MEMORIES OF THREE RIVERS

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Abstract

Memories of Three Rivers is set in twelfth century Oyo, Borgu, and Nupe, three kingdoms, in present-day Togo, Benin, and Nigeria that co-existed along the lower bend of the River Niger. In my re-imagining of the lives of my main characters, deified in West Africa and the African diaspora, I peeled away myths, legends, and centuries to reveal their humanity while being aware and true to unique customs, religions, philosophies, and storytelling traditions. Sango’s seven-year rule was a period of trade and wars and this is depicted in the dynamic and often catastrophic relationships that existed between the courts of the three kingdoms, and in the snapshots of the lives of common people.

Esu, the divine messenger and Yoruba trickster Orisa, and the Arokin, palace oral historians, weave Yoruba philosophy and mythology throughout the manuscript providing a backdrop for this complex culture and its ways of storytelling and archiving. The Arokin also bring to the page other views of those seven years, the official, religious, and people’s versions of history.

Memories of Three Rivers follows the journeys of Oba, Oya, and Osun to Borgu three capitals, Bussa, Ilo, and Nikki, and Nupe's main groups, the Beni and Jeba. The women send their merchandise across many waters and whenever the need arises to protect their interests in their husbands’ court, they gather information, and seek allies.

Oba the Orisa of domesticity, Osun the Orisa of femininity, and Oya the Orisa of winds are Ayaba, wives of Sango the Orisa of lightning and thunder—the Third Alaafin Oyo. Memories of Three Rivers briefly touches on the women’s origins, childhoods, infertility, and eventual motherhood. Oba was born near the swamps at Igbon, she was wise and industrious. Beautiful and sultry Osun was from Ilesa and she divined with sixteen palm fruits. Oya was born
in the Island of Jeba and became a buffalo woman as she came into her power as the bridge between death and the ancestors. The women traded in markets far and near, fought battles among themselves in the women's quarters of the Aafin, and fought from Sango’s side in his ten wars.

Yoruba oral history archived in the memories of generations of Oyo Arokin, Orunmila’s 256 books of the Odu Ifa, and Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of This World* provide the literary framework for this work. I hope this thesis will contribute to the muted conversations about the three Ayaba of Sango and their legacies, further enriching the oral archives of the Yoruba.
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The One who is my Rock, The Almighty.

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Gina Sully, friend.

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Dedication

To my parents

Olayide and Osobayo
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A word falls to the earth and becomes a story

Children own songs; elders storytelling

If a child wasn’t alive during a historic event

That child will listen to history told as a story

Storytelling is the father of history (Yoruba saying)

The Arokin’s Song

The upside bats that hung from fruit trees in the Aafin grounds unfurled their wings and flew over the Aganju square. In the Arokin’s quarters, the head Arokin of the Alusekere clan sang the genealogy of the Alaafin of Oyo. He recited the deeds of the Alaafin of Oyo, their movement from Ife to Koso to Oyo-Ile; of Oranmiyan the great, the grandson of Oduduwa, son of Okanbi, the first Alaafin—the owner of the Aafin Oyo; of Ajaka, his soft-hearted son who ruled after him; of Atiba, the son of Oranmiyan and Torosi, a Tapa princess. Atiba imbued with the power of primordial Sango became a worthy vessel for one of the irumole’s many comings. Sango, the terrible, ruled for seven years sitting on the throne of his father Oranmiyan. Sango, the mighty warrior bathed in blood and controlled lightning and thunder. Sango lover of women, and palm wine, who danced to double headed Bata drums. The Arokin smiled, as he spoke of the three beautiful women who were Sango’s wives, Oba, Osun, and Oya.

The Arokin pointed to the east towards a confluence some kilometers away where two rivers meet and bubble in perpetual battle. At Asejire, these eternal enemies fought, rolling about in rapids and breaking rough edges off stones. River Oba rose from Igbon and fed by many northern tributaries she flows powerfully southward to River Osun. Over the distance, Oba gathered her strength and plunged into the Asejire gorge. On the strip of forested land that separates the two rivers, the power of their hate made the earth tremble. There, both rivers mixed
and tumbled; hissed, and seethed. Oba forgot that to fight Osun she must become a tributary to her, lesser. Osun prevailed, and Oba rushed away from the confluence covering her loss in noise and rage. But waters keep the memories of their past lives fresh and Oba will be back. She can never forget their bitter rivalry, neither can Osun.

The Arokin got up and whispered, “At the confluence, you do not say their names. If you do you will hear the rivers roar at each other in your head. It is not your ears making this up; the two women are still at it.” He paused, as if he could hear them, “neither do you say the other’s name on the banks of her rival, or you will drown while crossing the rapids.” After their meeting, the sensual Osun gracefully flowed away. She reveled in her victory and tinkled through of groves of living green trees and hugs smooth granite banks. She bent her waters westward and continued to the Lagos Lagoon. The Arokin pointed to the west, and spoke of Sango’s last wife, Oya, and of the might of the River Niger. Oya, the mother of nine tributaries flowed by many peoples, from far lands to west, through desert, savannah and rainforest before forking into the mangroves of the Niger Delta and into the Atlantic sea. And in the great salty sea, all three women met and they perpetually remember the seven years of Sango, Alaafin Oyo, their husband.

* 

The thirteenth century birthed many kingdoms along the many routes that traversed the Sahara Desert, Sahel and Guinea savannahs, and rainforests. Kingdoms expanded, consolidated or were subsumed into another. In Ile-Ife, the land where the sun rises over the cradle of the civilization, Oduduwa commanded his descendants to live in unity, spread out, and conquer the lands that surrounded them. His sons and his daughters, wore fringed beaded crowns and ruled lands flowing with many rivers. They fought the Ibariba on the Northwestern bend of the River
Niger and River Moshi, and the Tapa across the River Niger on the southern bend. The Ibariba, Tapa and the descendants of Oduduwa fought for a foothold in the lands around the great bend of the Niger River.

* *

In the covered calabash, this hollowed out gourd called the world, the male and female kings didn’t rule absolutely. They were held back by many layers of control, both seen and unseen. They were accountable to their people, the councils of chiefs, the Ogboni—the earth cult—whose members carried bird topped brass edan staffs that clanged as they walked, the mother-birds who were on earth to avenge the wrongs done to them by children of the world, and the ancestors: Oro the executive arm of the Ogboni and masquerades. Far above the children of world were multitudes of Orisa, eight ajogun evils, sixteen primordial Irumole that climbed down the skies to create and populate the earth, but all are ruled by the Almighty, Olodumare, and Esu is his messenger.

* *

The musty interior of a shrine that had no carved or smelt images churned with the essence of Sango and his three consorts, Oba, Osun, and Oya. Images were carved on the surface of an upturned wooden mortar: Sango’s ose, his double headed axe, and a rearing ram, bangles, kolanuts and pots. On the wall hung a laaba bag, its red hued leather body decorated with cowries. In an open pot were Sango’s edun ara, celt stones that had passed through sound and light in the skies before falling to the ground. A wind blew in from the east and blew away the dust that covered the past and revealed a moment of memories. In this time, the Alaafin of Oyo, Sango, and his three Ayaba lived.
The Ife Peace Treaty

Oduduwa’s looked at his sons and grandsons and his insides cringed at the suspicions that lived among his progeny. He sat on a throne placed under a tree in the Ita Ijero courtyard, the place of conversation. An Emese shaded him from the midday sun with a leather umbrella. Three Emese sat around him and recited his sobriquets, but he didn’t hear them. He roused his failing strength and tried to see through the milky fog that covered his eyes. He crossed his ankles, and the string of coral beads he wore around his ankles clinked. An Emese knelt in front of Oduduwa straightened his clothes and covered his ankles with his white cloth. Oduduwa knew this meeting at Ita Ijero would provide a temporary solution to the greed and distrust that had taken root in the hearts of his children. Two were absent, the youngest, Ajibogun had gone to the great salty river to get its waters needed to restore his health. Oranmiyan conquered new lands somewhere, last Oduduwa heard his conqueror son had journeyed to a kingdom west of Ife.

Oduduwa signaled for silence with his pale horsetail whisk. He called out the names of his sons and grandsons and gave out beaded fringed crowns. They hadn’t expected these crowns. These many sons and grandsons of his wanted his Are crown for themselves. These sons, mothered by diverse women and carried the mark of his mother left on core and her failings. They carried their mother’s jealousies and fears and insecurities in their hearts. For awhile, his sons were occupied with the crowns, they tried them on and laughed. Oduduwa heard glass and coral beads clink all around him, and the beaded birds on the crowns bobbed. They soon got tired of them and quietened. He knew they looked longingly at the crowns given to their brothers. They analyzed each crown and read meanings to things that didn’t matter. In his heart he knew when the silence festered, opened old wounds, and distrust stank in the room.

Aafin Ife would be quiet without his rumbustious sons, but he knew in his heart that sixteen sons and grandson on the offensive far and wide would strike the fear of Ife in the hearts
of their many neighbours already itching to attack because they knew of his ailing health. He was on the defensive now, maybe something good would come out of their constant bickering.

“Leave Ife and start kingdoms.” Oduduwa said.

“The Commander of the land has spoken,” an Emese murmured.

“Death, the father and mother has spoken,” another Emese said.

“The fear that fear fears,” an Emese said.

“The big fear that swallows lesser fears,” one shouted.

“Ile Ife must remain even when we are no more. Therefore, whoever among you comes back to breach its walls will swell up. They will rot from within and be buried in evil forests.” Oduduwa spat into the air thrice, “my word stands.”

“Kabiyesi,” an Emese said, “your word is law.”

Oduduwa wished he could see his sons better and judge their reactions, but the sun had moved across the room. He sat in the shade now, and they in the full glare of the late afternoon sun.

“Leave,” he said. They looked at him and couldn’t understand. “Leave Ita Jero now,” he said. Oduduwa knew he may never see them again, and he held himself back from revoking his command. Oduduwa slipped his right foot out of his beaded slipper and slapped the ground thrice, “earth that shaves its hair with hoes I greet you. Open your ears and hear me well, if one my sons or daughters bring war to the gates of Ife. You must become higher than them and close over them.”

“Obanla has spoken,” an Emese said. Oduduwa had finally gotten the attention of his descendants. They sat still and stared at him. “You have until sundown to leave Ile-Ife,” Oduduwa said, “You must not be in the Aafin when its Enu Geeru gates closes at night.”
“The second to the Orisas has spoken,” an Emese said.

Oduduwa got up, and a circle of Emese closed around him with outspread agbada, “Olofin greets you all,” the circle of Emese said.

*
Owu

Agborogbimo, they are republican
The strong one played in fields of cotton
Owu was created first
The Olowu got a beaded crown before his elders

A little boy quietly crawled up to his grandfather who sat under a tree in the courtyard of his kaa. The old man pretended to sleep, and the boy sneaked by the watchful armed warriors and slaves that surrounded his grandfather. They knew this game he played it daily. He crawled behind his grandfather’s throne and grabbed the back of his feet. The old man laughed and one of the warriors placed the boy in his lap. Both played together for a while, the happy boy gurgled, and grabbed his grandfather’s white beard. The old man pried his beard out of the boy’s hands, and they shared a meal together. But on a day, the boy pointed at his grandfather’s crown. The dotting grandfather gave his crown to the boy to play with. When the old man signaled to a servant to take the boy back to his mother, the servant tried in vain to pry the crown out of the boy’s hand before lifting him from his grandfather’s lap. The boy howled out his displeasure thrashing about on the ground. Oduduwa allowed the boy to go with the crown. When he slept his mother returned the crown to her father, but Oduduwa told her to give it to the boy.

The boy, Ajibosin, was the progenitor of the Owu. The son of the chief priest Obatala and Iyunade, a daughter of Oduduwa. On that day, Oduduwa gave the boy a beaded fringed crown, before his uncles, before the dispersal at Ita Jero. The boy-king had to leave Ile-Ife, because two beaded fringed crown kings could not live in Ile-Ife. There could only be one Ooni in the Aafin Ife. The boy’s father couldn’t stop his mother from seeing the boy off. She mourned him like he died, even though she knew he would live only days away from Ife. The boy-king
settled outside Tapa territory, near his father’s vast cotton farms. His grandfather gave the boy-king six Iwarefa and an Ifa priest. They were to advise him and help him rule his new domains.

The six Iwerefa, Akogun, Obamaja, Orunto, Osupori, Oyega, Molashin, and Olosi the Ifa priest were wise men who taught the boy-king the ways of the world. They told him to seek and value advice of people lower in status than him. The Ifa priest taught him of the invisible and powerful world that could only be seen by the patient and wise. They seven taught him about his royal heritage and Ile-Ife. They also told him he could never return. His grandfather had to separate from him, not to would have resulted in a death, his or his grandfather’s. The boy didn’t flinch at the words of the seven, when they told him his mother and father would never see him again. He knew that a king’s father had to be die before the son could be king, and a king’s mother had to die before the king was crowned. His parents were dead to him, but he never stopped wondering about them and his siblings.

The boy, Ajibosin grew up on the plains of the savannah and played in the cotton farms; his fringed beaded crown always on his head. The seven wise men ruled his people and would hand everything to him when he became a man. He saw them manage the affairs of his growing people and learned. The boy spent days in the forest building up his strength. He hunted animals in the savannah and plains, he observed hyenas, bush dogs, and foxes out run bigger and stronger animals. His advisors said a big but weak state could easily be overrun by a wise and smaller adversary. He had seen this happen often in the wild. A pack of hyenas or bush dogs killed an abandoned sick buffalo easily. The seven taught him that one must know the weaknesses of his enemies and use it against them ruthlessly. He must remember never to underestimate his enemies, or he invited death. The boy learned never to hesitate or show his weaknesses, the packs of animal never did either.
When he was twelve, Ajibosin ran away from his people, and he left behind his crown—the only time he would be separated from it. He went south and retraced a journey he didn’t remember but knew well. His counselors had told him a lot about it: two rivers, forests, and valleys had to be crossed. He journeyed into the forests that surrounded his old home. A forest different from the sparse savannah forest of his home near the cotton fields. Bigger trees kept out the sun, their roots coiled all over the forest floor. The trees ruled here and allowed animals he’d never seen in their crowns. It took him only a few days to find a group of traders who journeyed to Ife, and he trailed behind them. A week after he left home he walked into the main gates of Ile-Ife. They were much bigger than he had imagined, as tall as three men standing on each other’s head. He wouldn’t have found his way there if not for the traders that knew of winding paths that opened to the king’s highways. The crowd of people going through the gates pulled him into the noisy king’s market. He walked around, seeing and listening to people. His grandfather lived, and people talked about the stupid princes that wanted their father dead. They talked about the conflict that brewed in his family, his uncles and cousins fought each other for the beaded Are crown of Ile-Ife while Oduduwa still lived. They talked about troublemakers outside the royal family who waited from an opportunity to wrench back the kingdom from Oduduwa.

Ajibosin didn’t go to the Aafin Ife but walked up a hill and from there he could see it from afar. He closed his eyes and imagined his father and mother inside one of the rooms of the Aafin, his grandfather too. He saw many warriors patrol its walls and gates. He knew this was the closest he could ever be to his parents and siblings. He stayed at the spot till sundown, watching. That night, he slept on the hill that looked down Ife. He left Ife the day after; he had
seen enough of the land of his birth. The journey home took less time, he knew what he left behind in Ife, and he knew well the life he returned.

The boy came to be known as the Olowu, his title came from his years spent in his father’s cotton farms. Olowu grew up to be intelligent and aware of his station, but more aware of this invisible world that gave birth to the physical. He wanted a kingdom as strong as Ife. He did away with the council of chiefs that advised Oduduwa kings and brought his people into power. He gave every Owu a voice. Olowu ruled from Aafin Owu, but his people knew he listened to them, their voices counted. They ruled together. The Owu made decisions as a collective and acted as one body. In Owu, an Igbimo must hold and a decision must be agreed to by two thirds before anything could be done. The Owu knew that their strength lay in the agreement of their numbers.

But Owu didn’t always have an Igbimo, this change came when a son of one of the lowliest of Olowu’s subjects advised him on a problem. The boy’s advice wouldn’t have reached him, if one of the wise men had not brought it to him. The Olowu set leaders over compounds, villages, and towns, then created channels that would allow every Owu voice to reach his ears. He moved his people away from Ife, far from his uncles and cousins and deep into the rainforest. The Owu explored the new southern land. They didn’t tame it but allowed it to remain wild and they prospered in the Owu forests. The Owu cut down peoples in their way, claimed their land, and erased the identity of former inhabitants completely off the land. They flourished in the Owu forest and became provinces. Seven federating pieces made up the Owu kingdom and the descendants of the original seven wise men headed each province.

*
Oyo
The birth of a force
It gathers winds and earth
It never rests
Spinning and spinning
Reshaping earth into dynasties

Oranmiyan, grandson of Oduduwa left Oyo on another of his war expeditions, but he could only go halfway before an army of angry black ants cut off his path on his way to the north. They bit his cavalry and warriors leaving big itching bites on their skins and hides. For days, the ants marched out of the earth and ate anything in their path. They made Oranmiyan take a longer route to the north which led him to the land of the Tapa. The king of the Tapa, Elempe, allowed Oranmiyan and his warriors pass through his land, but he forbade Oranmiyan to cross the Greater River, his western boundary, during the rainy season. Oranmiyan stayed in Tapa until the flooded banks of the river receded. His men worked in the farms of Elempe for their upkeep earning the trust of the king, and Elempe opened his palace to the Ife war prince. The brown restless waters of the Greater River called to Oranmiyan in his dreams, and he walked its banks early in the morning and late in the evenings. On it banks grew tall grasses and reeds that moved to winds. He watched white flamingoes and buffalos drink of the water and hippopotamus and crocodiles too. The river pointed him towards the lands from which its waters came, and he heard them call to him.

