal languages may convey different meaning in a song form. So, his declarations became imperative and more offensive.

Annangai being hopeful of the hereafter, held fast to the promise of seventy robust virgins with turgid breasts in paradise. Without that, he would cease to be faithful instantly. What was wrong with his having fun with six “half-used” women here on earth just as a foretaste of the promises? He thought.

He held up his *sauru* with two hands, forming a ‘T’ above his head and opened his chest in a mock *Sharo* dance which was indicative that he would give himself up to be beaten in a *Sharo* ritual as a payment for bride price if the women would agree. The women looked at one another. They all knew now that Annangai deserved nothing less than death. They contemplated how best to carry out the act.

“Nam ikyuru m gbigye,” he demanded, not directing his words to anyone in particular. The similarity between his stick and the one he belabored the cattle with made him replace the word sex with beat, instead. Moreover, he believed that just as he used his *sauru* to beat the cattle all day long at his discretion, so also it was with having sex with women. This substitution of the love-action word with beat, particularly made the women feel disdain for him,

“Give me your sword and I will give it to you,” Mbaduen ventured. He handed it over sheepishly.

“Give me your stick and I will give you mine,” Kpenjilen demanded. He complied, handing over his most potent weapon, *sauru*.

“Pull off your clothes and follow us into the river, we will all give you.”

Annangai needed no further prompting. He discarded his clothes and went into the river and at once the women forced him under the water. They kept pushing him in and out until his stomach became full. After battling in vain against six women, he became weak, and as he was sinking into oblivion, he gave himself up to paradise where he hoped and prayed to meet a better-tempered bevy of virgins. As he relaxed, the women concluded that he was dead and stopped the immersion. The six women collectively raised alarm, calling on nearby anglers to come and see the drowning herdsman they had discovered. It was apparent that he drowned while attempting to take a bath.

Two villagers constructed Amuku, a hammock used in carrying dead bodies and rushed Annangai Jango to Mkar Christian Hospital, seven kilometers away from the village. He had only gone into a coma. The Doctors, among them a white woman, gave him express treatment to revive him before asking for his particulars. At 10:30 pm, Ananngai regained consciousness as he discovered himself in the ward. He looked around the neat dazzling white painted ward. The room was lit with luminescent tubes. The array of beds was dressed in impeccable white sheets. Some patients had relatives, some of their numerous servants, sitting by the bedside and spoon-feeding them. The nurses looked like angels attending to them as well. He opened his eyes gently and on seeing where he was, closed them gently. The scent of the blooming Pride of Barbados and other flowers caressed his olfactory senses gently and he inhaled deeply.

The Chief Angel herself to wake up touched him. The mallam's description made her only comparable to a white woman. Beside her was a lesser angel translating from the heavenly language as the patient and the doctor interacted.

“What is your name?” Doctor Nolan asked.

The nurse interpreted in Tiv language which the villagers had told them Annangai understood. He swallowed. He wished

Allah had given the Chief Angel who looked as if she would satisfy him as much as the seventy yet-to-be-seen virgins would.

“On earth, I was called Mallam Abdullahi Hammadu but my real name was Annangai Jango. I don’t know what I will be called here,” he answered blissfully, waiting for another christening ceremony. When the nurse interpreted this, everyone was confused but when he explained, the doctor, the nurses, and all the patients burst out in heavenly laughter.

DR KIBOUGH'S MIRACLE

ALL UNMARRIED MEN AND WOMEN always have some level of preconceived notion of what the physical and intellectual features of their future spouses should be. Only the pragmatic ones know that love is where you find it; it can come to you in any shape and color. Still, the dogmatic ones go to the extreme of developing an elaborate manual; the physiognomic specifications, and the behavioral expectations of the unknown future spouse. Dr Kibough had a hardcover notebook in which he had the picture of his future wife plotted out. He had invited Bro Nyima to be a witness as he set down the Holy Book to serve as a guide to this epic search for a godly wife.

“This book and the Holy Book must be the handy and constant reference to get me a godly wife,” he declared after they had prayed for two hours.

“Yes, brother,” Bro Nyima supported.

“You know I’m searching for a life partner. Moreover, the Holy Book says whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst. The mouth of two or three witnesses establishes the truth. So, you, brother Nyima and the Holy Book itself shall be the witnesses as I plan for a woman that shall help me serve God better.”

“She must be a born-again Christian.”

“Of course, yes,” Dr Kibough nodded as he wrote down the first article of the constitution.

“She must be a virgin.”

“And a beautiful girl she must be so that her remaining a virgin over the years shall not be as a result of men avoiding her,” Dr Kibough added, “And I prefer tall ladies to short ones. Short women are always ill-mannered.” Being a doctor of science with specialisation in Microbiology, his brother could not challenge this assertion being just a graduate of economics. Dr Kibough may have discovered from his intense study of mysterious microbes that women like microbes could be characterized by their shapes and sizes. He may have discovered something deadly about short and stout creatures. Bro Nyima thought.

“Fat or slim...the tall ones?

“Well...Slim...Slim, yes...Slim.”

Other details were emphasized, elaborated, and specified.

“With these details, are you sure you don’t have a particular girl in mind you wish to marry who has influenced these criteria? Do you think you can get a girl of this exact definition if you follow this manual with your characteristic rigidity?” Bro Nyima asked.

“That sounds like a display of faithlessness. God said, ‘Is there anything too difficult for me to do?’ The God I worship is too faithful to fail me. He will and has indeed already created a woman of these specifications. With God, all things are possible.”

As they drew the manual, Dr Kibough’s third leg kept reminding him not to forget that the woman must have an entrance between the twin pillars. He rebuked himself at once for having canal thoughts and banished the spontaneous growth back to the bloodstream after silently admonishing himself that a true believer should not nurse canal thoughts.

He was just seven days to his thirty-fifth birthday and his ageing parents were getting worried that they might see a

grandchild from him. They kept offering to get him a wife from the village since he could not get one by himself but he would not hear of it.

“I am not in a hurry,” he would reply.

“But we are in a hurry. We want to see our grandchild before we die. People like Nyityo have seen their great-grandchildren.”

His Third Leg too was getting impatient waiting, it kept wondering when it would be able to perform its obligation like its other counterparts that have proven their worth with springs. It would wake him up at the sound of the first cockcrow and nod in an uncontrollable protest. Sometimes, it would puke on his bed to register its disdain for his shoddy manner of handling the entire conjugal affairs.

At last, Dr Kibough hooked up with Mbazendan, he had proposed to her. She had met his lofty prerequisites and Dr Kibough believed she was the chosen one. She was also a born again. They got on for six months and during this period Mbazendan would pay him short visits ranging from two to three days. On such visits, he would relinquish his bed and sleep on the settee in the living room. On one of such visits, Mbazendan ran out of patience and demanded just a hug or a good night peck on the cheek. That night he brought out the manual and showed her.

“With that demand, I have my doubts that you are still a virgin,” he said.

Mbazendan felt insulted, in annoyance she packed her belongings and left. The next day, when they met on the campus, Mbazendan went straight to his office and in her theatrical manners scandalized him.

“See,” she pulled up her skirt, revealing a birth suit, “I am a woman, prove to me that you are a man.”

A few days after, Dr Kibough invited Bro Nyima for another constitutional conference, also in attendance was the Holy Book, they amended the manual.

“She shall not be a Theatre Artiste; they are trained hypocrites.”

His mother came again. This time too she refused to eat in his house, she sought out a local food joint where she bought *Akara* and *Akamu* for brunch, rice, and beans for her dinner. It was a taboo for an old woman to eat the food cooked by a man, at least that was how she was brought up. Dejectedly, she left once more without any assurance from her son when the family would fix the date for his marriage.

His Third Leg too kept protesting against the delay. It sometimes made him wish he could secretly patronise an *Akpelaja*, just for one night to pacify the nodding it. What will the people; the heathen and the brethren say if they see the unholy woman entering and leaving this house? Will they really understand that he called her in for his third leg and he did not participate in the sinful act?

Back in the village, Nyingyor, his mother, after accusing her relatives of spoiling her only son through witchcraft without a reasonable response decided to visit the Orishor, the oracle. She hustled from one oracle to another, receiving various prescriptions which consumed a fortune but which didn't produce any result. Dr Kibough remained resolute and unhinged by all the incantations invoked on his behalf.

“Maybe he is either empty here or here,” his mother suggested to his father, pointing to her head and groin in alternation.

“In either case, he needs a cure and a good herbalist can do that even if it is a white man's curse that has been placed on him,” his father concluded. The Dr Kibough's sleepless Third Leg was a

living testimony that he was ten-over-ten down below. Although his brain was questionable as bigotry and dogmatism had occupied so much room thereby leaving so little for pragmatism thus alienating him from reality.

At forty-two, Dr Kibough was yet to get a born-again virgin beauty as he desired. How could he even ascertain if she was a virgin having no experience and with so much craftiness of women desperate for well-to-do husbands? A lump of alum and a fruit of lime were rejuvenating harlots into virgins every night and every hour. Most of his friends and relations were distancing themselves from him. If the Third Leg could detach itself from his body, it would have left long before anyone else. It could not leave so it intensified its protests.