He waited for the dry season and the river contracted to reveal rocks once hidden in its swollen waters. In the middle of the dry season, Oranmiyan, his warriors, and their horses crossed the Greater River and journeyed through the land of the Ibariba, Ile-Ife’s northwest neighbours. The Ibariba welcomed Oranmiyan and allowed him to stay. He stayed here for some
months, and on the day he left, the King at Bussa gave him a charmed boa constrictor. He told him to follow it and stop wherever it did. Oranmiyan’s eyes and that of his guards were trained on the snake. The snake turned westward slithering across plains and rocks and turned southwards. It crossed the thinnest breadth of the Greater River and continued on. When it stopped, Oranmiyan stopped and made camp there. It led them on for more days until it disappeared near a hill called Ajaka. Oranmiyan told his people to camp here, he would go look for the snake. While he searched for it, Oranmiyan’s horse slipped on the side of Ajaka hill, and he named the land Oyo, it slipped. Oranmiyan didn’t find the snake and settled in the land with his followers.

He ruled for a while in Oyo, and from this new land he waged war against the Tapa and Ibariba who regretted opening the new land near them to the war prince. The relationship between these three kingdoms danced like a sand devil that gathered everything in its path then threw it away as it pleased. It changed paths as frequently as the direction of wind that blew on their lands from the Greater River. Oranmiyan married a princess of Tapa, Torosi, to appease the marauding armies of the Tapa. His marriage forged an alliance between Oyo and Tapa, and wars ceased between them. The same did not happen with the Ibariba, they continued to pillage Oyo traders that came to their markets. The itch to conquer new lands crept into Oranmiyan’s blood like it usually did after a few years, and Oranmiyan installed his son, Ajaka, as the second Alaafin. He went warring in unknown lands again.

Back in In Ife, a cowardly war broke out within the royal family over who should be the rightful heir to the throne. Oduduwa called a conference, and his sons and grandsons sat together at Ita Jero. He listened with a broken heart to his own who wanted him dead before his time. He tried to settle their grievances and greed, but he didn’t succeed. Oduduwa couldn’t strengthen the
blood bond between his sons and grandsons, so he gave them beaded fringed crowns, a testament to their legitimacy. He sent them away from Ife with wealth to start their own dynasties. Ita jero happened without Oranmiyan and Oduduwa didn’t leave a beaded fringed crown for him, but he left Oranmiyan his vast lands.

Oranmiyan came back to Ife years after his grandfather’s death. He rode his horse into Ife at the head of an army of cavalry. He held a scepter in his right hand and a long winding animal horn in his left. His padded war vest hung heavy with charms and cowries and ado. He draped amulets around his waist and fear of him fell on Ife. The son of his older brother reigned as the third Ooni. Oduduwa’s slight angered the war general but he hid it well in his puffed-out chest. Oranmiyan won over Ife with his charisma and strong personality. The people said even his gait intimidated them; he walked like he owned everything. Some said humble Oranmiyan and didn’t demand respect, but they gave it because his countenance demanded it. Ife knew nobody could question the burly fiery warlord or even look him in the eye. They people loved him because Oranmiyan listened and walked among them unlike the Ooni who lived behind the Aafin walls.

But even Oranmiyan had a stain that marked him. He couldn’t silence the tongues that spoke of his birth. He pretended not to hear the whispers as he walked amid his people. They reminded him of the reason why he often turned his back to gates of Ife, of the barb in his heart that hurt him deep. They called him the half white-half red man, a slur that questioned his parentage. Ife asked in shadowed rooms and among trusted ears, if Oranmiyan was Oduduwa’s son or Ogun’s. His mother Desoju had died without telling Oranmiyan the name of his his father. Oranmiyan believed that she wanted both men to be his fathers; she told him two great men made him.
When a mad man dared to say this slur to his face, Oranmiyan cut off the man’s head in one swoop with his great sword and tied the head to the bridle of his horse. He didn’t remove it even after flesh and skin had fallen off the skull. Ooni Alayemore, Obalufon II, knew a confrontation would soon arrive at his Aafin if he didn’t assert his rulership. He sent word to Oranmiyan that there can’t be two Ooni in Ife. The Ooni reminded the war general of their father’s curse; Ife couldn’t be breached by one of its own. Oranmiyan had been told of the Ita Ijero curse and would not breach Ife’s walls. He would come in through the cracks in its Aafin. He grew up in the Aafin Ife just like Alayemore and he knew it well. He knew of the many things that happened to cracks in walls.

When Oranmiyan won enough Ife hearts and gathered the sixteen hand chiefs to his side, his supporters went to the Akeran residence of Alayemore and rioted. They stripped the trees around the compounds of their branches and waved them as they chanted “Alayemore, the usurper on the Ife throne.” Oranmiyan sent his warriors to keep the peace in town, but told them not to go near the Akeran compound. The rioters threw branches and stones over the waist high mud fence around the compound. The Aafin Emese could barely hold the crowd away from the fence, and they had to line themselves up in the path of the flying stones. Alayemore fearful for his life went on an exile to Ilara, and Oranmiyan became the fourth Ooni of Ife. Alayermore and his household stayed in Ilara, a town three days away from Ife and he plotted ways to take back the Are crown from Oranmiyan.

He left Ilara and founded Efon Alaye, a rocky enclave in the Efon Alaiye hills. He secured his town with many guards from the top of the mountain. Then Alayemoore sent word to his eyes and ears in the Aafin Ife. They sent him reports of the happenings in Ife and its five provinces. He built an army in Ife, hidden inside Oranmiyan’s Aafin. Tiny flames that he knew
well, his father had told him of ways to set Ife ablaze from within.

Oranmiyan, the warrior prince ruled Ife with a strong hand like one of his warriors’ camps, and Ife’s state pockets funded his many expeditions. He loved Ife but his love for conquering and exploring new territories took him away from home. He left the running of Ife to its many chiefs, and they nearly ran it aground. The sixteen-man council of chiefs couldn’t agree anything. They were loyal to their Ife quarters and didn’t trust each other. The council meetings divided into two groups openly identifiable by rosettes and rings of circles. Both sides wore these symbols on their person; these symbols identified and divided the Ife chiefs as it did its peoples. Rosettes and circles beaded on their caps, pedants and leather bags declared their positions: Alayemore or Oranmiyan.

Ife tired of warring, and the dastardly acts perpetrated by the motley of mercenaries who made up Oranmiyan’s army. They reached out to Alaayemore in Efon Alaiye. The people wanted an Ooni that lived in Ife, even those loyal to Oranmiyan wanted an Ooni in the Aafin who could fight their enemies. The indigenes mouthed doubts about Oranmiyan’s love for Ife, but everyone knew the very thing that drove the proud Oranmiyan away from Ife. They prayed that it kept him away again. Ife came together and planned to help Ooni Alayemore to regain his throne; they had eaten soup from two houses and knew which tasted sweeter.

Oranmiyan was away when the revolt started. People loyal to him sent for him and he answered them. The famous warrior prince of Ife returned home in annoyance. He raised his broad sword and cut down anyone who stood in his path, from Ore grove to Iremo in Obalufon’s territory. In the frenzy, he didn’t see the people he felled, they were his. Fueled by anger that his enemies dared to revolt against him even in his absence. In Iremo quarters, an old woman’s cry of anguish halted the trail of bodies he left behind. She stood in his path and said to Oranmiyan,
“stop, you kill your own children.” Her voice broke through his anger and he fell to the ground on his knees. Greatly grieved, he threw his shield deep into the earth at Ita Alasa. Oranmiyan mourned and couldn’t be consoled. His wooden staff, he drove into the earth at his Ife house, and it grew into a stone obelisk. His sword he left with the Onpetu at Ido. Oranmiyan turned away from Ife and told his people he would never to return.

Oranmiyan died at Oko, but his hair and nail clippings were buried at Ile Ife. Oranmiyan’s war staff, a memorial of his valour became a living stone in a grove dedicated to him. This granite column with 123 holes engraved on it stood on the very spot he threw his great sword into the ground in anger on the day he vowed never to return to Ife.
Biri
The shadow that is one with his king

Who steps into light and hides inside it

Biri, the firstborn son of the priest of lightning also worshipped shadows, and he became a shadow. His father’s priesthood could be traced back to priests long dead. Sango and Biri grew up together in the Beni palace of Tafie. Sango royalty twice born royal; Biri a servant. Sango’s father, an Ife prince, married his mother a Tapa Princess. When Sango’s father, Oranmiyan fled Ile-Ife he had passed thorough Tapa and spent months in the Beni palace. Elenpe, The Tafie gave his daughter to Oranmiyan to seal his friendship with the Ife prince. Oranmiyan continued on his journey and founded Oyo. In Oyo, the Ibariba sought to conquer their new neighbor but the Beni confederacy sent a contingent of warriors to help fight the Ibariba that preyed on the newly established Oyo kingdom.

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Sango’s mother, Torosi returned to Tapa after the death of her Ife prince. Her people say she returned because servants gossip drove her out of the Aafin Oyo, and that her life across the Greater River must have been a sad one. Torosi came back with the six-year-old son of Oranmiyan, Sango. In his mother’s land, the Tapa scorned Sango for the Oyo marks on his cheeks. It marked him differently from everybody, so did the Oyo coated Tapa words he spoke. Three horizontal lines cut across both sides of his face and three vertical ones on both cheeks, but unknown to the boy his insulters were only jealous of the finer marks on his face that were different from the jagged Tapa slashes. Both boys became friends in the Tafie’s palace; Biri embraced the scorned Oyo prince.

As the first son of the lightning priest, Biri, was born with the gift of light and darkness. Both forces he harnessed to do his bidding, but he had to learn to control thunder and lightning
from his father. The priest told his son that Sango also had the gift of lightning and thunder, but to excel, the Oyo prince had to learn how to control his temper. Everybody in the palace knew the boy became half-crazed when anger coursed through his blood. His eyes became bloodshot and, his locked jaws ground his teeth to powder.

When Biri and Sango were boys they played in the savannah grasslands of Tapa. They slipped out of the Beni palace and hunted in tall dry grass. Their mothers couldn’t stop them, they learned to sneak past guards. The boys returned to the palace in the evening with grass cuts on their arms and legs. The cuts itched as they smoked the animals they caught; they burned them before learning how to smoke them. They caught grasscutters and rabbits in fields and abandoned farms. They caught fish in the waters of the Greater river and its tributary the Lesser river. They smoked rats out of holes and ran after them as they bolted. Both boys were loyal; they never fought for anything, until the lightning priest showed them a rock. He called it an edun ara. He said, it fell to ground when lightning touched the earth; a lightning seed. A strange rock, burnt black, its face scarred from the pressure and light it had been subjected. The priest told the boys to bring back one when they went hunting. They looked for the stone, but never found one. Until one day they came to a hill that stood apart from the others in Beni land and found one. Biri and Sango fought each other for the edun ara. The only thing they would ever fight over. Sango beat Biri soundly; he used his bigger and taller frame to pin the slender Biri to the ground and wrested the stone out of his friend’s hand. Sango’s Oyo blood surged stronger than that of his mother’s Tapa. The boy took after his warrior father’s brawny frame. At age eight, Sango had grown several hand lengths over Biri’s slight body, and Biri walked light on his feet. The young Biri learned how to hide behind the shadow of the trunk of a young tree. The son
of the lightning priest saw his surrounding in shades of light and shadow; and he used his gift to best Sango’s brawn at times.

The lightning priest circumcised his son in his tenth year, while Sango had been circumcised in Oyo as a baby according to the customs of his father’s people. Biri’s father initiated both boys into the lightning cult after Biri’s circumcision. In that muggy hut, in the shrine at the top of the Seinsdu hill, Biri stood as Sango’s superior, for his bloodline hailed from lightning cult royalty. Every seventh day, both boys would sit in the shadows of the hut and watch Biri’s father and other priests bring down lightning from the skies. The thunder they made hurt their eardrums and shook the earth, loosening rocks from the sides of the hill. The sounds and lights didn’t scare the boys; they wanted this very power. They were eager to learn of its mysteries, but it would take them seven years to become junior priests. Biri wanted to learn more about shadows and lights and darkness to become one with any shadow he chose. But only lightning and thunder interested Sango, “light and shadows,” he said, “were too quiet for him.”

When Sango turned fifteen, he left Tapa for Koso to become one of a despised group, a roving musician. He travelled round the villages that made up Koso. He chose to forget his prince-ship, lightning gifts, and training. He turned his back on his inheritance, shaming his mother and the Tafie, offering them no reason for his actions. He didn’t tell them he left because his cousins, the sons of his uncle-princes taunted him because of his Oyo blood. The Tafie commanded Biri to go with him but not let him know of his presence. Biri went with Sango as his shadow. He had to be careful Sango didn’t trample on him when he entertained people dancing to bata drums. In Koso, Sango discovered palm wine. The sweet kind, cold and fresh with morning dew still clinging to the tapper’s gourd, or the thick foamy fermented kind that dulled a man’s senses quickly, or the palm wine dregs in the calabash that were guaranteed to
make a man hard for his woman. He also discovered women. He had a crowd of them around
him all the time, vying for his wandering attention. He drank palm wine to deaden the pain of his
cousins’ rejection. He danced sober, and he danced drunk. He passed out whenever bata drums
stopped talking to his feet. Biri carried him back to his hut on many occasions and in his stupor,
Sango talked of the shame he couldn’t hide to Biri.

In Koso, Sango made friends with commoners, the lowest of the lowest, the ones least
respected, conjurers, dancers, musicians, and acrobats. Society ranked these outcasts lower than
beggars. To the Ife and Oyo, music and dance did not equate to real work, they were hobbies.
Notable among his friends was Omiran, a man who stood at least three heads taller than anyone
around him. Omiran became Sango’s guard. Koso accepted Sango not as the son of his father,
but as it saw him. A young man who loved women and dance and couldn’t resist palm wine. Sate
became his bata drummer; the only drummer whose beats Sango danced. Sate and Sango moved
as one, as did their shadows. They were a delight to see. People loved to watch those two laugh
and dance, they were the highlight of Koso’s competitions. Sate’s drum spoke to Sango’s
shoulders, feet, and waist. The drummer could read Sango’s mind, and he changed the beats of
the drum to Sango’s unspoken dictates. Sango’s gift of fire enabled him to dance with brands of
fire in his hands and mouth as his feet moved and the flames didn’t burn him.

But the two friends had a disagreement and Sate left Koso; a woman came between
them. She had plied her wiles on both friends, leading both on. Sango walked in on her draped
over a reluctant Sate. Sango’s anger didn’t give Sate room to explain his side. The friends hurt
each other with angry words; it cut Sango deep that his one friend betrayed him. He didn’t dance
for a year. He grew lazy and drank palmwine, and his many women friends fed and clothed him.
When he turned seventeen, Sango re-entered the Koso dancing competition he won two years ago with Sate. That year, he lost; the fickle Koso crowd booed and jeered and the sluggishly moving Sango. He didn’t have new dance steps or tricks, and his new bata drummer wasn’t Sate. Angry that he lost, he remembered Tapa. He reminded himself of his parents’s bloodline; royalty on both sides of the Greater river that very night he walked back home. Biri became his shadow and together they returned to the Seinsdu hill. They continued their apprenticeship at the feet of Biri’s father, learning the secrets of fire, lightning, and thunder. At first Sango stayed in Tapa because he wanted to learn new tricks to show off at Koso; he couldn’t accept his defeat. But before long, the painful memories of Koso were forgotten and he became transfixed by fire, thunder, lightning, and the strange rock surface of edun ara. After years of learning in the hut, Biri could even hide in his own shadow and be one with it; light and darkness heeded the young priest’s voice. Sango could spit fire from his mouth and eyes, but the power of rolling thunder and lightning fascinated him more. And he continually sought to harness its powers.

Biri’s father would take the young men to the flat granite slabs cut into the Seinsdu hill. They cleansed their bodies, prepared the stones, and waited for nightfall. The priest showed them many times how to control thunder. As an elder, he would take the first edun ara. He rolled it in hands until it was warm, then he spoke to it. They were words that the young men knew well, words repeated to the edun ara, words that made them thunder seeds. The chief lightning priest reminded them that lightning and thunder making were not affected by the face of the sky, whether covered with dark clouds, or clear and filled with stars. If they spoke the right words, they would make lightning and thunder its consort would follow. The chief priest threw the rocks from the hill, and they shot across the skies, skipping in and out of clouds. Winds
picked them up and they disappeared into the night. Moments later bolts of lightning were born from that single stone; this large stem sprouted and continued to grow across the sky. The stem kept its thinner branches alight; the three always watched the stem. It lived longer than the thinner ones.

The men watched lightning dance around the sky, cloud to cloud, frolicking until it reached for the earth. They waited for thunder, the consequences of the blinding light, also spectacular in its own way. After the flash, they felt the air around them heat up and no matter how many times they prepared for thunder, it always caught them unawares. They cringed as it wrapped the power of sound around them. On and on, it repeated itself until it became a whisper. “Thunder is a very jealous consort,” the chief priest said, “beware of her powers.” He laughed at their fear, “I saw you tremble.” Biri and Sango denied their fear. The older man laughed more, and they joined him. The cold wind carried their laughs far into the dark night, and it returned to them as more laughs.

The priest of lightning always likened the sons of men to lightning, “our lives are flashy, but we should never forget the thunder. Both start at the same time, each differently spectacular.” He said “life comes in twos, nothing happens without a cause. We should never be too busy thinking about the spectacular in our lives and forget about the nature of consequences. The children of this world should and plan for consequences also.”

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Obalufon II
Ooni Alayemore

Ile-Ife hid itself in the hind parts of forest land; a very fertile bulge of green from which the dry plains of the savannah were not far away. Ife straddled swathes of dense and tall forests of Iroko, Obeche, and Mahogany. Ooni Alaiyemore knew war wouldn’t come through the walls of Ile-Ife. He fought a more difficult battle, jealousy and greed had opened internal cracks large enough for battles to creep through. This tussle between Oyo and Owu for supremacy wasn’t a new thing. Many of his relatives who were powerful kings had danced to the drums of greed lodged in their hearts. Their voices spoke the same words, “the throne of my fathers is mine.” The first Ife tussle started an unsurpassable rift between princes born to the same father. They fought for the throne of Ile-Ife even when their father lived. Oduduwa’s sons and grandsons wanted to know who would rule after their father, before his death.

Ooni Alaiyemore knew war would come to Oyo only three days away from Ife. He heard of the tension between Owu and Oyo from his Emese. He had to find a way to douse the fire without stepping on the egos of his royal relatives and be an unseen mediator of peace. He knew Ife’s many mysteries enclosed in by two tall layers of mud walls would not be able to keep out strife from his brothers. As the life force of Ife, he could not be absent from Ife, or it would shrivel up and be no more, and so would the other Oduduwa kingdoms. He would have to rely on trusted officials to do his bidding.

Even though, he had not seen the sun in many years, he lived behind silk curtains in the Aafin Ife; he knew Ile-Ife. He had run along the potshard pavements that ran along the Aafin grounds and beyond its walls when he was young. His father’s Emese told him Ile-Ife had contracted and swelled according to the times. In times of war Ile-Ife shrank behind the inner walls but expanded during peace. He knew the beginnings and ends of the remains of the old and
new walls; the remains of the old one lay in ruins blackened by a fire that had first raged in man’s heart before it engulfed the walls. Obalufon II knew first hand that enemies form outside the Aafin would find it hard to kill and destroy, but the enemy living within brings in the outside enemy in through hidden doors known only to the sons and daughters of the land. Recently, Lajuwa, one his courtiers had tried to usurp him. Ooni Obalufon had him beheaded at one of the Aafin shrines, and his family compound became a refuse dump. The Ooni had a terracotta head of the man made that it may stand as a reminder of Lajuwa’s treachery even when the eyewitnesses to the deed were long dead. It also reminded the Ooni that he had enemies in his inner courts.

In the shrine of Ooni Alaiyemoore’s father, Osangangan Obamakin, were twelve holes of the ayo game carved into living rock. As a boy he had stooped down to touch the face of the rock. He remembered the rock felt cold and on rainy days the holes filled up with water. No one played ayo in the holes, but it served to remind Obalufon II of games played with lives that died during the Ife’s many civil wars. Four seeds in each hole, twelve holes on each side, and two players scooped up seeds warmed by their palms as they strived to capture, distribute, and dominate. He didn’t need physical seeds to continue the longstanding game he played in his head. He knew he had a full hole. He’d patiently added seeds to this hole. He’d kept it perfect by not adding more seeds to spoil its perfect number. He itched to play his seeds into the territory of his enemies. But his enemies knew about his perfect hole; he couldn’t keep it secret. They wanted to add a seed to it and topple the Ooni’s plans.

The treachery of Oranmiyan still hurt his soul; he remembered that Sango, Oranmyan’s son ruled in Oyo. He would add a new chapter to this old story and make it his, and he would win the game. Through the side entrance of the Aafin, he heard the hammers of coppersmiths
from the Asude compound, as they gathered and molded metal into fame or infamy. They were Aafin craftsmen and lived just outside the walls of the Aafin. The beadmaking family created the beaded regalia – the crowns, staffs, and beads worn by the Ooni. Another family painted lively murals on the walls of the Aafin, shrines and grooves, depicting the daily lives of Ife. The Agbegilere family, carved intricate designs on posts, pillars, and doors—animals frolicking in iroko, mahogany, and teak: serpents, antelope horns, open mouthed mudfish, galloping buffaloes, red monkeys, snarling leopards, charging and trumpeting elephants, birds, and severed heads of traitors dripping blood. They carved stories against the grains of wood detailing conquests and loses, migrations and truces. Laadin, an elder coppersmith who often napped under the four-post shed filled with his tools; anvils and hammers. From there, he felt the heat from his iron forge blazing hot behind him and his apprentices knew not to wake him even when they needed his help. In his smithy, he made swords; he also made death clubs, and bracelets, and masks.

To tell his own story, Ooni commissioned Laadin to make masks made copper and terracotta masks. Some had vertical facial markings or were plain faced, they enabled Obalufon to assume invisibility, and mingle with both sides of the divide during celebrations.

Today two Emese brought him word of other carvings that told of another story. Lies twisted and given life on wood in murals. These stories spoke of the bravery of traitors and cowards, of coming revolutions that would wrest power away from usurpers—the sons of Oduduwa—of the fires that still smoked in Ife. He sent Emese to find out the patrons that funded these schemes against him. They reported a name to him that he couldn’t believe, another traitor in his courts, someone lower in the enemy ranks. He wanted more but they couldn’t go beyond that name. He told them to continue to search for those who started these fires. They gave him
the name of a man, Adeyemo, and the stench of treachery clouded the Ooni’s reasoning. He told one of the elders of the Asude compound to make a mask of brass for Adeyemo; he asked that it be laced with arsenic. The Ooni called Adeyemo to the main Aafin square and before the people he presented the mask to Adeyemo. He pulled the mask on his face, the Ooni could see him laugh behind his mask, he would never forget the smile on that face. He writhed in pain before he died; they told him, he lost his hair, and vomited and urinated blood. Ooni Obalufon told Laadin to make a bust. Laadin made a brass bust of Adeyemo, and the Ooni placed it beside Lajuwo’s bust in his room.

The Emese, Ife’s half heads, waited on the Ooni in the balcony of their building, near the Enu Geru Aafin Gate. The Ooni chose a side; he thought of the man to send to Owu. A young Emese eager to do anything to move up the ranks, or an older one, a friend who had grown up with him the Aafin. Should he trust experience, or should he trust youth? After all, the wisdom of children and that of the elders created Ile-Ife. Ooni Alaiyemore had consulted the Ifa oracle, and the Aafin Babalawo told him to rest easy on the Owu-Oyo fight, only make sacrifices to Esu. But he still worried because sometimes the Orisa moved too slowly for him.
Igbon

Igbon sat in the middle savannah known for its big juicy kolanuts. Only a day from Oyo by foot if one journeyed through the Ooni’s highway. The Igbon people joked that they could smell the contents of Oyo’s soup pots from their compounds. Oyo was their backyard, and Igbon knew everything that happened in Oyo. During first year of the reign of the fourth Igbon baale, a wife married into the wealthy Ololade compound and gave birth to a baby girl called Oba. The Ololade had farms of kolanut and orange trees. Their big kolanuts brought traders from across the north desert to Igbon. Twice a year, Igbon emptied its inhabitants into farms; men, women, and children moved into their farms at dawn bringing in baskets of kolanuts to their barns. The Ololade clan owned half of Igbon. They were one of the first families that settled there, and they had the biggest compound.

Oba’s grandmother, Asake, sold her kolanuts in the markets round Igbon. She took them to Apomu, Ile Ife, and Akesan; her servants she sent to the smaller markets tucked away in villages and hamlets. The noisy Olobade compound could be a small market on its own, and only a family death could halt the journey of their kolanuts to markets. The compound had a main building of twenty rooms, and five other buildings made up eight rooms each, and ten large barns. The big one housed the family. The small ones housed their servants and their barns kept their kolanuts fresh.

Seven years into the reign of the fourth baale, Oba went with her mother and grandmother on her first kolanut market journey. They started out early in the morning. One of her cockerels, the one with the plump red crown and blue-black feathers woke them up early in the morning when the moon was only a sliver of grey in the sky. The group walked on a path, in a single file, and the morning dew clinging to the grass that lined it washed their feet. The carriers were at the beginning of the file, at the rear walked her grandmother’s oldest servant,
Akin. They walked into the forest until they came to a large clearing where the path grew two more paths that veered off the main path. The farthest Oba had ever been from Igbon and at this crossroad the convoy splintered into three groups. They went their different ways walking along the paths, and the still dark morning swallowed them. Each group met up with other traders waiting at different points by rocks and trees and then travelled on as a group to assigned markets.

By sunrise, the wide road had thinned to a path, and only twenty people were left of the main group that left Igbon; the best of Asake’s nuts were going to Oyo. The group stopped at a huge tree; its name came from its size. The Igi nla grew alone in this dense green forest. Barren earth surrounded its roots, and blue skies rimmed its crown unlike other trees. Its crown allowed a ring of sunlight to break through the forest canopy, and it lacked life. The tree stood quiet unlike the other trees that grew far away from it. Oba’s grandmother told her to look at the tree closely. It grew bigger than any she knew, and its crown went so far up Oba heard her neck crick when she looked up at it. Its wide trunk had a smooth pale bark, and its roots went on and on around the tree tangled above the earth. “This is halfway home, daughter. Get to this tree, you are nearly home,” her grandmother said as she rubbed the tree lovingly. The group settled around its trunk and brought out their lunch. Oba sat close to her mother and grandmother, and they unwrapped their first meal of the day—eko and moin-moin. Oba watched her grandmother place some of her food at the foot of the tree.

“When I was a little girl I got lost in the forest,” Asake told her grandchild.

“You did?”

“I was disobedient. My mother sent me to gather some bitter kolanuts in the Aweda farm.”
“The one farthest from home?”

“Yes, that one, the one by the river.”

“I swam in the river all day. The sun was bright and warm, and I told myself it wasn’t late only afternoon. There was still time before sunset.”

“Ah. The-sun-that-deceives-children-to-stay-at-farms.”

“That one. I had barely walked down the road when the sun dissapeared and night came. I dropped the basket of bitter kolanuts and made for home.”

“What happened?”

“I got lost for many days and nights. I roamed this forest until I found this tree and fell asleep in its tangled roots here. In the morning, there was food under it. I ate it.”

“You ate the food meant for the tree?”

“Yes, I did that food saved me. It gave me strength to keep walking. By the time I got home, my mother had forgotten about the bitter kolanuts. I never forgot the tree that fed me and protected me.”

They rested for a while, and Oba leaned on the tree trunk and slept. Her grandmother got up and everyone else got up and brushed leaves and dirt off their clothes. “Oyo is nearby now daughter. Can you hear the hum of many people floating to us through the forest?” Oba’s mother Asake said. Oba listened but could only hear birds in the trees and the animals that ran about in the undergrowth. They got on the Alaafin’s highway at the bottom of the Edan hill and walked towards a group of Oyo Ilari manning a tollgate. Akin paid the toll for each person two cowries per head. The group met with other traders heading to Oyo, and the road became crowded with people and animals; they jostled for space. Oba laughed when she saw the walls of Oyo standing tall on its thick buttress. She shaded her eyes from the water in its stagnant moat reflecting the
sun. They stood to a side and waited for Akin to pay the entry tax, and an Ilari allowed the group into the outermost wall. They walked through two more gates, and into the inner layers of the walls.

Akesan market held more people than she had ever seen in one place, and she kept close to her mother’s side. The group from Igbon walked into the middle of the market to the stall where Asake sold her wares. Passed down from a long line of mothers to daughters it belonged in the Ololade family and could be traced back to the very beginning of Akesan. The market embraced a lot of noise; women called to buyers. They sang, praised, teased, danced, begged, and lied to get people to come buy their goods. Oba felt the energy of the space, and it filled her body with joy.

On the first market day of the New Year, the Ayaba of Alaafin Ajaka came to the market square to see to the welfare of the market women. The market broke into song and dance as talking drums announced their presence in the market. Four women dressed in identical wrappers of sanyan and red coral beads draped their necks, wrists, and ankles greeted the market women from under umbrellas decorated with beads. They stopped by Asake’s stall and talked with her for a while. The youngest Ayaba asked her servant to give Oba a cowrie. Oba looked at the proffered cowrie and turned to her mother. Her mother nodded her ascent before Oba accepted the cowrie. The Ayaba smiled approvingly, “such a well-mannered girl.”

The royal entourage left her grandmother’s stall, and customers took over the space vacated haggling over the price of bitter kolanuts sold in baskets of forties. Asake asked her granddaughter,

“Money or power, which is better child?”
“Power,” Oba said, watching the Ayaba walk away, “look at the people one Ayaba alone
draws about.”

“But why do you think they all came to greet me?”

“You are an elder.”

“Look well, child how many elders did they accord this honour?”

Asake looked at them; the Ayaba had split into four. “Money has its own power too. The Ayaba
came to greet me because of the power of money.

*
Osun of The Pots of Indigo Dye

Osun was born in one of the villages that made up Ilesa. A pretty baby loved by all the women in her compound. They fought each other to carry her, and she gurgled when she heard them fight over her. Osun’s mother pressed two beautiful dimples into her chubby cheeks; she lined her baby’s white eyes with antimony and molded her buttocks with rows and rows of sparkly glass beads. Osun grew into a young woman who knew early that her gapped teeth and wide hips could get her anything she wanted from a man. Osun led on boys, her agemates and ones older than her but never gave them what they panted for. She didn’t flirt with them in secluded paths or in the grove of the village river like other girls. She flirted with them in the open and enjoyed knocking the heads of friends and brothers together as they vied for her love. When the boys grew into men they all knew of sultry Osun, her craftiness and abrasive mouth, but they couldn’t keep away from her. She would give herself to a king among men she told them.

Her grandmother called her Solagbade. She knew her granddaughter would use the wealth of her beauty to get herself a crown. Her mother sold Ijesa kolanut and palm oil. Osun detested the reddish yellow of palm oil and the deep red kolanut stains that got under her fingernails. On a market trip to Ile-Ife she saw a woman make adire. The process of making intricate patterns on white cotton cloth by tying it with raffia threads or smearing with eko before dipping into pots of dye mesmerized Osun. She saw white cloth catch the dye in parts where it couldn’t resist it; and the patterns told a story of their own, of different shades of indigo. Osun learned adire making from the Ife woman for two years and set up her own indigo pots in her father’s compound. It gave her joy to dip old clothes in dyes and bring them back to life.

Only the best of beautiful things was valuable to Osun and she hoarded them. On her slim neck, she wore strings of segi beads. She rubbed white powder on her face and lined her
eyes. She loved the jangle of the rows and rows of brass bangles on her wrists, and the subtler tinkle of the tiny glass beads she wore around her waist underneath her wrapper. They added a spring to her steps a roll to her already curvy hips. Osun’s white teeth were revealed when her full luscious lips smiled or laughed or toyed with a prey. Her skin, she lathered in coconut oil; her lush hair she oiled with shea butter and set her hair with coral beaded and brass combs. She owned a thousand wrappers and decorated her house with parrot feathers.

As a child, Osun could see with her inner eyes and it took her awhile two understand that the present world reflected her dreams. When she came into her gift fully, her sight rivalled her skills of divination through the Ifa Oracle. Life came to Osun in dreams and life rarely didn’t happen as she saw them. But Osun could only see as much as the Orisa permitted her. She could see beyond the veil of seeing and see into the dark. She could see how the yet unknown formed and came into being in the realm of the seeing, and sometimes because of her pride and many biases she sometimes saw amiss.

Osun’s first husband, Orunmila, was the foremost Babalawo in many lands. A short dark man whose love for palm wine made him walk knock kneed. Born in Oke Geti in Ile-Ife, he learned the art of Ifa divination from Setilu of the Tapa. Orunmila’s gift of ifa divination made him known to many, and they sought his wisdom too. He set up a school at Oke Geti where he taught philosophy. He believed that knowledge is multifaceted, has many beginnings, many middles and many ends, absolute truths didn’t exist, and truths changed constantly. Orunmila also believed that good and bad were equal and inseparable. He married Osun as the first of his many wives and concubines. He swayed her with his knowledge of divination, but she didn’t like that she had to fight for his attention. Especially with Iwa, whose great virtue made Osun see in herself a truth she didn’t want to acknowledge. Iwa’s virtuous life showed Osun she lived selfish
one. Osun learned to sing and dance to Ayan drums beaten by her husband’s many apprentices. Osun also developed her gift of sight in Orumila’s house, but because of her impatience she learned only the sixteen-cowrie divination system. Orumila’s apprentices learned the sixteen-palm nut, the opele divining chain system. His students memorized and studied his sayings and graduated after twelve years. Orumila constantly sought wisdom and knowledge far from home; he believed the attainment of both and virtue to be the height of human existence. He was on one of his pilgrimages when Sango caught the attention of the fickle Osun. He had heard of her great beauty. Osun knew the brash man that courted her would be the next Alaafin of Oyo. She had seen this in her dreams. And when Sango asked her to be his, she had packed all her treasures and followed him to Oyo

*
Jeba

Within the arms of the Greater river that separated Oyo and Tapa drifted the Island of Jeba. A town of the Tapa, and a rich trading post on the banks of the Greater River. Jeba’s rich soil and its waters were filled with life. Its peoples lived off the savannah grassland and the many waters that surrounded them. Jeba came under constant attack during the dry season from its many neighbours along the banks of the Greater River. Tapa warriors successfully repelled these attacks in the wetlands upriver, but now a horde of warriors marched on its borders down south. They knew that most of Jeba’s warriors were away defending the crossing upriver. The Geeba fearing the obliteration of his people called on the elders of the land for advice, but they couldn’t reach an agreement on what to do. Tired of the elders bickering, the Geeba asked the priest who had been silent throughout the meeting, to say something. The priest said that the king should get a length of black cloth and give it to a virgin to tear into pieces. The solution would come from the torn cloth. The elders scoffed at the suggestion, “how can a piece of black cloth hold back warriors?” The Geeba ignored them and requested for the cloth, and he told his virgin daughter to tear it.

She tore it into two and flung the pieces on the ground from it came drops of water that became rivulets of black water. More water gushed from the torn cloth, it became a flood that swirled around the capital cutting a deep path into the red mud of the land, a river of swiftly moving black waters. It wrapped itself around Jeba cutting the land away from their enemies. This river joined with the Greater River and became one of its tributaries; both rivers kept Jeba in their middle.

In the dry season, Tapa warriors camped on the northern bend of the Greater River that bordered their lands. Upstream and downstream, they fought to fend off attacks. In the wet season, they put down their swords and farmed their lands growing sorghum and millet. Jeba was
safe in the the floods. Twice a year, the Greater River and its many tributaries flooded their banks after periods of dryness. During the wet season, the river’s waters shrunk for a time; the duration of this respite remains uncertain as the coming of its second flooding. The people along its banks knew it always came and during this second flooding the banks of the Greater River overflowed with brackish waters. It carried dead life from the swamps of the hinterland along its entire length as it constantly sought for sources to feed it as it lunged for the sea. These many waters held Jeba tightly, defined, and protected it, when they swelled during the rains or shrunk during the dry season.