“You could get even that not-too-ugly Idoma girl; just anything that has a passage between the twin pillars,” his Third Leg planted a thought inside his mind, “Or that beautiful hooker that used to go out with the student’s union president before she became born-again. You were the scripture union president; two of a kind. The Holy Ghost must have arrested her for you. You could even sneak to the *Akpelaja* business room and get just a round for me. Well, if you don’t mind my vomiting on your bed every night, I’ll carry on.” The Third Leg enthused.

“You are tired of cooking for yourself; a doctor of science and a forty-two-year-old man with all it takes to get a reasonably good wife,” another thought chipped in.

“But how can I go against the constitution in which the Holy Book himself participated in the drafting? Why did I not even just slice a small portion of the Holy Book, which sees Beauty only from the point of view of submission? Why did I not think of the chapter that describes the virtuous woman?

He ignored these thoughts for a short while. The Third leg never gave up. It became even bolder and notorious.

Dr James Igbadoo Kibough had an alarm clock and a smart cock, both woke him up every day at the same time. The Muezzin of the nearby mosque was also very dutiful in reminding him every morning of how he was behind on his fulfilling his quest of finding a good wife. Dr Kibough found himself waking up every day at four o'clock antemeridian for no justifiable reason.

"With God, all things are possible," Bro Nyima encouraged him. This sounded more like a mockery of his predicament. He was beginning to think that Bro Nyima, the only human participant at the conference was his real problem. That morning, he had seen a moderate fine heathen girl as she passed by his window apparently returning from a Till Day Break home service to a customer. He identified her by the skimpy dress she was wearing and the little handbag she was carrying. He had come to know that many of the girls who offered such services often dressed the same way in the area.

"Why not invite her for a cup of tea?" He discovered to his dismay that he was soliloquizing too much for a sane man. "If only Bro Nyima were not there to remind me of backsliding on my resolutions... but where is my faith now?" He asked himself.

He had forgotten that he had water boiling on the gas cooker as he sat writing a letter furiously. He did not consult Bro Nyima or the Holy Book this time around. He wrote it in consultation with his faithful Third Leg. He drove to the post office and sent the SOS home.

"With that letter, anything can happen," he said as he sat down to tea after dropping the letter in the mail box. It took the letter two weeks to reach the village. It took the trio of his happy parents and the bride only two days to reach Kano from Gboko. It had taken his father only a day to scout for the most visibly fertile girl around and that was how he became a happily married man.

When he finally met his bride, he cared less now whether she was a virgin or not. She was more ignorant of the concept of being born again than Nicodemus. Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, but she was a cock-eyed moron. The difference between Theatre Arts and the *Kwagh-hir* Puppet Theatre is only at the level of sophistication and nomenclature. Anyue was a member of the Anjoko Igbum *Kwagh-hir* group since she withdrew herself from primary five. She however suited Dr Kibough's Third Leg so well that seven months after stepping into Dr Kibough's house, she gave birth to a fully developed bouncing baby boy.

LOVE VISIONS

BEFORE BROTHER BEEIOR BECAME a born-again, he loathed the In-depth Living Bible Church because of the caliber of the female folks that belonged attend the church. These timid and apparently frigid imbeciles, tied up their ears with head ties, wore flurry necks and skirts that swept the ground. To him, these dimwits were far removed from the human race to the realm of orangutans whose stock could not pass for a woman. They wore no earrings, no necklaces and carried handbags that looked like they were stolen from the Museum of Elizabethan Antiquities. They carried themselves about as impeccably holy beings walking among stinking sinners. However, as if they knew he had a loathing for them, they kept coming to preach to him on their evangelism days. Beeior got a home training that helped him appear calm and controlled no matter what was going on inside of him. Therefore, he tolerated their nauseating appearances until he started forgetting their offensive attitudes.

However, since everything fabricated must undergo reformation and transformation, he noticed a gradual evolution of the group from the strict holier-than-thou stance to a more liberal approach. Though they still abhorred earrings and necklaces, they now danced to spiritual music and shook their bodies, wore more close-fitting clothes and did their lips with Vaseline or any other colourless cream to give them a shine. A closer look also revealed that some of them mixed their creams with skin lighteners making their unblemished skins match their souls. Therefore, Beeior was not so surprised to see a jeans-skirt-wearing cremated daughter of Eve on the trail that made the difference in their two-year effort.

“Maybe they can read minds,” he wondered, “How else could they bring along this completely modernized chic on this visit?” He thought.

This coincidence turned out to be the manipulation needed to work on the mind of Beeior and his lust. It was all that the situation demanded to make the proverbial guinea fowl’s head to absorb salt. Beeior became a born-again brother to the mortification of his friends.

“We will surely discover the anus of this sudden transformation,” Dezzy Gee taunted Beeior as he preached to her about the need to change her ways.

“Everything that feeds must have an anus, seen or unseen, or else it will stop feeding,” Roger Pee added.

“Guys, Bobby Bee is a fuck up,” Kazon Rollers burst out, “What the fuck do you think you’re doing, joining these morons?”

“Bless you, I don’t mind your insults but I’m Beeior and no longer Bobby Bee. Please spare me from your unholy language.” He replied his friends.

“Shit, men, this guy’s gone nuts. Let’s *fashe* him.” They resolved.

Beeior still stood out of his brethren. He hardly associated with the less liberated. He would not as much as sit on the same pew with an ugly girl or a poorly dressed young man. Those driven into the fold by the heat of worldly discrimination constantly got painful reminders from him. He made them doubt their conviction that in heaven, they would all be shining stars. The church had offered that great consolation them. Now they were misfits here too as well-to-do and good-looking brethren avoided sharing fellowship with any underprivileged.

However, the Holy Spirit; the Comforter that Christ promised his faithful had myriad ways of consoling the grief-

stricken like Sister Ngavan, the hunchback. Ngavan was a gnarled being with almost no spine to support her. She was a remarkable sight as she toiled to climb the steps that raised the church hall up like an earthly heaven. She was actually a human being with all the feelings of the other sisters. Her anatomy was complete and ready for every other use. Ngavan could only enjoy some of the usages of her body in the realm of the astral. Hugging and embracing loved ones in the material realm was restricted to mere wishful-thinking.

“When you have fun in the dream, it is the work of the demons sent to initiate you into dangerous secret cults,” the Powerful Man-of-God in one of the visionary sermons.

For Ngavan, this became the unstated reason why during the prayer sessions, she rolled on the ground, foamed in the mouth and spoke in tongues akin to orgasmic jabbering. The devil had provided her only outlet for achieving pleasure, sex in the dreams. The prayer sessions were a temporary window. This provided another opportunity for Brother Beeior. He knew that when the phantom pleasure doors closed, the sisters would certainly resort to the real thing with the real beings. He knew he stood a good chance of catching the most attractive of the sisters. During group discussions, he therefore hammered on this point to drive home his message of liberation. This increased Ngavan’s anguish as she would recoil only to resurface in her excellence in the gift of tongues, hysterics and trances.

Prophetess Ngavan was the first to see the vision in which the whole of Gboko city was infiltrated by *Mamiwata* spinsters who were simulacra for humans. Some even attended church services. Vivid descriptions of these demons made cremated sisters uncomfortable. Ngavan had now occupied an enviable position of a prophetess who could not be challenged by the pastors and *pastresses* except the Founder and General Superintending Overseer.

The Holy Spirit, the Comforter, had bigger ways of comforting the distressed. Visions became the in-thing. Everybody was now seeing visions under the authority of Ngavan. Prophet Joel came to the rescue of questionable visionaries. Sisters started seeing visions in which the Holy Ghost directed them to marry either the most well to –do brothers or the most handsome of the pack. He directed brothers as well to marry the beautiful ones from comfortable households. Here too brother Beeior saw another platter of gold upon which to feed his desires. Once the Holy Ghost gave directives, no one dared to disobey unless Ngavan, the Prophetess, contradicted such.

“If you disobey God, you are forgiven. If you disobey His son, his blood still cleanses you if you repent. But if you disobey the holy ghost, who will intercede on your behalf?” the pastor had asked in one of his man-of-God ravings. This pronouncement from the anointed man-of-God was incontrovertible. One could only work with it but not against it. Within one week of this declaration, the Anointed Man-of-God wedded seventeen couples, some of these against the vehement opposition from one side of the parents who x-rayed the marriages and saw pure infatuation, crush or gold digging at work. Weeks rolled into months, but only the *Mamiwata* were wedded. Ngavan still trusted the holy ghost for God’s time.

Brother Beeior was realizing that he was not so favored by the Holy Ghost courtship visions. He was becoming afraid that if he continued to wait on the discretion of the Holy Ghost, all the good-looking sisters would be married off to others whom the Holy Ghost favored more. He therefore launched a vision. Prior to the randy rowdy prayer sessions, he had confided in Brother Jacob.

“The Holy Ghost has directed that the first sister I shall open my eyes to see after the prayer warfare shall be the one chosen for me by God.”

“Yes, brother, that is a perfect way of allowing the Holy Ghost to work.”

“I only pray that He shall be just to me. You shall be my witness when I say amen, to grab the sister in my face.”

“Whatever the holy ghost gives you must be good for you. “All things work for the good of those who love God. The Holy Ghost knows all.” Brother Jacob said.

Brother Jacob found it commendable to report this design to the Prophetess, the overseer of visions. That was how Ngavan came to know how to allow the Holy Ghost to work without interference and secondly, how one could get in the way of the Holy Ghost.