The Geeba added the new river to his domains, it became the lesser river, and the Kyedye who settled along the length of Greater River became canoe men that plied its black or clear waters. The Kyedye were tax collectors for the Geeba, but in the night, they rowed the dead across the divide between life and death. The riverbank on either side recorded the beginning of a life or its end, and this changed many times in a day. Only the Kyedye knew which and for this service they didn’t receive fares. It became their heritage to guide the dead into the afterlife or the newly born into new life.

That virgin princess was Òyá, and from the day of the tearing onwards she became imbued with the power to tear down all that stood before her. She also became associated with the crossing into the foggy after life of death. Her powers were wrapped in brown, crimson, purple, tall columns of winds that ate anything in their path. Her new strength was far more than she could deal with. It scared her, but she couldn’t keep it away. She heard it everywhere, in the trees, in her footsteps, in the roof as it rushed through thatch, on the surface of the many rivers of her home. She wrapped her ears with head cloths and tried to keep the wind out and stop it whistling. It roared inside her, no matter how hard she tried. She began to see the dead, and they
communed with her. They told her of their worries and those they left behind.

Lelu, a Tapa women leader sent her son to Òyá, “tell her to come see me at the market.” Òyá came the next morning when the market was full. Both women knelt on one knee, stretched out their hands, and they greeted each other. They asked of each other’s wellbeing and that of their respective families. Lelu invited her to sit beside her on a bench, and watch. From Lelu’s stall in the market, both women could see the market spread out before them from land to water. Market women sat around their wares selling, talking with buyers on land and in canoes that bobbed on the Greater and Lesser rivers. Winds from the rivers blew over both women, and they stood still. Oya and Lelu could smell the waters of both rivers, they remained distinct even after they became one.

“Order,” Lelu said, “Chaos and order are a pair, order feeds off chaos to control it, most times. That’s how I rule the market.”

Lelu stood up and walked into the market and Òyá went with her. A path opened and closed after them as they walked deeper into the market crowd. Lelu stopped many times to greet section heads of the market. They walked on to the edge of the Greater River, and both women stepped into its cool waters and waded in until the noise from the market faded away. They stopped at the very point where brackish waters of the Lesser River mixed with the clearer greater and the two became one, a lighter black that circled the Island of Jeba.

“You must learn to control your core my daughter,” Lelu said.

“How do I do this mother?” Òyá said.

“Lelu pointed to the greater river, learn from the water, learn its secrets.”

Òyá bent down and scooped up the water in her right palm. She stared at it. “Learn from the lesser rivers too, their secrets are before you daughter and their powers.” Lelu’s words
opened Òyá’s heart to the mysteries of the force behind the tearing of the dark cloth, birth of the river, and the crossing of the dead and living.

“Use your gift well daughter.”

Lelu left Òyá in the river and returned to the market. Òyá sat walked out of the Greater River and sat by its edge. The waters lapped at her legs. On this stretch of the river she could see her father’s palace. She got up and walked further into the river until both waters reached her waist.

“Chaos and order,” she whispered, and she slipped on the river’s muddy bottom. She went underwater, and both waters covered her head. She closed her eyes and let the waters push her out of their depths. As her head broke the water she laughed, “to become one with water and wind and life and death.”

*

Òyá came daily to the riverbank to learn of the waters in dry and rainy seasons, of the winds that caressed the rivers’ back making their surface shiver in ripples, or whipped up the water surface trying to expose its depths for all to see, or made the grasses on its banks sigh to the winds that tickled them. At night she watched the Kyedye canoes cross the river, their passengers unseen to many but she saw. Òyá found an excuse to stay at the riverbank, she had servants clear a piece of land for her, and she grew vegetables that she sold at the market. Her stall stood beside Lelu’s. Òyá’s vegetables were green and leafy, and they didn’t have holes chewed by insects or sickly yellow leaves. A crowd waited by her place in the market every morning jostling to buy her vegetables; she never brought any back home. Their beautiful princess’s hands grew life and they wanted it.
When Òyá became of age, her father married her to a prince of a neighboring Ife town, Ogun, the warrior king of Ire. He went on long journeys to new lands; he conquered these lands with brute force and savagery. He owned a large smithy where contended with metals and brought them to submission with his furnace and hammer. His quest for knowledge brought him to Orunmila’s school, and he became one of Orunmila’s disciples and later his closest friend. Together both men would talk of wisdom Ogun more concerned with the application of wisdom. Oya’s cool beauty beguiled Ogun, it made the restless man stand still and smile more often. In Oke Ori, Ogun’s hill top Aafin, Oya was happy for a while during the short periods Ogun gave her his attention. Her beauty made him forget his smithy, iron, and bellows. Oya delighted him by cooking him red beans and fiery sauce fried in onions and peppes and palm oil, but after a while Ogun told her to stop pestering him, “you smother me with attention woman,” he said and returned to his smithy.

Ogun’s smithy belched smoke all day and all night, inventing the things he alone saw in his mind. He collected veins of quartz from dried up laterite riverbanks and extracted iron ore. He smelt it and made liquid iron. Ogun’s hammer could be heard beating iron on his anvil long into the night. With his double-edged machete, Ogun opened roads into unknown forests, made bridges across rapids and rivers and valleys. He had a great temper that brought him many difficulties; he acted in rage. Ogun loved Oya, but he didn’t have time for her and she soon became bored in Oke Ori. The constant ring of Ogun hammer and anvil gave her a headache and she resented his smithy. One day, Oya fled Oke Ori. She jumped into a canoe and a Kyedye rowed her across the Lesser River. During that crossing, her change into a new being started. When she walked away from the canoe into the darkness that surrounded the Greater River on
the Oyo side, she changed into a buffalo and galloped deeper into the low-lying savannah plains of Oyo.

*
Aafin Oyo

It was dark, early in the morning, that boundary of time and light, when the spirits of the dark fell asleep and the spirits of the day stirred from sleep. In a kobi, the verandah of a gabled building, near the very centre of the Aafin, the Alukoso’s deepest throated female gangan drum, the Iyalu spoke. Its deep booms and tinkling brass bells carried into the many rooms of the Aafin. The drum woke up most of the Aafin’s residents, but it spoke to the being of one person. It woke the Alaafin Oyo every morning to his duties as the Lord of the Aafin and Oyo, even when not in residence. The drum spoke into the Alaafin’s spirit his mighty deeds and greatness, and that of his ancestors. When the Alaafin stepped into each newborn day, he would wear this recitation like a richly embroidered cloth, and his day became a continuation of the deeds of Alaafin before and after him.

In the quarters of the wives of the Alaafin, Osun the second Ayaba had woke up before the Alukoso’s drum started to talk. A troubling dream had thrown her out of her sleep; she didn’t understand it. She sat up in her akete watching the everyday things in her room shape-shift in darkness. When enough daylight slipped into her room, she looked up and saw a cobweb dangling over her head. She stared at it long, trying to figure out if it looked real or not. It wasn’t, she decided, and pushed the cobweb out of her mind.

She closed her eyes and remembered her dream. She walked about in a thick forest, the forest canopy cut off most of the sun. She looked about her and saw a darkly spotted butterfly fly by her. It flitted about a thorny bush, perched on one of its tiny white flowers, and a gust of wind blew. Its wings caught on a thorn. Osun watched it struggle. She saw the butterfly’s wings tear as it struggled to free itself. Osun had felt the tear. It knocked her down on to the forest floor. The butterfly freed itself, and fell to the forest floor twitching in spasms, near her nose. She
could smell it, foul. Osun had twisted in pain as she struggled to rid herself of the heaviness that wrapped tight around her body. It took a while, but before she could get out of the dream, she had heard a voice, far away in the distance saying it is coming, it is coming. She looked at the butterfly; it had stopped twitching.

She opened her eyes, looked around her, and she saw the cobweb again. It looked real. Her shout of disbelief brought two Teetu to the door of her rooms with curved agbegengbe raised over their heads. Two female slaves entered, and Osun’s eyes pounced on the one responsible for not cleaning her room. Her eyes conveyed what she would do to her, and Abebi knelt far away from Osun. She began to cry.

“Abebi,” Osun said, pointing to a spot before her. Abebi crawled to her on all fours. Osun moved to the edge of her akete to see the crying girl better, “so you that made me dream.” She pointed to the cobweb overhead, “What is it doing there?” The girl knew that the cobweb must have been made during the night but didn’t say anything. “You know I will enjoy spoiling your life today.”

The blare of kakaaki near the Aafin’s Abata gates made Osun pause, she smiled at the sound. She dismissed Abebi with her eyes and the girl scampered out of her room. Osun laid back on her akete and listened. She heard the hooves of horses thundering, pounding on hard packed earth. Alaafin Sango rode into the Aafin Oyo and the dundun drums of Ayanganlu announced him, as death, the father and mother. As the husky whining of the kakaaki died down, Oba’s sonorous voice resonated round in the Aganju. The Aganju filled up with chefs and noblemen waiting to receive the Alaafin back in Oyo turned to Oba. The royal musicians in the shade of one of the smaller kobi overlooking the Akanju began to beat their drums to her song,
but they stopped abruptly when they heard more of the Ayaba’s song. She sang a dirge not a victory song.

Oba, the first wife of Sango, the only Ayaba out in the Aganju courtyard rolled on ground, wailing. Sango jumped off his horse and walked away from the scene. He stalked into the inner rooms of the Aafin. Biri, the Alaafin’s servant jumped off his horse slipped into his master’s shadow and became one with it. Sango went into Osun’s courts. He dropped his ose, the double-headed axe he preferred in battle on the ground, and it broke a pot of Osun’s choice glass beads. She glared at his back as he pranced around the room breathing deep, as smoke curled out of his nose and ears, and his eyes turned into red-hot coal. Osun knelt by the door, out of Sango’s way. She sang his oriki to calm him down, but she smiled that her senior wife caused this much trouble. When Sango looked at her, Osun’s joy had slipped off her face. Sango knew his Ayaba’s bitter rivalry didn’t allow for sadness or whatever she’d made her face into.

“What is it?”

Her eyes filled with tears; she looked away from him and didn’t answer.

“I have told you to stop worrying, children will come when Olodumare wishes it.”

Osun didn’t correct him or tell him about her dream. Sango sighed and gathered her in his arms; he thought she was sad about the line in his oriki that praised him for his many children. He told his wives that he knew this pain too; he wanted his Aafin to be filled with his children. He knew this pain well and his three Ayaba expressed it in different ways. Oba’s mouth curved frequently with distaste at the world and her pain not hidden well. Osun pouted and smiled coyly. Òyá’s nose flared with the shame of feeling it, but their eyes were same they dulled with the pain. He sat on her akete, pulled her on to his laps, and held Osun close. Sango
whispered the words of her oriki into her ears until she smiled and began to sing Sango’s praises again.

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Sango did not go out of Osun’s room for the whole day. He knew his other Ayaba knew this, and he knew he courted their trouble. But he couldn’t get himself to get up from Osun’s akete. He couldn’t get Oba’s dirge out of his head either. He knew he had to deal with her open treachery. She could have met with him in the privacy of his rooms to talk with him, but then again, he remembered he had not been to her rooms in weeks before he left for Owu. He looked up to see Osun come in with his supper. His favourite food, but amala and gbegiri didn’t interest him. He allowed her to put the food down, before he tugged at the end of her wrapper. It unraveled from her upper body. She slapped his hand away, wrapped it around her breasts and tucked its end in. He laughed and sat back on her akete. She smiled at him, loosed the ipele tied around her waist, and her wrapper fell to the floor. She stepped over her clothes and moved closer to their husband. His eyes trailed all over her skin. He caught her waist and drew her closer. Osun smiled and tried to wriggle out of his hold. But her eyes said different; she basked in the awe in Sango’s eyes. His fingers stroked at the stringed rows of tiny glass white beads molded to the shape of her hips. She pulled at the tightly coiled hairs on his chest and he slapped her fingers away, laughing. She pulled on them again, harder.

Ọyá, the third Ayaba sat in the darkness of her room, and the anger and sadness in body rocked her from side to side, forward and backward. She tried to stuff her pain deep inside her body, but she couldn’t stop the tears that flowed down her cheeks. She knew what the goings on in Osun’s rooms. She had sent her servant Afefe as a gentle wind into Osun’s room. Afefe
carried back the sounds to her, and they swirled around in Oya’s head. The wind became moving pictures and what she saw repeatedly stabbed her heart. She grabbed her iborun, wrapped it around her head and upper body, and slipped out of the Aafin grounds humming her own a dirge.

My husband, the Alaafin Oyo

Lord of 6600 villages and towns

Our husband, the One that struts with war

Eyes like white bitter kolanuts

And cheeks like lobes of kolanut

My husband, the One that walks with war,

Who calls forth lightning

And thunder your consort responds

With a broken heart

Death and whirlwinds, she quakes

The One that struts with war,

Whose warhorse’s tail swishes gallantly

If war comes from the right,

He tears it to shreds like a leopard would

If war comes from the left

He tears it into shreds like a leopard would

The One that struts with war

You are surrounded by war, tear it into shreds

like a leopard would
My husband, you are surrounded by war.

This is a strange war.

It comes not from the right or the left

It comes from above

It is a strange war
Outside the Aafin Oyo walls

Ôyá’s tears rained on the ground forming puddles in her wake. Her servant Afefe ran behind her. The bushes and grasses that lined the trail bowed as Afefe ran by them; they felt the anguish both in the wind and woman. Ôyá walked deep into the forest that started right outside the Aafin walls on the northwest corner. Afefe slowed down to walk across gangplank across a deep ditch that ran across the outer Oyo walls. Oya sang about the anguish and betrayal in her heart, and the trees and creatures that lived in their roots, trunks and their crowns listened.

Esu who had been poking at the miserly offerings of the Oyo – moldy yam, stale akara, smelly old palm oil – looked up when he heard Oya’s song. He stroked his long beard as she walked by him. He sat on a rock in the middle of the road where three paths met. The bald patch circled the rock, devoid of greenery, rubbed clean by the traffic of feet that came and went. Esu had his club and a covered calabash beside him. Ôyá didn’t greet him; she didn’t see him. He felt slighted by her disrespect. The people of Oyo must be proud, Esu thought, not to acknowledge him at a crossroad.

“Woman.” he called. She didn’t hear him. “Woman,” he called again stamping his foot on the ground, and he shook birds out of their sleep in the surrounding trees. Ôyá looked back but didn’t stop or walk back to the old man who called her. Esu also known as Laroye looked away from her. He had a wry smile on his face. He would make sure Oyo enjoyed him. His pursed his lips as his mind filled with mischievous ways to teach her a lesson, but he wasn’t allowed to think. A man walked from the direction Ôyá had gone, and he stopped at the very spot where Esu sat. The man couldn’t see Esu but said out aloud.

Láâróye

I greet you
Lord of mischievous, mean spirits

Olodumare’s messenger that wears shorts

Messenger that stands at the crossroads of the seen and unseen

At roads that confound

The King of Ketu

One who starts a fight, then stands aside to watch

The weeper sheds tears, Lááróye sheds blood

Old man at the crossroads

Beside him is his retribution club

And a covered calabash

Filled with Olodumaare’s ase

The power of the divine

To do as he pleases

Guardian of crossroads

With two mismatched legs, one long, one short

One leg in heaven, one leg on earth

The one clothed half in red, half in black

One who rewards good with ill and ill with good

The middle-man between heaven and earth

Gatekeeper that relays messages
He gives us whatever
It comes with a price
A lesson at the crossroads

The One who balances good and bad in the cosmos
Do not undo me
Do not change my yes to no
Do not change my no to yes
Jealous man of the crossroads
I greet you
Láâróye

Esu watched the man hurry away from the crossroads, “hmm…maybe some Oyo do not walk with their eyes on the soles of their feet after all.” Esu looked away from the man, he looked down the forest path, Òyá and Afefe were long gone. He reached down and picked up a rock that rested between his feet. He stood up and clambered on the rock that he had sat on, when Oyo was well within his sight. He spun Oyo around on its middle and saw its ten gates open to the metropolis, and beyond those gates lay many crossroads. Esu threw the stone towards triple walled city. It flew high, and winds carried it over thatched roofs, over the Aafin walls and it landed in the very middle of the Aafin with a loud crack.

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The light of the moon failed to reach around a corner of the Aafin. Far away from any building, the mound of the Esu rose from the earth. A woman walked out of the shadows of the Aafin walls and stopped in front the shrine. She removed her ipele from her shoulders and
unknotted its end. The tiny rounded body of an ado slipped out of the ipele into her palm. The tiny gourd overflowed the brim of its long-curved neck with palm kernel oil. It contained barely a trickle of oil but enough to do the evil the woman set out to do. In her other hand she held, a bowl of palm oil. She pours a generous amount on the mound. She stood over the palm oil drenched laterite mound and said, “this is your food, grant me favour and protection.” She put the bowl down. “This is not your food and emptied the ado of its content over the mound whispering, “Sango, Alaafin Oyo sent me to offer this to you, this isn’t from me. Hear me well; this offering is from Sango not from me.” The woman backed away from the mound into the dark night. Somewhere in the Aafin, a two-headed wooden effigy of Esu rocked on its stand. Both of heads were attached back to back, and both had wide smirks on their face. Esu could see the past and the future in the present. The smirks on Esu’s faces grew wider, as drops of the oil rolled down its forward-looking face. A tongue shot out of the mouth and licked the oil.

*
The Storm

In the Aafin Oyo, Sango reclined under the verandah of one of the smaller kobi. It rained heavily, and occasionally gusts of wind blew the sheets of water pouring from the skies and droplets of water splattered him, and he grimaced. Five ornately carved posts of ayan wood held up the thatch roof of the kobi; people and monkeys were carved all over the length of the poles. He felt their eyes on him, so he turned away from them. He tried to peer through the rain, but he couldn’t see a thing. He heard a disgusted hiss and turned to the post nearest to him. He saw the mouth of a woman purse at him and her eyes stared at him they were cold. He looked away from the post, but he heard the long disgusted disguised hiss again. It came from the grotesquely scrunched lips of another woman. He shivered as cold seeped into his bones, and he turned his back to the wind, it blew harder.

Sango got up gathered his agbada around his body and went to Òyá rooms to console her. A storm raged for days in Oyo; it uprooted trees and tore off the roofs of huts. It pulled walls down and emptied huts of their insides. Farmers were stranded in their farms and unable to return home to Oyo their crops flattened or submerged in soggy soil. The storm flattened one of the Ilari quarters to the ground. It happened in an instant, like a heavy boulder that dropped on it did it. Traders desertaed the Akesan market, because in the very centre of the storm a high column of swirling dirt could be seen from the surrounding districts. It kept people away. Sango knew why the winds blew strong and unending in Oyo. Òyá’s tears were unending too and she howled in grief casting the Aafin into mourning. Her wails rang in his head they were the only thing he heard, and it drowned the kakaaki or the bata drums, even the passionate nights in Osun’s arms failed to block her agony out of his head.

As he walked through the passages that connected his rooms to the Ayaba he thought of the best way to console her. He would be truthful and show her his love. At her door, he could
hear her become louder in his head. He lifted the mat that separated her room from the corridor where two of her servants sat, dozing. They fell to the floor when they saw him. He ignored them, and he slipped into her room.

He walked to her akete, “Ôyá,” he whispered, “my love.”

Ôyá heard him but didn’t turn from the wall to face him. He touched her shoulder, and she cried louder. Outside, thunder streaked through the cloudy skies and touched the very top of Ala hill splitting the tree on its top in half. Sheets of ice cold water poured down the sides of the hill, carrying loose stones down in waves of water. Inside, a tussle ensued, and Sango fought trying to calm the storm raging in his arms. How did one hold on to the wind, but Sango didn’t give up he kept reaching for her. His hands soothed, and his arms held her tight until she gentled, and her keening lowered to a whimper. Her body shook, and the room heaved with spent energy; its walls were covered with sweat. He held her and caressed her hair. She laid her heart his chest, sending her pain into his being. He trembled as he loosened her wrapper knotted under her armpits. She allowed it. He sat up and took off his agbada, he held her again. He looked at her gaunt face; her eyes were closed. He looked away from her face. Around her hips were rows of tiny glass beads, brown and purple, a tightly arranged wall that molded her hips. He stroked the beads and waited. Her eyes opened, and he saw the sadness in them. He looked away from them and suckled her breasts; she moaned softly but kept her hands by her side. He smiled. He gathered her into his arms again, chest against chest, and spoke into her ears. He could hear her heart beat. She could hear his; she listened and relaxed in his arms. He spoke more of his love for her and her arms found their way around his body. He let go of her to loosen the strings of his trousers. She rolled on her back and he lay on her. His eyes looked into hers; she saw his regret but looked away. She blew the lamps out and her legs clasped around him.
In the capital, the skies became a backdrop for a spectacular display of lightning and darkness, thunder booming intermittently. It woke up people and they wondered about the night. The man and woman were unaware of this, they breathed in the air thick with love and strife, they swallowed each other’s essence, and their bodies stopped fighting. Her hips opened for him, he eased himself into her and she received him, moved with him. They held each other and the wind that had raged in Oyo for days died down to a mere whisper. The rains slowed down, they became a drizzle and then fine mist, and the skies cleared of heavy clouds. The tall rollicking wind that had danced over the Akesan market vomited its insides all over the capital, its fury placated.

*
Inside the Kaa Idi Obi  
The Aafin Oyo sat on a slowly rising hill looking over the compounds of Oyo. Shaped like a triangle, it had three gates, a main gate that opened to all, a second one known to senior Aafin officials, and a third one known only by the Alaafin and the Baba Aafin. Its northern walls kept people out of the home forest. The plants in the forest grew untamed and only condemned spirits roamed it freely. The compounds of Aafin officials formed an inner ring outside the western and eastern walls. By the Aafin’s southern wall, the Aganju, a public space spread along its entire length. From this place of gathering, the Alaafin could talk to thousands of his people from under the shade of the extended veranda of the Kaa Idi Obi. Beyond the wide expanse of the Aganju, the main Aafin entrance, the Abata gates opened to the constantly moving Akesan market spread. The Aafin’s neck-high multiple layered walls were manned by armed Teetu. The walls didn’t keep out the noise of the market. It flowed into the Aafin a welcomed noise that reminded all that Oyo fared well economically. The Aafin’s walls weren’t built to keep the Oyo out of the Aafin but to keep prying eyes away from the Alaafin and his own. By the main gate the Alaafin welcomed strangers to his courts and they could stay in strangers’ quarters overnight. He also catered the disabled and beggars out of his generosity. An unspoken boundary kept this mottled crowd away from the other parts by a courtyard, a boundary that would forever separate stranger from royalty.

In the Kaa Idi Obi, Alaafin Sango sat sullenly on the Oyo throne. A chair carved from iroko and draped with the hides of many animals. One of his feet covered in a beaded slipper rested on a beaded leather cushion. He held a horsetail whisk made from the whitest of horsetail hair. On his head, he wore a conical beaded crown with a fringe, several beaded birds were stuck on it. This crown completely made of blue and white glass beads, long strings of white beads covered his face, and they tinkled every time he moved.
Eight Ilari sat on the steps that led up to the throne. Their half shaven heads bobbed to the praise of the Alaafin recited by the praise chanter, he sang the many deeds of the Alaafin. The Ilari interrupted the recitation by shouting the many cognomens of the Alaafin. On the left and right sides of the throne room sat the chiefs on mats made from reeds dyed in blue and green, seven men who made up the supreme governing council of Oyo, the Oyo Mesi. These men thought of the right response to any threat or matter that arrived in the Aafin Oyo from anywhere or anyone.

The Olowu ruled over Owu a kingdom several days away from Oyo. He had sent his messengers to Oyo again, one time too many. The Olowu’s warrior messengers were brash and loud, they disrespected the Oyo Mesi when they delivered their messages, disdain written on faces. Each time they had requested for the unthinkable and Alaafin Sango nearly choked on his anger as he listened to their demands. The Kaa Idi Obi was silent after each departure and the Alaafin roared his displeasure that he allowed the Owu messengers leave the Kaa Idi Obi alive.

In the beginning, the Olowu had been reasonable and asked for his annual tribute from his vassal Oyo. The Olowu’s madness started last year when he had requested double the annual tribute, and when the Alaafin Ajaka, Sango’s elder brother couldn’t pay it. The Olowu demanded the exile of the former Alaafin. Ajaka had refused to fight Owu and exiled himself to save Oyo from a war. When Sango became the new Alafin he refused to pay the Olowu too. The Olowu sent word that for that act he had quadrupled the tribute and Alaafin had Sango ignored him.

Owu sent more messengers to tell Oyo of the Olowu’s displeasure at the coronation of Sango as the new Alaafin. How could Oyo do this without the Olowu’s consent, after all his, the Olowu kingdom, existed before Oyo. He demanded that Oyo pay him the new tribute in a month or he would annex Oyo to Owu. The Alaafin seethed but he listened to bands of Owu warriors
that delivered the Olowu’s ridiculous messages. He wanted those arrogant fools beheaded at the Aafin shrine but decided to let them go. He had promised to ask his chiefs for advice; his temper had cost him a lot of loss in the past. When the men sauntered out of his presence, the Alaafin always asked for advice from the Oyo Mesi. They told him not to act because the Olowu poked about for a war. Owu didn’t really need the tributes.

After the last Owu messengers left, one of the chiefs Samu suggested that Oyo pay the tribute. He reminded the Alaafin that Owu fought ferociously and their warriors were fearless on the battlefield. “Oyo should beg the Olowu,” Samu said. Sango closed his eyes and ground his molars together. They sounded like the edge of a knife rubbing against a whetting stone. A collective gasp filled the Kaa Idi Obi and rebounded around the great hall. Samu’s advice came from his concern for his farms near Owu; he knew they would not fare well in a protracted war. After his thoughtless advice, Samu’s mind cleared and he thought about the effect of his words. He tried to slither away from the throne, but he wasn’t fast enough. Alaafin Sango jumped down from the throne and looked at Samu; his chest heaved as he tried but failed to control his anger and smoke bellowed out of his mouth and nostrils. Samu quickly prostrated on the floor. He covered his face with his cap and begged for mercy. The Ilari gathered their sleeveless gowns around their bodies, curled into balls, and chanted Sango’s epithets at him.

Kabiyesi. Second in command only to the Orisa. The one who kills and is thanked. The One who calms Oyo. The king who speaks with Olodumare directly. Olofin Adimula. The Leopard. The Owner of Lands. Seven men in one. Death, the father and the mother. The great warrior commander. Olufinran. Naked Fire. The One with white Bitter kola eyes. The terrifying fear.
When the Alaafin had his anger under control, he sat back on the throne. The Ilari and Samu remained as he befores prostrate before the throne. The other members of the Oyomesi were glad they hadn’t suggested; they tried to be less visible in the room. “My cousin the Olowu is playing with the head of cobra, he wants to use it to scratch his itching nose,” Alaafin Sango said.

“Send me and I will pull down the walls of Owu.” Bashorun said, it is those walls that give him confidence.”

“Is he comparing me to my exiled brother?” Alaafin Sango said

“But they are massive walls.” Samu said.

Agbakin moved closer to Samu and pinched him, “Haven’t you caused enough trouble?” he said.

“No, do not go to Owu with warriors. We will talk like the brothers that we are. Olowu and I are kinsmen. We will talk,” Alaafin Sango said.

“Yes Kabiesi,” the council chorused.

“Bashorun send an appropriate messenger to my brother,” the Alaafin commanded and retreated to his rooms.
Owu Grins at Oyo’s Folly

The Owu were fierce warriors that never turned their backs on war, a fight or an argument. Their blood ran hot, quick to boil, and they feared nobody. Armed with their epe, a short brass cutlass, they cut down their enemies in a bloody frenzy, hacking off limbs and spilling guts. The Owu were stubborn, immoral, haughty, and hardy, their women fought battles while pregnant. When they gave birth on battlefields, they sent the baby home and continued to war. Owu Ipole, the capital of Owu rose tall from the Owu forests to the east of Oyo. A wall higher than five men standing on each other’s heads surrounded Owu Ipole. The wall stood on a base as wide as the length of a tall man. The Owu walls had never been scaled, nor had any war come near it, not an arrow or a spear had ever glanced its smooth mud surface. Its warriors kept war fat away from Owu Ipole.

The Olowu of Owu grinned when his messengers bought back Alaafin Sango’s message. He laughed out aloud. His pompous young cousin obviously thought he joked when he sent word of the new tax to the Aafin. “Oyo, Borgu, and Ibariba paid tribute to Owu for generations, they will not cease during my time,” he yelled into the night. “The Aafin historians will not remember my reign in their stories as the Olowu who fled from a fight and reduced the money that came into the Owu coffers.” The Olowu stared at the Isan whips that hung on the in the inner rooms of Aafin Owu. They stood for the number of years a reigning Olowu had spent on the throne of his ancestors. This Olowu had twenty-one whips in his rooms, and that boy who still suckled his mother’s nipple dared to defy him.

“Who was he?”

“Who is he?”

“Who are the ones urging him to look death in the face.”

“Awon wo logunyan fun, to ni to be o soro.”

58
The Olowu sent messengers to his war general and the heads of compounds in the provinces. The Igbimo must hold tomorrow in Owu, decisions had to be made. It was time to plan a war. He told his war general and the heads, “Convince the federating provinces that the Owu troops must go out against Oyo.”

*
Iwarefa

The Brethren and Sistren

The Osi Efa, the Ona Efa, and the Otun Efa, three principal eunuchs and their three junior eunuchs, made up the Iwefa. They were also known as Baba-Afin and they oversaw the running of Aafin Oyo. The numerous Ilari -- halfheads, male and female that served under them. These three men with the help of their junior eunuch brothers performed religious, judicial and administrative functions over the inhabitants of the Aafin. However, one of the most important duties of the principal eunuchs was their attachment to the three wives of the Alaafin. Each one became the official son of an Ayaba, as a team they added another layer to the affairs of the Aafin.

Any man that slept in the inner rooms of the Aafin was either a eunuch or member of the royal family. The Teetu and Eso guards stood outside the heart of the Aafin where the Sango and his wives lived. Even the Oyo Mesi left before night fell the night, and guests slept outside this kept space where only one Alaafin ruled. The compounds of the chiefs were built round the out walls of the Aafin, near enough for both arms of the Oyo government to observe each other. But the Alaafin saw and heard more through his legion of halfheads. These men and women lived out new lives defined by the names the Alaafin gave them when they became Ilari. Ilari brought word to Sango’s ears of plots they had winnowed out with their official red and green fans.

Halfheads, called Emese in Ife did same for the Ooni Ife and the Olowu Owu. They formed a living breathing wall around their kings and anything his. They lived their lives for him, and he clothed them with authority and he in turn took care of their upkeep. This highly structured cadre of Aafin staff made the Aafin work without them the power and grandeur of the
Aafin wouldn’t be felt or seen if not for the proud man and women who strutted all over the Oyo realm speaking on behalf of the Alaafin of Oyo.

One of the seventy Oyo war captains, an Eso, brought a case to the Ona Efa of a man, one of the Aafin artisans who claimed he fell asleep and didn’t leave the Aafin before dusk. Ona Efa the most senior Ilari, ruled over the non-royal members of the Aafin. He sat in judgement every third day of the week and his words were carried out by all. Ona Efa looked at the man sniveling on the floor before him. He knew it could only be burning lust that made the wood carver flout the dusk to dawn rule. Ona Efa decreed that the artisan be made an Aafin servant, so he could deal with him if need be, “you won’t have to nibble at you wanted, you can have it all now.”

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In another part of the Aafin, nine titled heads of the higher cadres of the Ilari were having their weekly meeting in a kobi. The Ilari answered only to the Alaafin. They were his messengers, tax collectors, and body guards. Of these nine-titled male Ilari, four lived within the walls, five lived outside the Aafin walls. They were the eyes and the ears of the Alaafin in the six Oyo provinces and the many towns and villages loyal to the Alaafin, outside Oyo’s metropolitan walls. They nine Ilari also met with the Alaafin weekly; when needed they met daily as the affairs of the provinces could be as unpredictable as rain in the harmattan.

This morning, they talked about the yams harvested from the Ebolo province. They also talked about the broken bridge over River Ossi. The rainy season would soon be here; its repair was slow. Who was responsible for its repair? What delayed repairs? It connected three provinces; it should be repaired in a week. The toll for the crossing at Ossi is still two cowries?
Yes, but the proceeds from the crossing dropped during the time of repairs. Understandable. And the Orisa are not hungry? We feed them as well as we feed. And spirits? They are at peace, for now.

The Ilari shaved off half their hair. The shaved half, they nicked with incisions, rubbed dark with charms that made them invincible to unseen and seen powers. They carried fans of red and green, and they were male or female. Eight titled female Ilari also headed compounds within the walls of the Aafin. The female Ilari shaved their hair different from their male counterparts; they shaved off the sides of their heads and their incisions were made along both sides of the strip of hair they grew from forehead to nape.

The female Ilari met in another kobi, and discussed the running of Oyo, the Aafin, the women of Oyo, and its many markets, especially the Alaafin’s market, Akesan. They also supervised Aafin slaves and servants. The female Ilari went out of their way to see what their male counterparts didn’t see or hear; slight body changes, nose twitches, and roving eyes. They smelled what was adrift, even before it became real, and when nothing seemed amiss, they stared long enough, and they saw what was not.

Both Ilari meetings usually ended with one of the titled heads asking two questions after every other question had been answered, “Any word of rebellion from the provinces beyond the Oyo walls; any word of rebellion within the Oyo walls, any word of rebellion from those loyal to the Alaafin?” and the titled heads will pause and think. Each Ilari will answer these expected questions in their minds, think about all possible answers from the information they had and decide on how to frame their answers. For each Ilari head knew that even though it is the ear that hears and the eyes that see, it is the mouth that will speak for both. The mouth must be careful not to say too much, or it will put the ears and eyes in trouble. On this day, the consensus answer
was “no” but each Ilari head listened well for any stress hidden in the no. They also watched closely the body language of their fellow Ilari. They had to decide for themselves if the no heard was actually a no.

*

While the Alaafin slept in Osun’s room, she stepped out of her quarters to make his food. Ignoring the servants and slaves that fell to their faces to greet her as they went off to the Aafin’s farms. She beckoned to her eunuch Osi Efa, as she walked to the main kobi of her courts. She sat on a stool under the shade of the thatched kobi.

“Mother,” Osi Efa greeted, prostrating on the floor.

“Did you sleep well?” Osun said.

“I did. You?”

“The night was a nightmare; the face of the day is shrouded.”

“Maybe the day will smile before the sun descends mother.”

“Maybe.”

“What is going on in the Aafin today?”

“Nothing big enough to bother you.”

Osun grunted and looked away from her eunuch; she wanted news of Oba.

“The day for the celebrations of the Esu Oja is near mother.”

“I remember, the day I forget the market celebrations hasn’t come yet. Have you met with the market Ilari?”

“Eni Oja Obirin and Eni Oja Okurun will bring their reports to you later in the day.”

“Good.”
“The palm oil traders have also agreed to lower the price of palm oil.”

“And the other matter?”

“Mother, the trap hasn’t caught the rat yet.”

The Osi Efa left Osun’s room for the twice daily consult with his other two senior brother eunuchs, the Ona Efa and the Otun Efa. The three senior eunuchs greeted each other and settled into reclining chairs thinking about the discussions they had with their respective mothers today. Each man met with his official mother, one of the three wives of the Alaafin every morning. They were usually the first men to see the women’s faces and were privy to dreams and thoughts and fears that ran about in their minds.

In the soft darkness of these inner rooms, the women spoke to their sons and unburdened themselves, before they stepped out of their quarters to became Ayaba their true selves hidden well behind their roles. The eunuchs looked relaxed, but they weren’t. Each looked everywhere but at his brother, each man knew what the other man did. They sifted through discussions with their mothers and decided on the ones to talk about or the extent to coat them with lies or deny the existence of these talks without shaming his brother eunuch’s intelligence.

The most senior Iwefa, Ona Efa presided over their meetings. “Did your mothers wake up well today?” Osi Efa asked.

“My eyes haven’t seen mine this morning. She isn’t in her chambers,” Otun Efa said, though he had seen Òyá.