Brother Beeior was a very cunning man but could not bother to suspect why the hunchback shouted the loudest ‘A-a-i-men’ as the Man-of-God launched the prayer warfare that evening. He had planned to open his eyes in the direction that he would hear Augustina, the most attractive and seductive of the birds left sat, blabbering. He closed his eyes and got on with the theatrical prayers.

The gift of tricks is not restricted to normal people. In fact, those who are physically malformed are compensated with more generous portions of mental dexterity.

“Sip-sip shhiip sweet chic chic ksha- braba ba baba brrr sasa paa pra pa papa papa popo- Kwaghku kisssss kissssss-tatatatatata- kprurururu Kprararara- shav shav shav okokoriokoooooooooooo, hoooooooooooo!”

Brother Beeior peeped in the direction that he had heard Sister Augustina jabbering from to make sure that she was the only female in that position. He did this in the name of the father. Ngavan was facing him squarely, peeping at him through the slits

of her eyes. He closed his instantly. He assured himself that the first one may not count as the trinity was not yet involved.

“Mtshhhhhh tsh shaba shaba shaba Jesus Jesus bracadabracada bababababababa...”

He peeped again but this time Ngavan was staring at him with her eyes glittering with joy. He told himself that this was in the name of the Son. There is no harm in trying up to the final seal of the holy ghost. He turned away and continued his gibberish.

“...Aya-aya-aya- wugh –wugh- wugh- yei-yei-asho-asho-asho- charrararararara...”

Brother Benjamin Beeior Dzuana opened his eyes in the name of the holy ghost to see Prophetess Ngavan hobbling into his arms.

“Get away from me, Satan,” he shouted and pushed Ngavan, the Prophetess to the ground. He walked straight to the door and shoved the astonished usher aside.

“Brother...”

“Damn you, bastard.”

THE TESTIMONY OF SACRIFICIAL LOVE

IT OCCURS ONLY ONCE IN THREE hundred and sixty-five days so the programme had to be very entertaining, inspiring and spiritually overhauling. As such, a very suitable theme relevant and in tune with the changes in the secular world had to be chosen by the council of elders with the approval of the Synod, for the spiritual upliftment of Christians. This year's theme was framed, celebrated and hammered on over and over through the length, breadth, nooks and crannies of the Annual Bible Digging Conference so that every cooked or raw convert, no matter how daft, would take the spiritual message home.

This year's theme was "Sacrificial Love". During the opening session, the pastor with a crumbled face that looked like an aluminum bowl that was unfortunate to lie in the way of a lorry's leg, stood at the *Alyebagu*, the monkey's cradle, a corruption of *Areopagus*, the pulpit and compelled the congregation to repeat the theme repeatedly. He drew on the them to espouse many stories; relevant and otherwise, interesting and boring, funny and frustratingly annoying. Sometimes, he would parachute Bible verses in the thick groove of confusion and torture them on landing to run back to the theme. Sometimes he would shock the heathen part of his congregation by singing a heathen song to buttress a point.

Abena, a celebrated heathen and hedonist got there at the very beginning of the programme. His main purpose like many other pagans in the congregation was to watch the lewd dances of

the women whose bottled worldliness found a vent in dramatic license.

The melodramatic plays particularly fascinated him. The drama, aimed at evangelizing unbelievers and edifying the new converts always ended up exposing the caged libido of the women. One of the regulars was the piece on the healing power of Jesus, which relieved many people of ailments with particular emphasis on men with elephantiasis of the scrotum. These gourd-like inflated scrotal sacs never went without a diminutive penis riding on them like the butterfly crossing the river on the back of the hippopotamus. The actors carefully hung the balls to their waists with a length of wrapper covering them but their outlines spoke enough to make men like Agande, who still had surgical scores to settle, so nervous as to sneak off the arena.

“These people are always proud of this useless Bible-Digging. Why?” Abena asked Adela, a fellow pagan.

“Mhn-hum,” Adela muffled an indignant laughter, “they should entertain us and stop wasting our time. If they dig the Bible, I dig my farms and feed my three wives with their seventeen children, nonsense.”

“And they end up saying nothing of their personal knowledge or experience. It is always: The Bible says, Paul says, Jesus said that God said He would do this and that; they don’t even believe what they hear and say.”

“This thing with a fractured face is the worst of the *Pasakos* they have ever sent here. He is only doing that thing for money. He had the cheekiness to drive Terwase away from *Koloji* because I could not pay his kwata.” Abena raged.

This time Adela laughed mirthfully. For Abena, there was no difference between the pastor that headed the local church and the principal of the Missionary College under the jurisdiction of the Local Church Council.

“This baboon that heads the Church is called *Paseto* while the one in charge of the *Kolaji* is called *Prispal*.

“What of *Hedmasta*?”

“*Headmasta* is for *Primali*.”

“So, there are two schools here now?” “Yes, since last year.”

“I didn’t know. That foolish boy, Terwase does not tell me much. He is always in the kitchen with his mother.” Abena sighed, “Useless boy”.

Now that the pastor was leaving the pulpit, they heaved a sigh of relief.

“He is not even what one’s eyes should see,” Abena said. Some members, who had been listening to their conversation, had chosen to focus their attention on the Bible-Digging, though with much difficulty. Now, they could only cast surreptitious glances at the two, as overt goggling would have attracted a blatant insult from Abena. Abena knew that the next thing in line was *Anumbe*; entertainments, which in the native language were homophonous with a yellowish yam, which had a sweet taste mingling with bitterness.

“I love *Anumbe*, whether harvested from the farm or performed in the church,” Abena whose mood had dramatically changed now that they left the church hall and settled outside the open arena, said gleefully. He and Adela settled down on an exposed root of a mango tree. He silently chided himself for going inside the church. If he was sure that they would do it outside as usual... but who could wait outside, not knowing when they would come out? The twinkle of an eye would be one year.

However, they forgot the annoying Bible-Digging, they forgot the tedious wait, and they forgot the offensive *Pasako* with

a creased face after the spectacular show of women in scrotums with small penises. Abena laughed his head off when Tyona's wife did her graceful dance and effortlessly mimicked Agande. It was the joke of the village that Agande had approached her for an extra-marital affair. She had first demanded that Agande do a ceremonial surgical operation on his *msondo* by cashing down three hundred naira before any further discussion. Agande had done that and given her soap and pomade for two hundred naira. That money she used to pay for fifty lines of yam heaps, an average line being sixty heaps. Agande's *msondo* had become a farm machine for Tyona's wife.

“These women...!”

“These Christian Women...!” Adela complemented.

“Tomorrow is another day,” Abena said as they yawned and milled with the mixed crowd of Christians and pagans as they retired home. He got into the church hall the next evening ahead of even the Christians to assess critically Tyona-anchored Bible Digging. He gave a long hiss when Tyona climbed the *Alyebagu*.

“Mtsssssssew, this one doesn't even have a farm. What can a married man with six children do with fifty lines of a forty-five-heap long farm? If I summersault once, I will find myself at the other end of his pygmy farm. He is foolishly digging the Bible that does not require any energy while his wife is busy digging the well between her legs and cutting the *msondo* of Agande to farm and feed her children. Wan-Mbayaka, my first wife, digs from her farm and feeds her seven children, clothes herself and the children and throws away the crumbs to the pigs when the children and the uncountable passers-by cannot finish one calabash of her pounded yam. The Daughter-of-Mbagen, with her six children is equally doing well. If Kukase, my *pendatyo*, wasn't overwhelmed with painting herself all day and refusing to go to the farm, it would have been the same story for her as well. But she went to *Koloji* and opened eyes so she wants to be like city women. And these

Christian women have been inciting her against me by inviting her to attend *Katekisema*. Pwha, these dogs,” he spat on the floor as he mumbled his monologue.

Adela, who came later, was scanning the church hall for his friend, Abena spotted him and beckoned to him, relieved to find a true companion.

“How are you, Adela?”

“Fine, my friend...what of you and your house?”

“Food, it is only food that is sick and my wives have got the tedious task of carrying him out four times a day.”

“We have come to wait again.”

“...To mess our ears with their useless Bible Digging.”

This evening, however, the Bible-Digging was on the topic: “Loving Your Spouse”, and it was taken from the book called ‘The Greatest Song; Song of Solomon,’ by Tyona. Abena saw many similarities between the song book and the ancestral love songs of the tribe.

“The man who wrote this book describes even the nudism of his woman, I doubt if she is his wife,” Adela said to Abena.

“Yes, they say one-man-one-wife yet they openly take the wives of others. After taking the wives of their own members, they invite the wives of non-members to join their *Katekisema* as recruits. I will kill any Baboon that touches my *pendatyo*.”

“The *Chechi* of Fada is better in that regard. Fada does not marry and prefers to urinate on his stomach like Adi-Vihya the King Grass Cutter.”

“Ha ha ha eeee, don’t kill me, Adela. Fada has *Sisita* as his wife. He only urinates inside the *mboro-mboro* that he wears on the thing. Did you not hear that when Fada Kundu died, a wife and

four children surfaced from a corner of the town to inherit his properties? When *Kwayamasta* stands in front of women signaling the places they will meet after learning songs, you think it is only to eat their food. Demelu only wanted to become *Kasekii* so that he would be consoling widows. Let me listen to this Greatest Song, it catches my fancy.”