“Mine woke up with troubles,” Ona Efa said.

“So did mine,” Osi Efa said.

“Our mothers cannot be sad, or the Aafin and Oyo will suffer,” Ona Efa said.

“But the land is frowning, so they frown,” Ona Efa said.
The three men asked themselves if they had anything to talk about, nothing they answered. They sat for a while in the silence filled with their thoughts of their mothers and their worries.
Esu and the Oyo boy

Esu, the big man of the crossroads
The one who breaks into many fragments
And no one can put together

Esu, the divine messenger, who’s over 200 names can’t be invoked in vain or mocked sat at lonely Oyo crossroads. Both young and old; he wore his black and red colours and engaged himself thinking about the trouble he alone can create and freely gave. He could still taste the palm kernel oil he detested on his two tongues. He snorted at the foolish woman who thought that giving him the oil in darkness would hide her from consequences of her actions. He called to his sacred animal, the owl, who like him saw far and wide and near to look into the spaces and crevices, on earth and between earth, and the realms of the Orisa and Olodumare. He had a message to carry to Oyo, and he would do so in the language of the world and Orisa until their ears rang.

Esu sat at crossroads but could see markets, the insides of houses, and compounds and towns. He could see his brass Aafin on the Igbeti mountain near the bend of the Greater River. Esu, the enforcer of Olodumare’s wishes laughed; he enjoyed being stern and playful and unpredictable as he did his work. Deceitful, cunning, reckless, crafty, cruel, and quick to anger, but not averse to praise and flattery, he loved palm oil. Only the proper sacrifices at his crossroads made him use his ase to grant a wish, desire, prayer, or create and destroy. All who knew him knew he can be appeased, even if his rules and taboos were broken, but only if he wanted.

At all crossroads, Esu saw many a traveler stare at roads confused. They asked which path is right, which will take them backward or forward? Esu thrived in that space of many
possibilities, disruptions, contradictions, and fear. He may guide the traveler aright, lead astray or bring him to an end for a lesson. The other place is the market, where he pulled crowds by bringing wealth and prosperity to those who have offered the appropriate offerings to him.

He smiled with his two faces and looked on Oyo malevolently and benevolently. He brought his two faces together, detached and neutral, two sides of a hand, good and bad, and he confused the children of the world at his crossroads. The gleeful instigator of conflicts loved having an audience to observe his deeds. At this it time, his four eyes stared at Oyo, and he would not fail to entertain them with good in evil, and evil in good. Short man and tall man: he flung himself into the wind and became a tiny hole, light and darkness, even death. He grabbed one of many clubs and cudgels he possessed and thought of retributions for the woman who gave him palm kernel oil.

“Did she know once he raised a club it must not be lowered unused? Did she know one must not see sleep until he finished the task, but how does one know when the divine messenger is done?” Esu smirked and rubbed his club on his shorter leg. He could see the woman sleeping, and he’d not started on her task.

*  

A little boy shot at the undergrowth along a path with stones from his sling. He walked by the junction where three roads met. His stone shook the tall grasses, hit something and an animal screeched rustling through the bushes. The boy jumped and laughed, as he walked by the crossroad, whistling. The old man sitting at the crossroad bristled, anger drained him of his strength. Who dared to walk by him whistling? Esu struck his feet on the earth and it trembled with a force that got to the boy. He felt it under his feet and wondered what made the ground
shake. He stopped whistling. His mouth froze into a pout and the boy remembered his mother
told him not to whistle at crossroads; only Esu’s whistle as the herald of the Orisa should be
heard at the crossroads.

Boy ran home, though he fell many times, he picked himself up without dusting the
earth off him. Boy knew his mother detests dirt, but he can’t whistle, he must tell her. Esu gets
up from the rock his sat on and limped after the boy. He got to boy’s compound before the boy.
He leaned on a wall and watched the boy run into his mother’s room, his little feet caked with
dust. The mother took one look at him and scolded him for his appearance. The boy said nothing
but made hooting sounds like a monkey; he jumped up and down. His mother angry thought he
mocked her and the struck boy across the mouth. Boy fell to the ground crying, and he points to
his mouth.

The boy’s mother finally noticed his mouth and felt that her slap had made it so. She
rolled on the floor and cried out to the elders in the house to help her. She jumped up and
grabbed her breasts, “his mouth is bent.” People rushed out of the compound, “what is it
woman?” She pointed to her son, and they gathered round him. “His mouth,” she screamed from
behind the crowd. Nobody heard her; they gathered around boy looking at the puckered mouth.

Esu watched the boy weep tears, he saw the mother nearly naked rolling on the floor. In
agony, Esu wept blood for them both. Esu threw up dust as he wailed, and a woman elder looked
at the dust whirling about the compound. She looked through the sand and wind. She looked at
the wall and nodded, Esu, she said to herself. Esu blinked away his tears of blood; he had shed
enough. The old woman said to her family, “let the boy be, this happened for a reason.” Esu used
his staff to raise himself from the fence and walked away dragging his shorter leg. “This had to
be done, boy needed to learn this lesson, listen to your mother always.” Esu walked back to the
crossroads he had done his work. Boy would be saved by listening to his mother in the future, his mother who offered daily sacrifices to Esu, to preserve her boy’s destiny.

*
The cut-off head of the python

When a hand that wields a cutlass, and chops off the head of a python, it does not rejoice by throwing up itself up in celebration. The body that owns the hands jumps out of the way of the separated head, not because of blood but because the jaws of the dead angry python would latch on to anything; it could still bite.

Ayoade, the last Ayaba of the exiled Alaafin Ajaka, remained in the Aafin Oyo, because her day of delivery drew near child. Her husband didn’t allow her to journey to Igboho with him. She delivered a baby boy a month after her husband’s exile, but she decided to stay on at Oyo because she had a wrong to right. Alaafin Ajaka, Sango’s elder brother had been taken away in chains to Owu by his cousin the Olowu, because he decided not to pay the new annual tribute. One of the Olowu’s warlords tied Ajaka’s to their horse with a rope and dragged him to Owu. Alafin Oyo ate dust from the hooves of their horses. A walk of shame; the crownless Alaafin of Oyo had walked out of Oyo’s gate with his head bowed and covered in red dust.

Ajaka cursed Oyo, “you reject me today, but in seven years I will return.” The people didn’t regard the curse, but it stuck to Oyo, like a fly on a corpse feeding on flesh. But nobody blamed Alaafin Ajaka’s Basorun the wily snake who advised that Oyo be subtle in exercising its power when it dealt with its neighbours, because he wanted more power for himself. He told Alaafin Ajaka to soften his words people responded to smiles not grimaces. The Alaafin heeded his advice and didn’t go to war when Owu threatened. The towns that paid tribute to Oyo responded in kind, and they stopped paying theirs. Ajaka sent his Ilari to dialogue with them but they could not persuade coronet wearing kings to change their minds. Owu responded to Oyo’s by increasing the annual tribute and threatened to come for the Alaafin’s wives and children if its demands were not met. They would become his indentured servants in the Aaafin Owu. The
Alaafin sent more Ilari to the Olowu, but he knew he was trying to dialogue with a man who only talked in blood drawn in battle. His words had no effect on his relative the Olowu.

As a last resort, he sent his Basorun to Owu to broker peace, but the two-faced liar sold Oyo’s weaknesses to the Owu for bags of cowries. The Basorun sneaked out of Oyo before the Owu warriors arrived to take the Alaafin away. He left his family behind, his self-exile disgraced them. They left Oyo, and nothing has been seen or heard of them since. When Oyo referred to the past events the called Ajaka’s Basorun as “sixteen coconuts that cannot be used for ifa divination” an epithet that showed his uselessness and betrayal.

Oyo’s war general and his adjuncts, Olu Ode and Olu-Ode couldn’t figure out a way to bring back Alaafin Ajaka. They had thought of more than three different war plans, but they and the Oyo Mesi didn’t agree to any and confusion reigned in the stead of the absent Alaafin. Their enemies the Ibariba heard of the happening in Oyo and decided to invade at this time when nobody sat on the throne of Oyo. And because the Ibariba were so confident of victory they sent word to Oyo that they were preparing for war against them. In two moons, they would be at the westernmost gate of Oyo.

The Oyo Mesi knew the ramifications of this war and convened an emergency meeting. They invited the Aafin Babalawo into the Kaa Idi Obi and asked the Ifa oracle for help. The oracle told them to ask the Alaafin’s brother Sango, who lived in Tapa with his mother’s people, for help. Sango had rescued his brother and returned to Tapa leaving the Oyo throne vacant still. The Oyomesi consulted the Ifa oracle again and they were told to make Sango the next Alaafin Oyo and rule in his brother’s stead. The people cheered. They were happy to have a strong Alaafin that could fight their wars, but months after the people of Oyo began to grumble, inside them, from the levies they paid to fund these wars. “It would leak out of them soon,” Ayoade
said. She knew it would not be long before their grumbling got to the ears of the officials. She knew how these things festered in the insides and until they seethed. She knew nothing could ease this burden.

She used to the end of her wrapper to wipe her tears. Her husband had walked away from the palace, twice in shame, once to Owu in chains and then to his exile in Igboho. She could never forget both. Her baby woke up with a cry and took her away from her thoughts. She yanked her baby from her back and stuffed her right breast into his mouth. She hissed. Sango should have refused the crown, but no he accepted it and agreed that his elder brother be banished to a small village on the outskirts of the kingdom.

Ayoade watched Ôyá come back from her evening walk; mistress and servant walked by Ayoade’s courtyard. “Ôyá.” Ayoade called, but the troubled woman didn’t hear her. Afefe frowned at Ayoade and greeted her. Ayoade hissed, “Husband and wife are same. Who does she think she is? I am an Ayaba too.” she called out to them, but neither answered Ayoade. Her baby tried to get a better grip of his mother’s nipple bit hard and drew blood. The pain jarred her out of her grievance and she spanked his bottom with more force than necessary. The baby stared at his mother, his mouth opened but no sound came out. Milk dribbled out of his open mouth. His mother consumed with hatred for the woman walking away from her didn’t hear her son’s wail.

She would stay in Oyo and bear her shame bravely. She had already put a pot on the fire and full of strife it seethed. She tended and stirred its contents. She looked forward to watching it boil over and drown anything and everyone in its path. Ayoade smiled, the Alaafin’s hand cut off the head of a python but forgot to move quickly out of the way. The python’s jaw, fueled by
vengeance snapped open, looking for what to bite. This python would make sure its last bite counted.

*
Human Messages: The halfheads of Oyo spoke on behalf of their king

The Basorun of Oyo spent the night thinking of the message he would send to Owu in the morning. It had to be conciliatory, yet Oyo must not stoop to begging to stay the impending war. The Basorun knew that day rushed to break the short night; he had to decide soon. He went through the possible messages in his mind and grumbled. Early in the morning, he decided on one, he sent a slave to the Aafin for an Ilari, a man called Èyìnlàárò. The Basorun felt that the Ilari’s name, it is the end that we should think of, fit his task.

A slave led the Ilari into the Basorun’s iyewu, the old man sat in a corner, and light from a lamp illuminated the room. Its flickering flame danced across his face. Eyinlaaro prostrated before the Basorun and remained on the floor.

“Did you wake well baba?”

“Go to Owu, tell the Olowu that the Alaafin asks if the day broke well over Owu?”

“Yes, baba”

“Tell him that the day broke well over Oyo.”

“Yes baba.”

“Tell him we must keep the day as it is, smiling.”

Eyinlaaro rose up from the floor and set out towards Owu. He didn’t need to pack a bag. There were provisions and a place to sleep at every toll gate on the highways controlled by the children of Oduduwa. He only carried a white and blue beaded staff that stood for the Alaafin’s authority. The staff had on its top a small beaded crown, and strings of beads dangled from the crown’s edge. Eyinlaaro walked out of the Aafin an extension of the Alaafin on an important mission, and the staff spoke of the power of the Alaafin. The Ilari also had in his other hand his official green and red fan. As he walked out of Oyo, people on their way to their farms bowed to
ground as he walked by them. They showed respect not to him but to the authority he held in his hands.

Eyinlaaro didn’t see the broad outer walls of Owu until the night of the second day. He passed through the gates late in the morning of the third day. The deep ditches that were on both sides of the wall were filled with rain turning into a moat filled with sticky red clay. He raised the staff of the Alasfin at a gatehouse outside the main Owu wall on the third day. The sentries let him raise it longer than necessary disrespectfully sneering at the staff of the Alaafin. Eyinlaaro waited before a back gate the one closest to Oyo. The sentries on the wall motioned him to come when they were tired of staring, and Eyinlaaro stepped on the single plank laid across the moat and walked towards a small gate. The sentries tried to make him trip by staring at him severely, and when he didn’t they sneered at him. He made it to the other side, and they allowed into the walled city. A sentry led him to Aafin Owu and handed him over to the Aafin guards. The Aafin drummer announced the Ilari’s presence and a slave led him into inner corridors that opened into the inner courts into the kobi of the Olowu. Eyinlaaro prostrated before the Olowu and started singing his praise.

“Swallow your song,” the head of the capital province said, Eyinlaaro pushed back words that dangled on his lips.

“What is your name?” Another chief said.

“Eyinlaaro,” the Ilari said.

“Leave, tell the Alaafin that the end doesn’t count. If you plan the present well; you will be in the right. The planning at the end doesn’t count, because it will align with a well thought out present,” another oloye said.

Eyinlaaro left Owu that day but the sentries at the gate delayed him for a day. While he
Waited, an Owu Ilari walked the road to Oyo. MabiObaninu ran with a message to the Alaafin “Tell the Alaafin to respect tradition. We all know Owu was created first.” MabiObaninu knew he had to get to Oyo before Eyinlaaro, and he did. The Ilari from Owu, MabiObaninu walked ahead of the Oyo messanger by a day. The Oyo Mesi didn’t let the Owu Ilari deliver his message either after he told them his name. They sent him out from their presence. “Oyo isn’t angry. Tell the Olowu we do not wish him to be angry too.”

“Who cares about the anger of Owu? It is time Oyo gets angry and that is what matters.” Basorun said after the Ilari had left the presence of the Oyo Mesi.

Mabiobaninu bumped into Iya Aafin, as he backed out of the kobi into the Aganju. He had heard the Basorun’s last remark. He prostrated before the woman and apologized.

“Where are you rushing off to young man?”

“Owu, mother.”

“Your message?”

“Tell the Alaafin that the Olowu says the price of Owu cotton is about to be more expensive.”

“And your name?”

“Do not anger the king.”

“hmm, you may go.”

Eyinlaaro delivered his message to Bashorun Oyo a day later. The old man sighed, riddle time, and dismissed him. A time for both sides to pry into the minds of the other and read what remained unsaid. The Oyomesi would meet and decide on another message, they sent a message two days later. Kosija left for Owu the same moment, Mabiobanu walked into the Aafin Owu. He told the council what had happened. They shrugged over his report they had not expected
anything less. This game, both Aafin knew of the rules and both played it well, hide the real message in the Ilari’s name, and send as many messages as you can while you got ready for war.

Obakosetan, “the king isn’t ready,” an Owu Ilari left for Oyo and met an Oyo Ilari, Kosija, “there is no fight,” midway between both kingdoms. Both messengers saw each other and nodded at each other. They turned slightly out of the narrow path and walked into grasses lining the path, so the Oba’s staffs of authority they carried would stay in the pathway and not be touched by grasses and vines. They walked on without stopping, and the beaded staffs that towered over them cast shadows in their wake.

“A rock doesn’t bow to the wind. The elder doesn’t yield to the younger.” Obakosetan’s message.


Both Ilari’s spoke at the same time, in two different kingdoms, to two kings who had already made up their mind to war. Even though, the trail of human messengers on both sides didn’t stop, each Aafin made up two faced messages while their respective Balogun prepared for war.

Ayekooto – “the world has rejected the truth” delivered his message, to the Alaafin.

“Owu

was the first, when truth is upended the world will end,” the truth he delivered.

“What truth?” Alaafin Sango said sneering at the Oyo Mesi.

“There are different versions of truth,” Samu said.

“We must remember our source. We are brothers.” The message Oyo sent back through Ayekooto, obviously blind Owu needed to see the truth.

“Whose brother?” the Olowu said, “I know my mother’s sons.”
Kosija, “there is no fight” got back to Oyo, and the Oyo Mesi knew the response of the Owu before the Ilari opened his mouth. The Olowu didn’t accept any entreaty. He wanted war.

“An agreement. A decision in three days, if not war.”

Imo o kojo limped towards Owu. He had cut his left big toe on a rock, but he couldn’t stop to rest. He had hit his left leg against a stone before leaving Oyo; a bad omen for any journey. But nobody would listen to him, even if he said anything. He bound the cut with some leaves and hurried on his way, leaving blood smears on the way to Owu. If he did not get to Owu before sundown, he would be the reason for war between Oyo and Owu. The Oyo Mesi had reached an agreement on when to declare war on Owu and they sent Imo o kojo to throw the Olowu off this. He got to Owu as the sun set over Owu on the third day of the given ultimatum.

He shouted his message from the door, before his good foot touched the floor of the council room.

“We must remember our beginnings.” He dragged himself in and collapsed to the ground breathing hard.

“And your name? a chief said.

“There is no agreement,” the Oyo Ilari said.

In the months of Igbe and Ebibi, the fifth and sixth months of the year, that is during the rainy season, a stream of Ilari journeyed the paths that led to and from the two kingdoms carrying messages, as both kings played more riddle games. They both knew a war couldn’t be fought in the wet season, so both kings waited for the long dry season and entertained themselves with the game.

Owu sent Orikunkun, the Ilari whose name meant “strong headed.” to show the Olowu’s obstinacy, the inviolability of his words. He didn’t carry an urgent message. Orikunkun walked
slowly. A huge man whose very weight made the earth shudder from bearing his weight. Owu
didn’t rush to Oyo. It had finished with its war preparation and waited omly for the rains to stop.

When Orikunkun got to Oyo, children ran out of his way. They peeped at him from
behind their mothers’ wrappers. The door to the kobi could fit three of him but to show his
disdain for it and Oyo he entered it sideways. He had no message for the Alaafin. Only his name
would and when he spoke it into the space of the Kaa Idi Obi. He took leave of Oyo and returned
to Owu.