Abena thought, “what is the difference between the Greatest Song and this one running on my mind:

Gbangya, the hairy one

Let her embrace me

Gbangya has embraced me

Gbangya slept with me

Turning her back

Gbangya likes it best from the back

Gbangya,

Let her embrace me”

Abena raised his hand. There was a buzzing of murmuring. Tyona ignored him and continued his Bible-Digging

“This thing, if he happens to go to farm with me, before he finishes a line, I will finish five,” Abena thought and sustained his raised hand. The women were at the verge of bursting into laughter. He eventually shot up and those who had been observing him burst into laughter. Others took cue and joined, following the direction of the gaze to see Abena standing defiantly with his hand still raised. Abena looked behind him only to discover that he was the point of interest.

The pastor came to his rescue by standing up and suspending the digging. He asked Abena what was troubling him.

“Yes, since I started waiting for *Anumbe* in the gathering five years ago...”

“Thank you,” the pastor cut him short, “You are...?”

“Abena Do.”

“Yes, Abena Do, this is exactly what we want. Tomorrow, the Conference for Bible-Digging will end. We will give everybody the opportunity to give a testimony of his or her experience. Kindly chew your teeth and wait for tomorrow, thank you.” He sat down, as Abena Do beamed with a new found likeness for the pastor. The evening was a memorable one for both the Christians and their guests. The Christians were beginning to get elated that the devotion of half- a –week every year for Bible Digging was not in vain after all. Tyona’s wife felt proud of her husband for the first time in their twelve-year-old marriage. She silently attributed the response to the Bible-Digging skills of her husband. He had beaten even the pastor in the efficacy of Bible Digging for which the pastor has been trained and consecrated.

“This year’s conference is so successful. Even a terrible man as that wants to testify the goodness of the Lord,” she whispered to another woman.

The day of testimonies finally came. As the floor was open, Abena waited impatiently for his turn to come. Even the women were eager to hear the testimony of the heathen. He may probably be convinced to send his wives to attend *Katekisema* since as a polygamist; he could not become a Christian himself. Abena listened to the testimonies of the Christians. He felt within him that all the testimonies he heard lacked substance in one way or the other. Some did not really fall in tune with the theme or any topic presented. He lost patience after the fifth Christian gave a vague testimony and sprang up with his hand leading him. The pastor pointed at him and nodded. There was absolute silence. The

women whispered. He cleared his throat and decided to engage the congregation on a narrative catechism.

“My name is Abena Do, Abena the son of Do, not Abenado as the *Paseto* pronounced yesterday. I have learnt a lot about love from this gathering, from what the members of this *Chechi* have done to my knowledge and what I have heard from the Bible-Digging. All these have reminded me of my experience in Kaduna when I visited my brother who was working with *Arewa Teksstais*.”

The necks in the front swiveled and craned to make sure that the owners had a video coverage of the testimony. Those behind and around propped the head-cameras with their hands so as not to unduly stress their necks. He began.

“This issue of love, in the year One Thousand, Nine Hundred, Three Score and Ten... Three Score and what?”

“Three Score and Ten,” the congregation thundered. “I visited Denen in Kaduna. I did what?”

“You visited Denen in Kaduna.”

“En-hen. Do you know what happened?”

“No.”

“He gave me four score pounds. He did what?! ”

“He gave you four score pounds,” they activated the combined narrative mode.

“En-hen. Do you know what I did with the four score pounds?”

“No.”

“I changed all into pennies and shillings-pennies and shillings-pennies and shillings. I did what?”

“You changed all into pennies and shillings-pennies and shillings-pennies and shillings.”

Everybody was warmed up and enjoying the joint narrative venture with Abena Do, and wished the story would never end.

“Mhn, do you know I did with the small pieces?”

“No.”

“Love,” he paused to let it sink in, “Love. I entered between the legs of women with the whole money. I did what?”

There was a tensed silence.

“Mhn. I saw a Yoruba woman; I gave her two Shillings and entered. I did what?”

Silence.

“I met an Igbo harlot. I gave her two pence and entered. I did what?”

Silence.

“Mhn. I found a Hausa girl hawking banana, I paid for the whole thing and asked her to bring the whole tray into the sitting room and I started putting my hand between her legs the way Ayangalu had told me that Fada has been doing to women at confession and *Kasekii* too has been doing at *Katekisema*. I was also told that *Paseto* too has been doing it to the wife of Ortamen Jimegyo. I did what?”

The church erupted in silence

“Calabar women, Egalla, Egbirra, Kuteb, Idoma, Berom, Kaje, Angas, Nupe, Kaka, Basso ... I loved all with the whole money. When it was time to come back, I had no money so they showed me one old Hajiya...”

The pastor who had been shocked into stupor had now recovered and found his voice.

“Where can I get some hefty youths to drag this madman out of the gathering and beat the sins out of him?”

“Mhn, that is exactly what I want. I will beat the slaves,” Abena flexed his muscles to show his readiness. The church erupted in confusion and commotion and everything fell apart.

HIDDEN TREASURES

I DECIDED TODAY, after sessions of coaxing by the *pastress* to go to church. I always feel too devilish to enter sacred places.

“No, sinners are most welcome, Christ died for such,” she said.

“What about the birds, those pretty, fine things?” I asked.

“Beautiful creatures; they sing praises to Him.”

“It’s sinful to ever think of grabbing what serves the Omnipotent Creature Himself.” I thought aloud.

“We have the word from the Creator of the universe. You will surely get it there,” she pointed to the building, “It is free. If you really want it, you must go there.”

I shuddered but pulled myself together quickly to prove my manliness.

“It entails a special kind of guts to dive for the cubs in the very presence of the Omniscient and Omnipresent Lion,” I muttered.

“You will find it there. It is dead elsewhere. Here, it is chewed and left for you to swallow. Elsewhere there are no miraculous gifts.”

“Mnhhn,” I contemplated.

“Come on, be part of it!”

At midnight, I headed towards it. I found him waiting. We entered through the kitchen door. We ignored the busy cooks and went through the railings like water passing through conduit pipes. The railings streamlined our movements. We reached the seats arranged with angelic ushers standing by. We kept moving. Yes. Those who comb the nooks and crannies must surely find it in abundance for gold is never noticed on the surface of the earth. Those who dig in and comb the mazes for the hidden thing will definitely find it. It was now dim as only the blue lights illuminated the corners. We shuffled and groped and as the lights grew dimmer, we became silhouettes. The number increased. We finally reached a door with a white inscription: RIBADU CAFETERIA.

“But you invited me to church,” I complained.

“The church is not a building. It is a collection of the faithful.”

The shock of this sudden discovery and my fear of sacred places vanished, I felt so free as I explore the place. The door pane was not there to bar the seekers.

“When he died, it was chopped to make way for sinners,” she vouchsafed an explanation.

“This is a night vigil,” a booming voice announced, “hold somebody, tell him or her ‘I love you’, join your hands together and praise the Lord.”. The giant speakers at the corners played out Panam Percy Paul’s original while the silhouettes followed the tune. I felt feminine hands grab my waist and two fleshy pads hit my back. The pressure behind me pushed me forward with a sudden shove. I bumped into a feminine behind in front of me.

“Bum-bum before me, boo-boo behind me, double the trouble,” I screamed and the sister in front of me did a volte-face. I felt the pounding in my heart and the whiz in my head increases. This is it! This is the spirit. We settled down after the excitement died down. Lights came on. I recalled seeing a woman selling

drinks at the entrance. I still felt the sensation lingering at the points where the untamed rigidity of the sister's chest in her teenage stiffness had pricked my chest. I dashed through the nooks to get a bottle of Brahma filled with *Kunun Zaki*. We could share it in the name of the Lord or love. It was the same. I returned with the corn brew characteristically concentrated, leaving clear water on top as the woman shouted after me, "Mix up, mix up!" "No, we will separate the sheep from the goats today," I shouted back as I ran back to the cave. I did not meet my teenage sister.

"Where is our sister?" I asked the rival, threateningly. "She is chasing after Yellow-man," she answered calmly. "I will, I will kill Yellow!" I rushed off with a battle cry. I saw him, he had a cigarette. I am allergic to smoke.

"Hello, Yellow," I dared. Yellow immediately recognized me and crushed the half-burnt cigarette.

"Terrible Devil, is it you?"

"Come, my sister, Yellow-man is my roommate. He will apologize for any wrong he did. Please forgive him," I opened my arms to receive her but she fled through the ruts of the railings, whimpering.

"Come on, let's reconcile," Yellow-man called out.

"If only you will reciprocate my love," she sobbed.

"Come on," Yellow and I chorused, opening our arms simultaneously.

She zoomed into Yellow's. It was a magnetic jam of passions. I heard gibberish, hisses, moans and ecstatic groans all around me.

"No!" I shouted and fumed out.

THE ROVING (WO) MAN OF THE WORD

THE PHENOMENON WAS A YOUNG old being; deformed or simply ugly. Yet who could tell whether or not she was beautiful, not knowing the aesthetics or formal values of belief beings? She looked more like a flying being by her physique, with more endowment at the trunk at the expense of the sickly legs. She wore a flowing white slack that looked like *Aladura* or a Muslim prayer gown.

Like a cattle egret, she was moving, moving and just moving on the road. Occasionally, she peered at a car window and eked out a preacher's noise from a malformed, under-formed, deformed, or rather well-formed mouth by belief-being standards.

“Halle-luuu-jah...Obloko prassmo laaas dey!”

She would wrap up the mossy teeth and limp, totter, tramp, or rather walk a few steps or many by the time and space concept of the belief- beings. She would possess possessions, a bus or a taxi full of passengers. She would croak another sermon in a loud voice to the conscripted congregation.

“Aaa-iii-meeeeen, chrasst inn dey dass nee-ii-mm heee-eeeell fayaaaaaa!”

She would hop some steps on, then realize that she had a book from which to read. She would then unsling an old patched-up bag and get out a tattered book from the assemblage of oddities,

balance on the two sticks of some legs. Spreading out the coverless book at the center, she would point up a corroded finger at an angle of one hundred and fifty degrees and squawk:

“Preeee-iii-isss pot let gooood! And-oor fine blaaackka seee-iii-taaan!”

She would open the bag and pass it around for offering as she sang:

“Frreeeeee, freeee da woood ov Gooood, Yoo leegs kaaannnot tek de goooospee, yoo mmoooni wee gooo.”

Gullible, over-zealous, sympathetic, dramatic, universal *churchists* and let-me-be-seen philanthropist passengers would drop crumbled notes of different denominations into the bag of oddities. She would squeeze the squinted eyes and raise a cooked hand to bless the givers:

“Sha-mma-mma-mmah, Bloood of chizos.Nevba lack, Bleees yoo pamili, Kova muta with bloood ov chizos. Aaaa-iiiimeen!”

She would then zip-up the bag, slip it under her arm, and push it until the shoulders bar it from reaching the neck and hop off the bus.

“Frafa frafa to be heee-ven, laptcho aengyel!”

Moving and stopping. Doddering and hopping. Squawking and shrieking. Peering and begging. Quarrelling and possessing. Keeping mute and thinking. Sometimes she would spread out the palms and fingers of the two palms in insult at a reckless driver that nearly knocked her down.

“Heeeeeel Fayaaaa! Ripen naaaw!

The being discovers an itch between the legs. She stops and scratches. The discomfort yields a sweet sensation. Scratching goes

on for a while. Closes the eyes and shudders. Cracking and thunderous scream:

“Deeelillah lasss kye Saamm sooon. Abishalom yan Rahabi. Yobu dey blokos!”

Closes the eyes shudders again, toddles on, and goes off. She would roam by day and rest by night and by extra-terrestrial decency mate with any of the androgynous composites, whenever and wherever she found the opportunity. She would rove through the cities and on the long stretches of roads linking the towns and the villages. Villages scattered or clustered around the roads witness yet another apparition. Weeks after the spectacular passage, children would be busy speaking in unknown tongues, preaching, and gesticulating like the creature. This they would do until they find a new attraction, probably a rare spectacle; a passing horse rider or an itinerant dancing troupe after which they would mount tree branches dancing.

GATHERED MEANINGS

JONGUL CHI SONGU WAS A CHILDISH ADULT as the villagers described him.

He was old enough to take his place in the elders' assembly but preferred to joke and sing parodies with the teenagers. He would sit at the outer circle at the village square to avoid being committed to serious tasks. He would exploit his age and membership to attend the nocturnal meetings even when the cult barred *women with testicles*, *women-women*, and children from attending the *Igbe* Cult, where only real men met to discuss serious issues. He also had a sharp ear and eye for the vocal and gestural mannerisms each member of his community exhibited which he dramatized to the admiration of even the subjects of his mimicry.

The desperate scramble for converts, communicant dues and levies brought in the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM) and the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) into the Utimbeku Community like two fang-baring foxes out of their lair. Jo Chi Songu with his ever-ready bludgeon of comedy was poised to strike at them both. The Dutch Mission did not pose such a big threat to the community because their puritan stances were rather repulsed and repelled than they attracted native converts.

The Roman Catholic Mission got the first shot. He parodied all their most popular songs, changing the themes into worldly and trivial affairs while sustaining their tunes. The parodies were funny and more popular with the youth whom the villagers feared were more vulnerable to the trickery of the missionaries. The converts

were becoming more of a laughing stock with each translated song or hymn.

“I had told you when the elders were considering ex-communicating Jo Chi from the *Igbe* Cult that you should never disown your madman. If you do, one day, a strange madman will intrude and rout your village and you will not be able to beat your chest and tell him that you have his betters,” Akosu told Gbagir as they discussed Jo Chi’s new value.

The Roman Catholic Mission has existed in the community for over a decade, but it only made snail progress as only imbeciles and outcasts of society joined and accepted to be baptized. Even with that its numbers fluctuated and dwindled whenever the *Kwagh-hir* Festival coincided with church events. The clans-people were not bothered about this pack. But the whole clan stood still in confusion when the Mission bought a set of steel drums and a bugle for the school organized for the morons. The instruments became a magic wand that started pulling all classes of children, drawing them to the school as a springboard for a headlong dive into the church. The Mission also mounted a swing, which the villagers called Lillo. But it was the band and the symphonies that were eating the hearts of everyone including the adults. The love the tribe had for music, rhythm, and dance weakened some parents into complacency. They found one reason or the other to condone the self-will of their children who insisted on going to the ‘Babel School’.

Jo Chi started his work on the children whose minds could be swayed like the swing they loved. The pupils, teachers, and even the heathen found themselves humming the symphonies of the drums and the bugle whose original lyrics even the catechist could not ask Fada to teach him. The rhythms and the symphonies waited in the ears for wordings.

As Jo Chi Songu sat outside his hut whetting the blade of his *Ityough* which he used as a chisel for cutting wood, Targba and

other pupils passed through the compound on their way to school. He stopped them, as he would usually do to make fun of their *Maigoga* shirts and *Alafinti* trousers. His mind told him that he was sure of the wordings of the drums and the bugle.

“Do you know what the *Busa* says when it is blown?”

“No,” chorused the eager voices.

He sang:

Kohol inyaregh ki makeranta

Fada Ngohol ya cha cha

Kohol inyaregh ki makeranta

Fada ngohol ya cha cha

Fada ngohol ya!

“It is not true!” Ahangba said, the look on his face betrayed his inner feelings. The lyrics also matched the rhythm without doubt. He could not tell what Fada does with the money paid as quota at the beginning of every year.

“Is it true that Fada eats the money like we eat yam?” Msughve asked, baffled.

“I will not go to that place again,” Tyowua said. “Do you know what the band says?” Jo Chi asked.

“No,” Targba and the others responded enthusiastically.

Jo Chi laughed a prolonged tease and responded only after his mirth had subsided to their utter consternation.

Fada kungu tswar.

Dio Nyian tswar bong

Fada kungu tswar

Dio nyian tswar bong

He sang, swinging his right hand as though he was holding an imaginary drumstick while the left hand was positioned at the end of the phantom drum punctuating the beats.

The Father has a white anus

D.O. has a crimson red anus

The Father has a white anus

D.O. has a crimson red anus

“But Levlev Fada himself taught me how to play those rhythms,” Targba said.

“Yes, since none of us has ever seen the anus of Fada or *Dio*, whatever Fada says must be true,” Jo Chi pressed on. They all laughed gleefully.

“So, the Reverend Father and the Divisional Officer, do not consider the vivid description of their anus as an offence? They are strange, like Alu Kur who would drink a concoction of *Ogogoro* and *Burukutu* and gather the children around him to sing insults to his person,” Msughve concluded.

So long as no one translated the lyrics that the children took home via the school to the Reverend Father, there would be no penance required. The catechist himself would have regretted this particular act of loyalty. Jo Chi had yet another angle to the game. He strolled to the homestead of Tyodzer as Targba was beating the drums as usual but with a new found enthusiasm. Tyodzer was carving a figure for the *Kwagh-hir* puppet theatre.

“I am greeting the sculptor,” Jo Chi saluted,

“Mhmm! Jo Chi Songu, my friend, how are you?”

“Mirth is the cure for every problem.”

“Oh, you have been enjoying yourself as usual!”

“Yes, Targba and the missionaries are providing the fun.”

“Mhm.”

“Hear him...Targba,” Jo Chi pointed to the direction of the school and the wind brought the sound of the drums louder as if responding to his magic finger.

“Yes, he has taken after me. I used to play our local drums for the *Kwagh-hir* group of Ayange Gwer in my youthful days. I was famous for killing the morale of our opponents with the intimidating rhythms of the drums before the puppetry and masquerading,” Tyodzer said with pride.

“Targba must have told you the language of the band and the *busa*,” Jo Chi probed.

“No, he doesn’t come out of the kitchen. He belongs to the women. That is why I did not object to his joining Fada. He is a woman with testicles. He will be a shame to the Igbe Cult.” He went on carving with his smaller Ityough while the bigger one and the machete lay by his side.

“Fada is teaching them how to insult *Dio*, himself and the converts.”

“Kpash!” Tyodzer exclaimed with a mixture of disgust and disbelief.”

“The rail leg they beat to summon them to school and church says “Tswar gbeng! Tswar Gbeng! Tswar Gbeng!”

“It is very true. If they don’t have a deep anus on each of those baboon buttocks, why would they stupidly join the God of people who even from the appearance of their skin do not have substance?”

“And the band Fada says has a white anus like peeled yam; Dio’s own is red like camwood.”

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ...deceitful chameleons are these white people! They are Fada, they are *Dochi*, they tell us *Dochi* is better than Fada and we hear that Fada is better than *Dochi*. Fada is a white man and *Dio* is a white man. However, they tell us that the anus of Fada is white while that of *Dio* is red. This means the white man is foolish and does not even know colors. He is also not sure of what he tells us about God, Mtsweew!” He went on carving.