Alaafin Sango tried one more time for peace and sent the last Oyo Ilari to Owu. The Ilari
carried Sango message a wooden hair comb in his shoulder bag. The Owu Aafin boomed with
laughter when the Ilari unwrapped the message and showed to the Olowu. The Owu oloye passed
the slender wooden hair comb around. They knew fine craftsmanship but ridiculed the comb and
Oyo.

“Sango has reduced Oyo to this.”

“The Alaafin wants us to comb our hair.”

“Do we look like women.”

“He’s now a frightened woman concerned about her hair.”

“He’s whining about a broken brotherly relationship.”

“The Oyo are afraid of war.”

“The Oyo are afraid of blood.”

The last messenger the Olowu sent to the Alaafin carried a double-edged machete
wrapped with palm fronds. It meant one thing only, war.

*
Three Necklaces

In the front of the Alegbede family compound a collection of rusty, unnamable metal objects dangled from the eaves. The biggest building in the compound leaned on the compound’s front wall. From its insides, the sounds of iron beating iron into submission rang out into the open. At furnaces, young apprentices furiously pumped at pairs of billows; their naked torsos were wet with sweat. The muscles of their upper bodies and arms flexed as the air they pumped fanned coals alive and in different parts of the building lumps of metals in different states of solidity glowed red as they melted. The chief blacksmith Ogundana had poured out his morning libation to the Orisa, and he asked that they help his friend live old, see his children’s children, keep his head on his shoulders Ogundana looked out of his smithy, he could see his friend’s head bent over an array of pots filled with beads. Both men had grown up together in adjoining compounds, each perfecting his craft, and now old they were the elders of their family compounds.

The next compound to the Alegbede were the Isona. The men of the family worked with needles and beads, and they embroidered stories on silk, cotton, and leather. They were crown and umbrella makers too, and they also made the beaded royal staffs and robes of the Aafin. Baba Ale the most senior man of the clan sat in front of its main building looking in pots filled with beads. Baba Ale motioned that an apprentice brings each pot to him and he scooped up beads of different shapes and colours. He brought them closer to his eyes or raised each to the sky, allowing the sun to pass through it so he could see their imperfections. He picked out only the perfect ones and dropped them into three calabashes by his right. The rejects he allowed to run though his hands and they clattered or clinked as they tumbled back into their pots.

Today, Baba Ale decided to make beads for the Ayaba of the Alaafin. An impossible task, not that he didn’t know how to make exquisite jewelry, but he had to fashion out three
necklaces that should not only soothe the fickle spirits of each Ayaba. They should not cause them to be jealous of each other and not fill the Alaafin’s ears with his supposed unskillfulness if they chose to be spiteful. Three different women with differing tastes and prejudices who had refused to tell him exactly what they wanted but trusted him to know and satisfy their needs. He needed all the help he could get if he was to win over these women who could whisper things that were not into the ears of the Ooni.

He made Oba’s first; he carefully picked three perfectly shaped milky white cowries and pale red coral beads things from the depths of water should complement each other. They also agree with her essence she commanded money and had a spirit cold like the bottom of a river. For Osun, he took two handfuls of tiny segi beads, blue-green glass beads of the same hue and stringed them together. Blue, the colour of extremes: cold and hot; sensual and frigid. For Òyá, he stringed polished red jasper that picked up the dim lights in the evening sky and dazzled in his palms. Not unlike the nature of its owner, her explosive strength and warmth. Baba Ale and his household couldn’t sleep the day the three necklaces were delivered to the Aafin. By morning, the Isona compound could become a refuse dump if the necklaces provoked the anger of the Ayaba.

Three messengers, Sango sent to his wives, and they left his quarters at the same time. This he did to ensure that a fight didn’t start about which Ayaba got their beads first, although he knew Oba his first wife should. But he felt it was better to have one angry woman than to have three on his hands. Sango knew the many eyes and ears of Ayaba in the Aafin will certainly tell who got what first. “Three messengers,” he told Biri, “The three must get to their doors at the same time.”
Osun sat before her pots of indigo dye watching her servants add raffia tied pieces of cloth into their deep depths. They stirred the pots with sticks for a while and then they let the waters be. She watched rippling indigo waters close over the white cloth and then became still. Osun’s brass bangles clinked as she examined the dyed wet clothes brought before her. The dye created patterns where it couldn’t get to; patches of cloth kept white by tied with raffia. The clothes were taken out and spread out to dry in the sun, then beaten and folded into baskets to be sold in markets. Osun loved discovering the many dyed patterns made in varying shades of light blue and deep dark blue. She knew she caused the similar effects by colouring emotions and watching ensuing events unfold around her. She examined an intricate pattern when a servant knelt before her a calabash in his hands. She laughed as opened the proffered calabash and saw the necklace in it. She took it out and added them to the rows of beads already around her neck. She knew he favoured her and she swayed with the joy she felt.

Oba sat by the door of her biggest storeroom; her servants and slaves were counting the baskets of kolanuts that would be on the way to Ile Ife by dawn. The messenger knelt before her; Oba ignored her and dropped a stone into the basket by her side. Each stone stood for ten baskets, there were already fifteen in the pile. The servant waited her eyes on the ground and calabash held high above her head.

“What?” she finally said, glowering at the servant.

“The Alaafin says I should give this to you.” She thought, what does he want now? I know he wants something. She passed the necklace through her fingers; they were cool and smooth. She didn’t put them on. She dropped them on the pile of stones, and added another stone to the pile. Before long, the beads were forgotten completely covered by stones.
Óyá sat on a stool her courtyard while Afefe wove her hair into a suku. Her full hair glistened from coconut oil. Afefe divided Oya’s thick hair into sections and wove it from her hairline to the in the top of her head. When she finished it looked like Afefe had placed a high upturned basket of her mistress’s head. Afefe wove together the ends of the sections and attached cowries to it. Unlike the other Ayaba, Oya made her hair into a hairstyle that their husband liked and allowed only Oya to weave his hair into a suku; the other women cut their hair short as their office required. Afefe stopped sewing on the cowries into Óyá’s hair, so Oya could receive her gift. Óyá took the necklace and smiled. Afefe put it around her neck, and her body warmed the stones and they gleamed against her dark skin. She sighed with pleasure and a cool breeze blew over Oyo that evening.

*
Esu Oja festival

Harvest time in Oyo arrived many times every year for crops, but in the sixth month farmers harvested yams before their vines become brittle and the soil mounds hardened. The larger farms outside the walls and the smaller ones within the walls produced bountifully from their rich dark soil. Oyo also celebrated Esu Oja in the sixth month, but the Ayaba in charge of the festival kept postponing the festival week until harvest season nearly passed. Osi Efa, the eunuch in charge of the celebrations and his market assistants, Eni Oja Obinrin and Ebi Oja Okunrin, kept reminding their mother Osun, but she thought of other things, or rather the one she didn’t have. She told herself, “if she wasn’t fruitful, why should Oyo celebrate the harvest or thank Esu for the wealth and abundance made from its markets?”

The crowd that came to the market at Akesan dwindled because Oyo didn’t celebrate Esu, so he stopped pulling people into the market. Eni Oja Okunrin sent his assistant Aroja to the market men to collect fees for the upkeep of the market, and they drove him away. Eni Oja Obinrin sent her assistant Aroja to her the market women for their fees and they looked at her with evil eyes, more than a couple hissed. The market assistants had no word to take back to Osi Efa; he didn’t have a report for his mother Osun.

A fight between the pottery sellers from Ìlèsà and the cotton farmers from Owu made more people stay away from the market. Moss and patched of grass grew in abandoned stalls and the market became lean. The fight started for a petty reason; an Ijesa slighted an Owu for his iru, “he said it stank like an Owu fart.” But everyone knew fermented locust beans smelled irrespective of who made it. The fight didn’t end, and it caused a scarcity of pots and cotton in Oyo. When Eni Oja Okunrin and Eni Oja Obirin stepped in to settle the dispute, they were ridiculed and would have been beaten but for the Ilari. They formed a barrier around the skirmish and pulled out the troublemakers. The Ilari shut the main Aafin gates against the crowd, if they
hadn’t the crowd would have poured into the Aganju courtyard and interrupted the Oyo Mesi meeting holding under a kobi where they sat in judgment daily settling disputes between the people on behalf of the Alaafin.

The disgruntled traders from Ijesa and Owu took their wares to Apomu Market several days journey away from Oyo. The Oyo cloth weavers had to travel to Apomu for their cotton. They couldn’t find any in Akesan. When they got to Apomu, they were shocked to find Owu and Ijesa traders selling their cotton and pots side by side in the same section of the market. They settled their quarrel in Apomu. When an Oyo bought a measure of cotton from the Owu the traders added forty cowries to the sale. The Ijesa did the same they added ten cowries to every pot they sold to an Oyo. The Oyo traders returned home with less things that they had hoped for. And the situation worsened pots and cotton became more expensive with each Apomu trip. Then one day, Oyo couldn’t buy anything from Apomu because the Owu and Ijesa traders decided not to sell anything to the Oyo. They Oyo sent word to their compound heads, and they talked to the six Oyo province heads. They called Osi Efa to a meeting early one morning and asked him to wake his mother from her sleep; they didn’t allow Osi Efa to sit down. Osi Efa knew of the market tension; the two market Ilari updated him with reports. He talked but he couldn’t reach his mother.

Osi Efa called his brother eunuchs all six of them to an emergency meeting, and they discussed Ayaba Osun’s lack of enthusiasm to start the weeklong Esu celebrations. The six eunuchs knew the year’s yam harvest would go back to seed and there will be a seed yam shortage next year unless Esu got his offerings. Osi Efa had tried to reason with his mother but she only talked about the cobwebs in her room and the torn butterfly in her dreams. The other senior Eunuch’s had been told by their mothers Oba and Òyá not to interfere with Osun’s issues.
Oba wanted Osun to experience their husbands disfavour; Oya wanted their husbands slow ending anger to boil against Osun; she wanted to be his one. The other Ayaba waited for Osun use her own hands to do herself bad. Osi Efa said, “I need your help brothers. How can I get through to my to his mother?” Silence filled the room and it took a while before his brother spoke. But Osi Efa’s plea for help wasn’t answered despite the many words his brothers spoke. He knew he had to bring the matter to the Alaafin.

Osi Efa’s shadow moved across the Alaafin’s room walls in the morning before the koso drums woke him up. The first face the Alaafin saw. Osi Efa prostrated and didn’t get up from the floor, as he talked about the decline of the market and the Esu Oja celebrations. Alaafin’s lips curled up with disgust, as he listened to Osi Efa. Twirls of smoke came out of his nostrils and his eyes reddened and the walls of his room heated up. On the floor, Osi Efa’s eyes looked at the Alaafin’s beaded leather slippers. “Why?” Alaafin said, cutting into the Iwefa’s excuses.

The Iwefa whispered words into the space between the Alaafin’s slippers. “my mother had a dream about you; she has refused to tell it to anyone in full.” The Alaafin’s ears picked up only two words, Osun and dreams, and he didn’t bother to hear the rest of the words the Iwefa clothed in fear. The Alaafin knew enough without the silenced words that something unknown bothered Osun. He told the Iwefa to leave his presence and start preparations for the festival. Esu Oja would be celebrated this very night.

Osi Efa saw Osun after he left the Alaafin’s rooms. He had to tell his mother of the Alaafin’s anger, but she waved him aside and told him to let her be. She sat unmoved before her Ifa tray trying to see; she tried to understand the ifa verse that she read from her cowries. She’d repeated the verse all through the night into her room hazy from the oil lamps she burned overnight. When Abebi told Osun, the Alaafin summoned her to his rooms. She rose up without
dressing up, and the slave thought she stepped into a dream. Her mistress didn’t curse her, neither did she line her eyes with her special antimony. Osun stepped into the Alaafin’s iyewu and felt the heat radiating from the Alaafin’s body. She saw he didn’t try to control his anger. Why? she didn’t know, but she knew their husbands’ anger well. She dropped to the floor and rolled from one end of the room to the other and begged him to have mercy.

“Arabambi. Olufiran. Alasekeji Orisa. Onile,” she said. The Alaafin sat still. His eyes away her face; her praises didn’t not move him. “Do your duties woman and get out of my presence,” he said. That very night the necessary propitiations were made at the Esu shrine by the Alaafin; he didn’t have to send word too Osun to do her part. She waited by the shrine wall, and in the darkness of night while she waited she thought of her actions. She knew she did badly. That night the Ayaba and the other Aafin women offered their sacrifices at the Esu Oja shrine. In the morning Ona-Efa, as the head Iwefa led the women in a dance round the Akesan market, and prosperity and peace returned to the market, but many sorrows continued to flit about in Osun’s soul. She continued to see the torn butterfly in her dreams.

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The Market at Night

The world below is a market

The skies above are home

The main square outside the walls of the Aafin Oyo provided space for Akesan market. Oyo’s daily night market held in an open field with a lone tree in its middle. The barren expanse of land grew nothing, but a giant iroko tree. The buttress roots of the iroko grew above the earth, then it thinned into a straight trunk riddled with rusty nails. During the day, the field stood empty, except for the clusters of upside down fruit bats swaying gently as they hung high from the branches of the iroko tree. They twittered loudly that on some days passersby said that they heard laughter, screams, and cries; and wondered if there were people in the crown of the tree. Around the foot of the tree lay multi-coloured bat poop the result of the different fruits they had gorged on during the night browned in the shade of the iroko tree.

As the sun went down over the crown of the iroko, the bats unfurled their furry brown wings and flew away from their roost covering the orange lit sky over the field for a brief time. Their flight signaled the opening of the night market and traders from the six provinces of Oyo set out their wares on the ground in calabashes, gourds, pots, baskets, and a hum, a melding of voices rose from the people gathered. Night fell, and palm oil fueled lights flickered in the gentle breeze that blew through the market. The little flames enveloped the people and separated them from the outer darkness that surrounded them, creating a liminal world. In the night market, selling and buying under the cover of darkness were three kinds of people. The dead but not dead, who died before their allotted time and roamed the earth living out the remainders of their days. These men and women moved far away from their homes, hiding from those who knew them, and lived out a new life. The living also sold and bought in the night market. Both the dead
but not dead, and the living knew of each other’s existence, and they didn’t cross into each
other’s space or break established rules. They accepted each other’s existence as a fact of life,
but both groups also knew that they could only trade in the field for a while, that is, until the
night became thick and lamp wicks dulled. When the darkness of the night deepened, the living
returned to their huts, and the dead but not dead too. They both knew the time for the third group,
the owners of the field arrived, and the mothers became the life of the iroko tree.

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The market in full swing flowed around the iroko. Esu walked round the market unseen
by most, seen by those he appeared to or those with inner eyes. He pushed a woman’s lamp into
her lap. Its light burned a hole through her wrapper, and the hot oil scalded her legs. She went
home early complaining bitterly she would lose money because she had to stay away from
Akesan market until her burns healed. But she saved her husband from burning to death; she got
home just as fire nibbled on the thatch of their roof. Esu made a man bump into another man;
both men had shoved at each other, angry. They would meet again tomorrow morning and meet a
need in each other’s life nobody else could. No buyer stopped at a gourd seller’s, because of his
miserly libation to Esu, and Esu never forgot a slight. Esu caused a fight between two good
friends; they had to learn the value of their friendship the hard way. Esu also made a man stay
late in the market by making lots of customers buy his yams. If the man had gone home to his
wife, he would have fathered a son who would kill both of his parents in old age.

Esu enjoyed walking through markets. He felt closer to the divine here, all of him; his
immortal and mortal parts were at peace. The children of men were born into the world to buy
and sell in, and at the end of their lives they returned home to Olodumare their maker. And if
Olodumare willed they would return to the market below the heavens after choosing new fates.
Esu especially loved causing mischief in markets testing their fates. He repaid the children of men with what they sowed, sometimes in the same measure; more often he used his measure. And so Esu, Olodumare’s messenger corrected the balance of good and bad.

The crowd in the market dwindled and Esu walked out of the field behind a group of traders from Ikoyi. Beside Esu walked a man carrying a basket filled with stolen onions. Esu smiled at the gleam in the man’s eyes; he would to teach him a big lesson that will forever be remembered by his descendants. They will start a proverb and it will record what he, Esu, would do. The man came from the Awodi compound, a compound well known for the greed that passed from father to son. The man walked into his house dropped the basket of onions beside his mat and tried to sleep, but he couldn’t close his eyes, an unending stream of tears seeped out.

* 

At the darkest time of night, each trader packed their wares and swept their spot, by this way the traders cleaned the market. When the field emptied of people, black birds began to fly across the face of the full moon and gathered in the crown of the iroko tree in the middle of the market. They cawed loudly flapping their wings. A grey bird, the chief mother-bird arrived later and perched on her branch. The other birds dropped to the ground and waited. They cawed louder, and more birds came. When the assembly became complete, the birds became women, and the chief mother-bird joined them on the ground. One of the strongest mother councils in the Oyo kingdom met daily in the iroko tree in the middle of the Akesan market. The Alaafin dined and wined with the head and her deputies regularly. They were powers that he courted and pacified for the peace of the kingdom and its markets. Though, he could hear their noise from his quarters in the Aafin Oyo at night, he could nothing about them. The council of mother-birds dispensed cosmic justice as they saw fit, they decided wrong and right. They favoured the
children of men without cause, or if they chose they stayed angry with a person and their descendants for all eternity, rejecting, and relishing their rejection of all entreaties. They were the jealous birds who avenged with the ferociousness of a mother and they smothered those they protected under their wings.

Iya-Eleye, chief mother-bird welcomed her sister and daughter birds and the council went into the first issue for the day. “I’m still undecided about this Alaafin. What do you think of Sango?” Iya-Eleye said.

“He is a handsome one.”
“His wives are beautiful.”
“His eyes are always up. He is a proud one.”
“He is a powerful.”
“He has a temper.”
“He has pain, hidden deep in his heart.”
“You have all spoken well. He is a being that we don’t know fully but know only in parts. Observe him.”