“And the *busa* says, Kohol nyaregh ki makeranta, Fada ngohol ya cha cha!”

“I have been seriously thinking about asking Targba to stop punishing his mother. He takes money from her to pay *Kwata*. He also takes from her to pay for worshipping their God every Sunday. He takes from her to pay *Ista Diti*. Everything they do, they must pay money. I don’t even know what *Dio* does with the money I pay as tax every year. The beatings defaulters receive from *Chafa Don*, is the only thing that makes me pay the tax.”

“A mad man sets fire to his house first. After insulting themselves, they teach the children how to insult their fathers. The band Targba plays also says:

Terem saa ishe kpum kpum kpum,

A saa ishe kpum kpum,

Terem saa ishe kpum kpum kpum,

A saa ishe kpum kpum

Without any comment, Tyodzer calmly stood up from his carving and used the sharp machete to slash down two tender shoots of the *Akindé* tree at the center of the homestead. No better canes were gotten at home except the *Hueza*, which were only

found in the forests. He did not forget to carry the dreaded *Itough* believed to be also used by the *Mbatsav*, witches and wizards, custodians of the traditional society as a weapon of torture. It is believed that people who were found wanting in their moral and social responsibilities were exhumed at night for a post-mortem judgment. The zombies would be made to walk and dance to the rhythm of the flutist. A story is told of a situation where the flutist's father, Angyo died and was exhumed for the judgment. The wordings of the flute, which he did not interpret on the judgment night, were later made into a popular folk song:

Tyo hemba ga ze ma mve ze

Angyo terem mva ve

Tyo hemba ga ze ma mve ze

Angyo terem mva ve

The Council is supreme or else I would not be here

Angyo my father, see me here

Tyodzer strongly believed that the resurrection and last judgement the Christians made so much noise about was a mere corruption and imitation of the grand performance of Mbatsav judgement.

“Let any slave come between me and that foolish boy today by way of peace or violence. I will show them what they have never seen since birth,” Tyodzer threatened. As he gathered his arsenal and headed for the school, Jo Chi knew it would be a vain and dangerous venture to stage even a mock plea. He quietly headed home.

When Tyodzer reached the school that was just a long-range arrow shot from his house, Targba was the first to smell trouble cooking as every sensible child would. He knew his father and all that he was capable of doing. He threw down the

drumsticks. He set down the big drum gently to the ground, sneaking away while the players of the two small drums were still playing their supporting role.

“Stop there!” Tyodzer pointed the twig-full head of his trashing weapon. Targba froze. His colleagues stood dumbstruck. The teachers and the catechist receded into the classes. Everyone dreaded the pagan’s sharp companion that hung on his shoulder ready for use whenever the need arises.

“Fool! Twash,” the first stroke of the cane landed on Targba’s body, “Twash”, they ask you to beat the mother drum and call your father a wasted, useless and irresponsible person and you foolishly do it like the slave that you are, “Twash, Twash, Twash, Twash!” I will tell you that a boy takes after his father and not the foolish mother. Run home and go straight to the farm and never ever dream of seeing yourself here till I die.” Tyodzer thrashed and followed Targba the way one would follow a bush rat during a hunting exploit.

Targba fled home to the anguish of the Catechist, the teachers and the pupils. As Jo Chi strolled home, it occurred to him that if he had substituted Terem for Nelem, whom everyone knew lost his eyes in a pathetic situation, the ripple effect would have been more impacting. The *saa ishe* phrase, which means wasted, literally meant a lost eye. That is how Nelem Da heard about the lyrics of the steel band.

That night, the *Igbe* Cult held an emergency meeting to determine the fate of the Catholic Mission.

LEPROUS LEADERSHIP

My tale strides the earth and looms large in the heavens. This story was told when the Giant and Heart of Africa was in her late thirties and wore tribal marks and was haunted by goggled graveyard goblins. One of these every-days, there were two destitute living in a desolated compound. People and even this ill-fated couple; Gbatar, the leper and Tyavgyer, the blind man often wondered why fate called *Shawon* by men of the tribe chose to play such a terrible gimmick on them; making them the only survivors in a lineage of forty-eight members. The others had died from one mysterious illness or the other.

They complemented each other in skills and shortcomings. However, Gbatar like his fingerless and toeless limbs was a crude thinker who chose to ascribe the leadership role to himself because of his sight. He sometimes wondered aloud how people without eyes felt, to the hearing of Tyavgyer. He however had a boiling envy for the blind man's strange abilities especially the one to recognize people just by the octaves and pitches of their voices and all other attributes with which blind men make themselves popular. Most especially, the leader was never at home when it was meal time. Tyavgyer, knowing his deficiencies in sight, knew how to make up with the advantage of ten fingers that even Gbatar the self-acclaimed leader depended on heavily.

Whenever an opportune meal moment came, it was a nightmare for Gbatar the leader who shed salty tears on the

realization that no matter how hard he tried; he could not beat Tyavgyer. Pounded yam with fish and *Akpo-Chegher*, or *Igyo*, Caterpillar and melon balls soup were his delight and he would have loved to be able to steal the fish and caterpillar for himself and while leaving the blind man with just the melon balls. Tyavgyer would first navigate the soup with his fingers while dipping the first lump of pounded yam in the soup to ascertain the number and sizes of the meat or fish inside. He always did this with a characteristic smartness that left Gbatar who could see dumbfounded and sometimes he was not even aware when it happened.

Gbatar was not aware of this until one day, using his fingerless palms, he shifted two of the four pieces of meat and landed them on his toeless feet, which he brought together for that purpose while Tyavgyer was cutting the pounded yam into swallow-able balls for him.

“But the pieces of meat were four,” Tyavgyer said puzzled.

“How do you know?” Gbatar asked, equally puzzled. “They were four, I know,” Tyavgyer insisted.

“And I ask you, how did you know?”

“I can’t tell you how I know. But I am sure they were four.”

“They were only two that I saw with my own eyes”, a fallacy the leper told with an insinuated insult. Yet he could not stop wondering if it were true that the tales of psychic sight or the third eye was a reality. If it were a case of sand blindness, he would have suspected that Tyavgyer was just a lazy bastard who hid under the canopy of blindness to depend on others. Nevertheless, the eyes were not there and the sockets were just a sealed valley of flesh where the eyelids kept twitching in the reflex act of protecting the eyeballs that a strange disease had eaten up about a quarter a century ago.

“How...how...how did he know, this blind man?”

Gbatar did not play such tricks on Tyavgyer again for a long time until the effects of that embarrassment wore off his crude mind. They were good companions until then.

One day, Kukase was celebrating the New Yam Festival, an occasion that always left constipation among the children in its wake. The blind man who had starved the whole of the previous day demanded for a slice of yam, throwing shame to the dogs, as he did not have the eyes to feel the shame of people looking at him. Kukase gave them two.

“En-hen, this is what I have always said about Kukase. She is such a kind woman that I will not mind marrying her when her husband dies,” the leper said aloud.

A little girl brought them two hot helpings. On top of the biting hunger, Gbatar was irked and envious of the dexterity with which the blind man shuttled his own slice of yam between his two hands. He could not do such without his own rolling into the sand and bringing unwanted visitors to his teeth. He decided to put his fingerless palms together to form a flesh plate. Tyavgyer’s benevolence deposited the steaming piece of yam on them. Gbatar could now toss the yam up so that air could soothe his hurting palms. He did this with suppressed anger. He was distressed by the pain and humiliation of begging a blind man to assist him crane up the yam from the metal plate on to his palms severally, the slice of yam missed the target on one of the tosses and crashed on the ground attracting a horde of sand to his greater infuriation.

“Tyavgyer, please, help me take this stubborn piece of yam.”

“You know I can’t see it,” Tyavgyer said. “Bring your hand let me guide you.”

If Tyavgyer could read, the Braille of annoyance appeared conspicuously on the face of the leper. However, he could not read faces though his strong sense of history gave him a faint idea of the great evil that was his compatriot.

When the main course meal of pounded yam and chicken arrived, Gbatar knew he had to beg Tyavgyer, who was always willing to roll food into balls, dip them inside the soup and place them in his palms, before serving himself. He could not manipulate the meat even if he had forgotten the lesson of the four pieces of meat. Someone must have to cut up the chicken leg into smaller pieces and he lacked the tools for doing so himself. He holistically depended on Tyavgyer. His mind bled profusely and sweat covered his face. If he could fold his fingers to count, he would have counted three straight cases which proved that Tyavgyer was becoming too much for a subject by attempting to usurp leadership from him. He was more of a rebel, a dissident, a felon and a traitor. He could only fold his fingers mentally bidding the time.

It did not take him long to map out his strategy for dealing with the threat. On one of their hopeless days, Gbatar broke into a well-deliberated soul-moving lament, a cry full of anguish and bitterness at their helplessness.

“Kpei! My brother, Tyavgyer, this world is too much for us. I don’t find life worth living”.

“Yes, Gbatar, my brother, if you find life too difficult to live, what else can a blind man like me do?”

“We shall go and drown ourselves inside Aya, the furious prostitute,” Gbatar ruled.

Tyavgyer carried his *agatar*; the grope-stick and stuck it in the armpit of Gbatar who towed him towards their destination. On their way, Gbatar excused himself under the pretext that he wanted to answer nature’s call and went into the nearby bush, he

took as much time he wanted, then he lifted a big stone which he held with his other armpit as he towed the blind man to *Aya*; the roaring lioness and to his death. Tyavgyer noticed the slow and laborious movement as the leper grunted as is he was carrying a heavy load. He also wondered why it took the leper so long to pass stool. The *Peteki*, his loincloth was so used to his unwiped anus that the smell of faeces became a harbinger of the leper's appearance. So why did it take him so long and why did he come back grunting? Then...this hampered pacing!

When they came to the angry stream, *Aya* lay across the path as ever, raging, hissing, fuming, splashing and daring anyone who was not adept at swimming to jump or slide into her. She did not have any compassion for any invalid and the leper and the blind man were no exception. The only good thing was that she never leaped and yelped at anyone but waited for one to take a personal decision of entering into her. She never discriminated and had no respect for status.

The leper volunteered to take the first jump. He positioned himself some five feet away from Tyavgyer, lifted the stone as high as his height could allow and dropped it into the river. The blind man's trained ears measured the sound. This is too small a splash and there is no accompanying struggle or scream, what a peaceful way to die! He thought. Nevertheless, he decided to compose a hasty dirge to mourn his leader before joining him.

Kpei, aye!

My leader the leper has left me

What else can I do but follow him as usual Yet

I will grope the world

With my faithful, *Agatar*

To gauge the depth of its character

At this, he suddenly extended his grope stick and with a full force described an arc, catching the leper's crude frame. The strike was so sudden that Gbatar could not suppress the involuntary scream.

“Ayei!”

“Ayei in the water or on the land?”

The amphibian leper turned homeward in flight but Tyavgyer followed on tuning his sensitive ears to the leper's footfalls and belabored him on the back with his weapon until they reached home. From that day, Tyavgyer left the Tortoise to climb *kpachie* and pluck the fruits on his own and his woes multiplied.

One day, the leper found the world truly too hard to live in so he sneaked alone to *Aya* and slid into her bosom.

KOBO-WISE

LAND GRABBING HAS BECOME THE FAVOURITE hobby of members of the prestigious Generals' Club. This pastime finally reached Bamunga. Our retired general arm-twisted and bought off a vast piece of land from the locals for a proposed farm. My secondary school mate Joe was among the team of surveyors who came to map it out. The Retired General had overshadowed Bagobiri, another aggressive character in land acquisition. I sat down with Bagobiri on the trunk of a tree felled for reasons best known to the vandal and watched the land prospectors from an underdog observer perspective. I bought three wraps of roast peanuts hawked by an itinerant Fulani girl. The tree we sat on had remained there for the past four years with no Mumuye tribesman, best-known wood hunters, hacking it to pieces for *Burukutu*-brewing furnaces. Whatever magic restrained them could not work on Tiv folks whose irresistible appetite for rodent triggers wildfires that sometimes consumes thatch houses and sometimes a family's family property. Where we sat was Bagobiri's territory and no farming activity had gone on here either, as Bagobiri, my Fulani friend, had bought the piece of land for ranching of cattle.

As I sat munching on the peanuts, which I shared with Bagobiri as we chatted away, I mused over the short chat I had had with the elegant and exquisitely charming girl on our first encounter.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Suna na?”

“Yes, your name,”

“Suna na Aisha.”

“Do you go to school?” I asked.

“Makarantan Boko? Babu, sai Islamiya.”

“I will be calling you Aisha Buhari from today.”

She smiled and fluttered her heavily pancaked eyelids flirtatiously. She was a beauty to behold, bold and persuasive. Her dress sense and make-up skills could pass her for a Nollywood actress. Her coquetry sold the entire wares she carried around worksites and nearby offices faster than other girls did. Only if she were, even without western education, allowed by the system to use her business acumen on a grand stage, she could be the Ladi Kwali, the Potter or Nike Okundayo, the Adire-Maker of her generation. But the moment she gets married, all the business skills, the experience and clientele will be locked up in purdah and the burden of feeding the family will fall squarely on the shoulders of her husband.

What she lacked in verbal communication was adequately compensated for by her body language and eye-contact skills. How she managed her teeming captives who wordlessly expressed their lustful cravings in surreptitious glances or overtly hypnotized stares, was best left to imagination and various permutations.

“See them,” Bagobiri bashed into my thoughts, pointing to a herd of cattle grazing within the area fenced with living trees that also provided shed for the cattle intermixed with wooden posts of fallen trees bound by barbed wires. “If you push them hard, the way that cattle boy don dey do, them go rush and spoil people’s farms, when you no put them for ranch. Before I buy this land for ranching, the Mumuye, dem dey farm here. The money wey I spend for *barna*, when my cattle chop their crops pass wetin I finally take am buy and put fence for this place.”

“Your school children are doing inter-cow sports,” I quipped, referring to the cattle as a bull on heat ‘ploughed’ a female through the herd.

I remembered my colleague in the office who had taught in the primary school and served as a principal before coming to the ministry. He had a beans farm in the surroundings. Bala the office watch-man who lived nearby had goats that usually strayed to feed on his farm. Mr Iliya would call Bala, once he sighted through the window, any herd of straying goats approaching.

“Headmaster! See your pupils, they are roaming about and entering my farm!” The less-busy staffs in the office would burst out laughing and rush out to help stem the rapid destruction the goat could cause once they entered the farm.

Seeing Bala in pursuit of the herd around was always fun. You could see pregnant goats, running and coughing, the he-goats running with their over-sized testicles swinging back and forth like pendulums, sometimes hitting and ramming against their hind-legs, the kids running and crying in terror as their tender limbs could hardly cope with the pace the mature ones set, and fearing they would be captured any moment.

“Games Master! This 100-meter race is destroying my crops.”

One bull, newly acquired for the ranch and tethered for acclimatization, broke loose from the stake and ran amok in our direction, sniffing the air menacingly, Bagobiri instinctively scampered to his feet and ducked behind the dead wood although we were sitting outside the fence. I followed his lead and lay flat on my stomach before we realized that our survival instincts had made a jest of us. The perimeter fence of stakes of wood and barbed wires halted the menacing bull’s rampage. We realized that the sniffing bull could have used his olfactory detector to locate us, and use his spear-sharp horns to lever up any of us nearest to him. The

impact, the tear of flesh, the bloodiness was clearly imagined; a hanging piece of flesh here and there, tattered and blood-dyed rags, dusty apparitions and pains. We dusted ourselves up. Aisha, who was still hanging around expecting more patronage, fled. Her wares scattered along the trail. Her silk dress was torn as she resisted the pull of a stick jutting out of the fence-stakes.

“Shege Bujumi!” Bagobiri swore, “This one fit kill person one time!” he remarked.

“Bagos,” I called him by his nickname, “you need to fortify the fence.”

“If this one carry you for that horn, your name na sorry kowai!”

There was a serious stampede among the herd as the herdsmen battled with looped ropes and sticks to apprehend the terrorist. The surveyors, vendors and purchasers abandoned their enterprise and became spectators of the rampaging bull and the casualties. When we were naturally saved from the rampage, they cheered. We suddenly became a laughing stock as chicken-hearted men. If the bull had charged in their direction, they would have turned into chickens too, including General Zango. If and iffy situations broaden imaginations. If there were no fence, what would have been the outcome? Tragedy! If we were mauled by the bull, we would have become corpses. They would have become sympathizers. Others would have chided us for carelessness. The bull owner would have been blamed for needless deaths.

All that was fenced off.

The land business resumed. Land was about to change hands. Money and power were used as a medium. Proper measurement and demarcation. Documents were signed with all the parties in agreement. A bold signpost warned, THIS LAND BELONG TO LT. GEN. ZANGO: TREPASSERS ARE WARNED.

This was done to avert future encroachment and infringement on landed wealth of others, to avoid skirmishes and bloodshed.

“Bagos, if your bull tear me apart now you for lose good friend now.” I said pensively.

“Allah Kiyaye! God forbid bad thing! What if he carry me for those horns, you for miss me too. All the cattle here, you fit sell them buy my life?”

“I would have nominated four bulls here to inherit your four wives.” I quipped.

“Haba aboki na! Kai kuma!?” he laughed the joke off. “But if cow kill me now, haba! My wives and children go suffer. All these cows, kap! My brothers go share them wallahi!”

“Bagos, that’s why I have been telling you to send them to school. With sales from one bull, you can pay their fees for one year. And with that you have given each of them a cow and a future.”

“I dey hear you,” Bagos chipped in to signify interest.

“My father put me for school by selling oranges and mangoes. After school, I get job. I build that house on that land with the money wey I get from my salaries and the business I learn for school. I buy that car, not from farm produce but from salaries. I allow my uncles use the farms to support their families but any time they begin misbehave, I will stop them. With the knowledge wey I get, nobody can take even those orange and mango farms from me. The knowledge wey I get, nobody fit steal am from me. Bagos, I tell you, that day cattle rustlers carry these cattle away, heart failure fit kill you and your children go become beggars.”

“Allah Kiyaye! Ama, gaskiya ne! Na true you talk. Gaskiya ne!”

He sat for a while engrossed in thought.

“What of the Islamiya? That one no be school? Why dem no go get job for that one?” He asked.

“That one too na school. But e get different use. You fit use am prepare your children for how to understand your religion and social duty. But they need more than that to live well with others. They need western education to understand how other people think and do things.”

“Gaskiya ne!”

“When your cattle sick, you dey call an imam or na veterinary doctor you dey call?”

“Likita!”

“When you wan build your house, na mallam design am?”

“No! Na Architect!”

“Dem dey teach architecture for Islamiya”

“Babu! Makarantan Boko!

“Those surveyors wey dey work there, na for Islamiya dem train dem?”

“Babu! Makarantan Boko!”

“You know say our Deputy Governor na engineer and him na Muslim too?”

“Haka! Haka!” he said, nodding vigorously.

“You gree say hin na good Muslim?”

“Haba! Jamilu, Mutumin Allah! Na correct man wallahi!”

“You know the Emir of Kano, HRH Lamido Sanusi Lamido?”

“Na him be Central Bank Governor, before before ba?”

“Bagos, I get meeting for 10 O’Clock. Mek I go prepare.”

He did not respond. I left him as he was engrossed in thought.

TONIGHT AGAIN, SHE CAME TO CARRY ME HOME

(In memory of Helen Mbakoron Aorabee)

Their negotiation failed. He turned his back and left. The mafia boss gave me a double-barrel rifle with a binocular telescopic sight.

“Shoot him!” He ordered, offered me a rare privilege, “It can only be a good shot within 400 meters,” he added.

As the corrupt and treacherous government agent walked away, I fired the first shot from behind, it hit him right in the back. The pellets scattered as they penetrated his chest, he was the burly police sergeant that bullied me at the Pharmaceutical Council of Nigeria office, threatening me with his rifle. He had told me not to think that because he is a police sergeant, that he is an illiterate.

He has a master’s degree,” his colleague collaborated, “if not for frustrations he has suffered in the hands of people in the office, he won’t be here acting as a common bodyguard.”

“And he wants to vent his frustrations on me because he thinks that people who sell medicine are illiterates! Master’s degrees are not engraved on the face, if they were, you would have seen one on my face,” I retorted.

He was the negligent doctor at the Federal Medical Centre, Jalingo who let my wife labored till she had a ruptured uterus and bled to death. He thought taking on the profession of ‘saving lives’ made him God and shielded his ineptitude behind the lab coat and blocked his ears from reason and pleas for urgency with his stethoscope.

He was the board member at the civil service commission who forced me to go to court and swear an affidavit increasing my age and thereby forcing me to retire two years before I was actually due for retirement because I was a non-indigene.

I fired again as he stuttered off, bleeding. I hid the shrinking riffle in the pages of my giant-print New King James Version and fled, running with such a floating speed that my feet barely touched the ground. The school pupils saw me and were happy. They cheered excitedly, “Man of the Century! Man of the Century!” I waved back.

“Did you die at the age of 80?” They asked.

“No, I died at the age of 60, two years after my forced retirement,” I said.

At the football pitch, they abandoned expensive new books and eyed the expensive shoes and gold watches belonging to the governor’s son as he came to play with ordinary folks. They left the books, history books, Onwubiko, literature books, economic textbooks, Kofi Tawiah, biology books, Stone and Cozens, chemistry books, Abbabio, geography books, Goh Cheng Leon and Adeleke, books in all subjects, English texts with glossy covers and all other subjects. They abandoned books, tilled and ploughed under ridges by political vandals and barbarians as they wasted the turf of the playing pitch for rallies.

I know she loved books for the children. So, I bent down redeeming the books, books wet with rains, books miraculously untouched by corruption.

I traced my wife to two thatched huts with bamboo doors lying adjacent to each other. They were securely locked from within. It was a quiet and serene suburb. I knocked on the first door. The door opened by half a foot. I shoved in the nozzle of the gun and followed. It pointed at her forehead. She smiled on seeing me.

“Are you still afraid of guns even after alien Malian Fulani bandits have made them common like cooking utensils?” I asked, dropping it on a stool.

“No, guns don’t fire here,” she answered.

Before I could hug her, a pupil who was trailing me dropped her books on the floor.

“Aunty, help me do my homework,” she pleaded. “Aunty, so you’ve been hiding here? We’ve been looking for you these two years!” she added.

I knew hugging her was death. But she was too beautiful to resist. Her ethereal glittering face and loving mien with those tiny black marks on both sides of her high cheeks were too familiar to fear. So, I opened my arms and we melted in eternal love.

THE LAST CHAPTER OF EXODUS

WE MISSED OUR WAY HOME several times and we were exhausted after long hours of trekking. We decided we would trudge through the thick bushes to the river bank regardless of whatever obstacles we encountered on the way. I took the lead and the others followed cautiously. We had to use both our hands to part the heavy grasses that covered the path and as soon as the first person passes the grasses would cover the path again and the next person would have to use their hands to push off the grasses from hurting their faces. Occasionally, we would rattle a rabbit or *grass-cutter* intruding on their peace. I prayed silently that we don't stumble on a spitting cobra. I knew the others nursed the same fear as I did but no one was willing to voice it out. Voicing the fear was considered an ambition because men were not supposed to be afraid, we were supposed to be brave.

After nearly an hour of struggling and probing with a mental compass, we came across a crocodile nest that had recently been abandoned by its hatchlings. We continued to move forward until we reached a steep cliff; from there, the river was too deep for us to enter without using a parachute. We moved along the bank in the direction of some distant laughter. When the boatmen refused to come over and transport my twin brother and I across during our village years, we ultimately exploded at the river crossing spot. Why would they expend their rowing effort on obnoxious, unimportant brats who couldn't even afford to hire them? They would therefore occupy themselves with derogatory

innuendos in adaptable tunes that could be altered to convey various messages to various listeners.

When we arrived, the laughing pair was halfway away from the golden sand in the middle of the river. The small leaking boat we saw at the bank of the river had no paddles. Two urchins had just used it to row to the golden sand using their four palms as paddles just to defecate on the golden sand. I drove them away and berthed the boat in a manner they would not push it into the water without stronger efforts.

I told my companions we would rather swim across to the opposite bank of the river. The abandoned crocodile nest was capable of scaring even the bravest of minds. I saw reluctance in most of the faces, but I chose to be the scapegoat. I decided to take the risk of going first so that even if I am attacked by a crocodile, they will be safe. I studied the water carefully and took my chance but not before I had removed the pair of clothes and shoes, I didn't want to get wet and made everything into a bundle. I held it with one hand above my head as I swam with the other hand.

“Put a name tag on that bundle. If you drown and nobody can identify your corpse, it will be buried to show your children that you had a grave,” Tarhe Dajo, one of my followers quipped jokingly.

“I’m sure to swim across, no need!” I assured him.

As I took a plunge, suddenly I met a confused pack of men and dogs attempting to cross from the opposite bank but at last deciding they never truly needed to cross swarmed around, creating confusion in the deep waters. I beat a temporary retreat and waited till they swam away. I plunged a second time and my company followed. We cautiously swam the deeps for a quarter of an hour before our feet could touch the golden sand under the water. We could now wade through the shallow waters and climb the sand that had been heated by the scorching sun. We could now

plod through the sand like desert camels leaving footmarks on the golden sands of time. We climbed up the steep cliff on fours like a platoon of apes and found ourselves at the edge of a big farm. The farmer and his son were at work weeding the grasses. We greeted them.

“Please, permit us to maneuver through your rice farm. We are fugitives, we fled our land when the tyrant ruled with the sword of vendetta,” I pleaded on behalf of the men and women who had suffered unjustly for eighteen years for standing what we believed was theocratic tyranny. He made the double-edged sword of the spirit blunt on the side of lies and sharp against the truth. Those who held the truth chose exile. It was not long, his devotees turned against him and he fled the land with a little clique of diehards.

“This is wheat! It is not rice,” he replied calmly as he gestured the most desired permission. For the first time in many years, we were treated with kindness as we encroached back on our fatherland. We took much care not to tread on his crops. There were blocks packed within the farm and ditches made in preparation for a farm building too. We carefully walked the labyrinth till we came to the edge of the large farm.

We were now confronted by very tall thatch grasses. Someone had cut some and tied them in bundles, they were piled up so high that we could not see ahead without climbing the mountain or taking time to circumvent it.

“Let me use this as a climbing hook to get on top of the pile,” Adagba said as he picked up an old sickle on the ground.

“You’ll be buried by the thatch bundles when they collapse on you,” Debre advised. All of us laughed at the mental picture of Adagba struggling under the weight of thatch bundles and moved round the pyramid to espy a long stretch of high brickwork at the end of the tall grasses. We feared it could be an unending fence of a conquered piece of land flexed off the hands of uneducated and

powerless locals by a retired military general. We could be boxed in we thought, but as we got closer, we found the brickwork to be a yet-to-be-roofed classroom block of an emerging mega-private school.

Finally, the much-needed trail deviated from the structure and led to the wide road we had been looking for ever since we crossed the crocodile-infested River Katsina-Ala. A year before our flight, unidentified shooters assassinated the school's owner, whom we all knew. We observed a person in his likeness beckoning and speaking with us as we sprinted away in blue tracksuits. We faced the route and refused to turn around, whether it was his spirit attempting to derail our return or his son acknowledging the new dawn, we faced the path and refused to look back.

These stories speak to the ills and religious hypocrisies that undermine our humanity. They remind us of those aspects of our lives we would rather keep in secret, for ours is a pretentious society. In this collection, Aorabee employs realism and surrealism in waving metaphors that resonate with our dialectic realities.

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