“Ah, ah, we will mother,” the council said.

“I must also bring to your notice that Esu is in Oyo, someone offered him his taboo. This offering brought Esu to Oyo; the messenger has a message to deliver. And as we know he interprets messages as he pleases.”

“Aah, aah, he always delivers judgment in his own ways,” the council said.

* 

The cries of the birds filled the field. Osun knew like the people of Oyo knew that a council met under the iroko tree. She came for help, to the breasted mother-birds who chose to
hear the cries of man’s children, if they wanted. Osun knelt before the massive iroko tree, and laid her hands on its scaly grey trunk. She began to sing their oriki, maybe singing their praise will make them grant her request:

My Mother Osoronga
My Mother you know my voice
Let me carry a child in my womb
Let me suckle a child, even for a day
Elegant bird that eats in full view of the town
Prominent bird that sits on beaded crowns
Famous bird that eats in a cleared farm
Birds who make noises in the dead of night

Six is the number of their powers
Their tongue carries power to speak into existence
Ase their power is in their wombs
The most potent one, they keep deep inside
In between the moist innermost layers of flesh
Birds of the night that fly gracefully
You know my voice
My Mother Osoronga
My Mothers count in two
They tally their accounts in blood
The screeching owl strikes terror in the faint of heart
Their vulture is death visiting, waiting to prey on the dead
You do not hide under the cover of darkness; the world knows where you meet
In the day the mothers are not hidden, three cowries are tied around their left ankles
Let me carry a child in my womb
Let me suckle a child, even for a day
Birds of the night that fly gracefully
You know my voice

The mothers allowed her to talk, but they didn’t show themselves to her. The chief mother-bird gave the other birds leave to speak. One bird reported on a happy couple who lived near her house, “Husband and wife are so happy,” she said, “All they do is laugh and sing and disturb my afternoon sleep.”

“Aah, aah,” the council answered, “don’t they know you were busy all night doing good?”

The council decided the couple really needed some sadness in their lives. They decided that their sister-bird’s needed afternoon sleep would now be disturbed by tears.

“Tears are good,” the sister-bird said, “I prefer tears. I can sleep through tears.”

The chief mother-bird, asked for the name of the woman and breathed the name into a gourd, she gave it to one of the younger birds to hang it on a nail near the topmost branch of the iroko tree. ‘Ten years.” the mother bird said, “we tie the mouth of the woman’s womb today. The gourd would collect her menstrual blood and tears. After ten years, it would fall to the ground and she will be free.”
The other birds nodded. An older bird said, “but we shouldn’t be one sided in delivering judgment, we can borrow the man’s penis for our use.” The chief mother-bird nodded, “We will give it back after ten years too.” the mother bird said.

The other birds agreed, “Of what use is his penis if he’s wife’s womb has been tied.” Another bird, the oldest one, reported an incident to the council, “you know the girl that helps me with my daily chores, Amope?”

“Yes,” the council answered, “we know Amope daughter of Ajiwun.”

“Well, I gave Amope an orange, but her mother didn’t let her eat it. She told her daughter to continue to help me but not to accept any food from me. When the girl asked why, her mother said it was the right thing to do. But do you know what?”

“What?” the council said.

“When mother and child rounded the corner, I heard the mother tell the daughter I am an old woman who refused to die.”

“Aah, aah,” the council shouted, “she said that? Her mouth could form those words?”

“Yes, I heard it with my own ears. Ajiwun ridiculed me because I don’t have a child of my own.”

“Aah, aah, she has a big mouth. We will teach her how to use it well. Her words will be become grunts, and will remain in her insides, rotting.”

“Amope then called me old woman with the one protruding tooth.”

“Aah, aah,” the council screamed, “you have suffered this week.”

“Avenge me my sisters,” the oldest bird said.

“We will oldest bird, we will.”

Another bird said, “I saw a disturbing scene, a man beating his pregnant wife. This isn’t the
first time he did that but this time he poked one of her eyes out of its sockets.”

“Aah, aah,” the council said, “aah aah that’s too much. We must avenge her eye but what would she give us in return, we do not do charity?”

“On her behalf I have pledged the baby in her womb. I will give the baby a bird as soon as it is born.”

“We will poke out two of his eyes and make him lame in one arm and leg. Which do you prefer sister bird?” said the chief mother-bird.

“His right arm and left leg,” she said.

“It is done,” the chief mother-bird said.

The youngest bird, a seven-year-old girl, took the floor. “Seniors, you know I’m the youngest. People never think of me as one of you, and don’t respect me.”

“If only they know that you are mighty,” the council said.

“I asked the woman that sells by the three roads junction for akara fried in palm oil.”

“Our favourite,” the council laughed, “did she give you some?”

“No, she didn’t. She told me to take my smelly mouth out of her sight.”

“Aah aah, she said that?”

“She did seniors.”

“These children of men are wicked. After all they did to us in the beginning? They still do not respect our birds. What do you want us to do, youngest bird?” the council said.

“A very simple request, my seniors, a sore on her cheek that will heal when my anger dissolves.”

The council laughed, “But we know our anger may never dissolve. Why her cheek, youngest bird?”
“It’s close to her foul mouth and it is a part that is very visible.”

*

All night long, Osun sang the mothers’ oriki until her voice became hoarse. The mothers ignored her. When darkness thinned, the women returned to their huts as they had come, as black birds flying through the skies. The iroko quietened and Osun knew the mothers had ended their meeting. Before the sun took its place in the heavens, the bats returned to take up their space in the crown of the iroko tree. The mother-birds were back in their huts and emptiness returned to the field.

*
Olu Ode and Gbonka

Olu Ode, the chief of Oyo hunters rose through the ranks of the clan of hunters by acts of bravery and mischief. Born to a brave hunter in the Odeperin Compound of Oyo Metropolis; he became one. His father and his fathers before him also farmed the earth when they were not hunting. Olu Ode, the boy, went out alone hunting in the savannahs of the elephants and lions. His playmates said he boasted he would kill an elephant alone at eight, and he left his family compound early one morning before anyone could stop him. Gone for months, and not found by his uncles who looked for him, the family forgot him. His mother believed otherwise, she never stopped saying his name. She woke up early in the morning and whispered his name in the direction of the rising sun, “sun remind my son of his name. Remind him he is the hawk.” Olu Ode returned to her two years later dragging the head of an elephant behind him. He joined the corps of hunters that also doubled as warriors as early as he could. He ran away to Ikoyi. He hated faming, the back-breaking job of making yam heaps as high as his waist. He became the chief of the hunters after, he killed a buffalo, one that had eluded many hunters. He defended Ikoyi from a group of raiding Tapa, and Onikoyi made him chief of warriors of his detachment. But he stayed as the chief of hunters because he hunted down enemies as a hunter does.

Oluode wore a small round cap, an ojijiko, always. It had a tail made up of the red tail feathers of a parrot, and it dangled to his waist. The cap channeled the evil spirits into his being. He could smile, even when angry and many who didn’t know him thought they had been forgiven. Olu Ode never forgets to repay his enemies. His omo-ode knew he had no patience, but he tolerated mischievousness if it helped his cause. One of the youngsters stole a strong sword from an enemy and the boy pretended to be a woman and stole into the warrior’s iyewu. Olu Ode made the boy a captain. He didn’t allow for mistakes; one omo-ode overboiled a poultice once, and Olu--Ode commanded that one of the boy’s fingers be burned in fire.
Olu Ode’s fame as an archer spread all over Oyo, and even the expert archers of Tapa knew of his skills. He once hit a man far away from him and he had to make the arrow bend slightly around a forest path to hit his target. He turned his back on words when the tired him. He complained that they drained his very essence, and he married a dumb woman because he loved her silence.

The bold male rat that stands before a cat
The elephant that shakes the forest
He stumbled on Kisi and flattened it
As he got up
The forest shrunk before him
He rumbles by forests and plains
He fought Kila and brought down his club on the town
Not stopping until rivers overflowed with tears of those that mourned
He cut paths through virgin forests
And brought riches back to Oyo
He set fire to farms of dissidents
And fought the large nosed king at Pate
He picked his teeth with an elephant’s tusk
After a meal of a mountains
He rested at Oke-Oyo
And the people fled
Before the spirit in their midst
Gbonka, a grandson of an Eso walked conscious of this; he walked stepping into footprints of his ancestors marked in the earth. He came from a lineage of warriors; a sneer hung not far from his upper lip. A short man who moved his head from side to side like a lizard. His asiso, a patch of hair, the only hair he allowed to grow on his body covered the 201 incisions made on his scalp. These repelled evils from his inner head. The mothers say Gbonka had a full set of teeth when his mother pushed him out of her; he tried to kill his mother, he stayed in her womb for thirteen months. Gbonka became an apprentice to the Babalawo at Fesu there he learned of the healing power of plants and their roots, and the many types of death they could bring. He also learned to be patient to the ways of the Orisa. Gbonka owned many clothes, and he wore them over his bloodied war clothes. He also rode on the tallest of horses, taller than the Alaafin’s.

Warrior, son of an Eso

Dark beauty that kills

On the battlefield

The husband of Banke, mighty with his sword

The short man that sneaks on his enemies

With drums and dance

He impales the heads of enemies at Ajaka hill

They sing a song at Oyo

Of the elusive one, the father of many sons

They beat their drums at Igbeti

Of the short man that wars

Of the wars that he brings
Of he who fights like a demon of the crags

Both men met at the war of Kajola, during the reign of Alaafin Ajaka, Sango’s brother. In the war camp, they slept beside each other waiting the start of battles. They talked of the riches that waited for them, and the glory too. In the mornings, they went about their tasks, scavenging food, hunting or rebuilding of the sleeping quarters, but they returned to each other. Usually with news from different parts of the camp. Of the wife of the war general that cooked and sang her husband’s praise. Of the first battle that never came; a series of meeting stopped the war. For two weeks, they watched war generals talk with the other side, and a treaty agreed on. “Alaafin with good insides, Gbonka said. Olu-Ode said, an Alaafin without blood on his hands.” The two disgruntled warriors returned to Oyo, as friends.

*

Oba sent a slave to the warlords with two gourds of palm wine and savory bush meat; she knew both men talked under the tree that leaned on Olu Ode’s at sundown every five days, “tell them that Oba sends her regards, not the Alaafin. She wishes that good winds blow over you.” When the slave left, Olu Ode smiled but his kept his thoughts to himself. Gbonka looked up and down, and told himself, “more would come of this gift.” Both men knew frugal Oba never gave a gift except to open a door.

*
The Battle of Penises

Sango commanded Basorun Oyo to go to war, “scrape off the shame that sticks to our pride, even if you have to war against our relatives.” The Basorun met with his under-chiefs Olu Ode and Gbonka and sat down to talk war. Basorun said, “the Alaafin wants the Olowu alive because of the blood they share.” Both men promised they would bring the Olowu to Oyo bound, but knew they would do otherwise. Descendant of Oduduwa or not, the Olowu had made Oyo into his outhouse, and he believed wrong if he thought that he could defecate turds of taunts on its Alaafin as he pleased. The warlords said, “we would help the Alaafin make the right decision. The one he should have made in the first place.”

Oyo troops moved out through its southern easternmost border. They passed through Odan gates, over 10,000 thousand men had converged on the Oyo capital ready to battle. Oyo’s warlords each raised a contingent from his quarters, his family, servants and slaves. Five young scout-hunters had left Oyo ten days ago for Owu to monitor any Owu activity. They brought back a report to the war council that comprised of the Oyo Mesi, the chief Eso, and many warlords. The scouts said they walked around Owu for seven days and they saw no signs of preparation for war, the Oja Oba market remained open, and people went about their normal duties. They tried to get into the Owu gate but only one scout did. He said he didn’t see anything that told him Owu prepared for war. The five decided there was nothing to see and decided to come back to Oyo with this news. On their way back to Oyo, they stopped to sleep at five-road junction, as they had on the way to Owu. In the morning, they were about to climb down from their hideout in a tree when they sensed that something could be wrong, a silent forest surrounded them. They knew it paid homage to a force they couldn’t see. They stayed hidden, and they saw two Owu scouts slither past them. They didn’t wait long before Owu troops tramped through the forest. A dreadful sight. The troops poured out of the forest all through the
day. They said the Owu cut a path through the forest the size of the Adan hills. The horde pressed down tall grasses, shrubs, and tree saplings that stood in their way. The scouts said that the fierceness of the Owu silenced the forest as they moved through. They said that the forest animals and even the spirits were quiet, terrified by the troops that passed through their domain.

The vanguard of the Oyo troop, the omo-ogun marched out with the vigour and the strength of the young towards the open flat lands of the savannah that the Oyo knew well and owned. The Oyo cavalry followed, in a column of horses five abreast, the riders carried spears, bows and arrows strapped on their backs, tiny brass bells tingled on the bridles of the horses, the colour of cloth woven into their bridles spoke of their units. The cavalry chief, Sarumi rode behind them. Foot soldiers crammed into the lane, they came in the after the cavalry. In the rear, on horses were Ayaba Oba, Alaafin Sango, Ayaba Òyá, the warlords and their deputies, surrounded by the Eso.

The blacksmiths in the six Oyo provinces made arrows, double edged machetes, the curved machete, swords, and spears. The war stockpile rose in smithies and the apprentices poured them into store houses, built for the purpose alone. The heads of spears, the flats of machetes and swords were fitted with wooden handles and taken to these provincial stores. Ogundana, the chief blacksmith recorded their number daily as they increased. Oyo children collected the seeds of a fruit called the eyes-of-death in large vats, its seeds aren’t poisonous. Their mothers pressed a fermented juice that killed anything it touched, and if it dropped on a patch of ground it will be barren for a generation.

The Oyo travelled south, away from the savannah, and made their way into the green tangle of trees. They made camp at the edge of the rain forest. The cavalry settled on the outer rim of the camp in the foot soldiers in the middle. The war tent stood in the very middle of the
camp. They built with a palm tree fronds and tree trunks. Biri stood behind the Alaafin, and the Ayaba Osun and Oba sat by his sides. Osun stayed back in Aafin Oyo. Omiran taller than most men couldn’t fit in the tent; he stayed by the door. Biri and Omiran informed the Alaafin of the movement of the Owu troops, very different from the ones Olu Ode and Gbonka gave the Alaafin. But the chief of the Eso and his seventy brought reports that corroborated Biri and Omiran.

“We need to draw them out of their stronghold.” Biri said. Sango nodded. “Out of Owu and its forests” Biri said.

“Do not underestimate the Owu, they are skilled warriors.” Òyá said

“We won’t, we want to take away their advantage.” Omiran said.

“Forest, plains, wherever we fight this battle, remember they are our kin,” Sango said.

The chiefs advised that Oyo attack head-on, but Sango thought the plan wasn’t good enough. He decided to send troops to break down the unrelenting Owu charge into bits. He would attack the main splinter from the west because he knew towns there would not aid the Olowu in case he was required to retreat. Alaafin knew his war generals didn’t accord the Owu troops their due. They had looked down on them, but Sango remembered their gallantry when he attacked the garrison where they held his brother. They had fought like forest demons that couldn’t be killed; he had routed them by throwing thunder stones into their midst. He knew the Owu soldiers were more disciplined than the Oyo. He had asked his Uncle, Elenpe, Etsu of the Tapa for help. Elempe tired of Owu dominance and eager to throw the yoke off his neck had agreed to be the secret Alaafin Sango kept from his warlords. Alaafin Sango had two thousand Tapa warriors led by two of the Etsu’s chief bodyguards hide in the caves of Mejiro. They were well versed in the art of fire breathing and fire archery the Tapa had perfected both for
generations. Their cavalry carried swords, spears, and big leather shields, but they could fight best in fields of the savannah like their homes. The Oyo trapped a contingent the Owu warriors between two forested hills to the east of Oyo. A grave mistake, the Owu once again in their elements hacked down the Oyo foot soldiers. The Oyo cavalry couldn’t do much on the steep forested slopes of hills; the horses slipped felling their riders.

The Oyo infantry carried the agedengbe, the curved tip of the machete hit stomachs and pulled out innards as it exited bodies. The Owu’s epe, a well-known curse to their enemies, a short machete with which the Owu excelled in close combat. They grinned as they mowed down terrified enemies with the epe. In the grassy plains, Owu valour didn’t shine against the cavalry of Oyo, they allowed for too much space that didn’t allow for face-to-face combat. The horses outran Owu and Oyo archers rained down arrows on them from all sides. By the evening of the first day the earth of the battlefields soaked with the blood of the dead had corpses piled up on it. Oba decided not to join the battle on the second day. She and some women tended to the wounded men but, they could only do little. The mangled bodies carried to them were already dead. Òyá didn’t join the women, she stayed by her husband’s side fighting on his right.

Both armies rallied at the beginning of the second day and charged again and again at each other, both sides retreating and pursuing in turns. War drums thundered rallying and taunting each side and exaggerated the deeds of dead and living warriors. On the evening of the second day, both the Alaafin and the Olowu met at the top of a hill that overlooked the battlefield below for a talk. The wind blew hard at delegates from both sides, and they raised their voices to be heard. It sounded they shouted at each other. The Alaafin said “Owu must forget about tributes from Tapa and Oyo.”

“Tapa too?” Olowu said.
“Oyo and Tapa,” Sango said.

“Leprous Tapa is in alliance with disrespectful Oyo,” Olowu said.

The talks failed; the Olowu and his group walked away from the hill, but not before he said he would bring Oyo to heel. “I will not remove my foot from Oyo’s neck, until I break its back. Sango watched the battle from a vantage point, on the third day of the battle. He saw little difference between the warriors: their clothes were the same, their cries of pain were in a language spoken and understood by both sides, although in Owu and Oyo dialects. He heard the groans from both sides and grieved as iron shaped into swords, knives, spears, barbed arrowheads cut flesh. The only distinction between the warriors were the marks of their faces, same but for a little difference, four long horizontal swipes on the checks of the Oyo, between the ear the nose, while the Own had three horizontal swipes on their checks, between the ear and the nose. Both Oyo and Owu had three vertical stripes on top the horizontal ones.

The more disciplined Owu warriors were stronger, even if they not win the war. Alaafin Sango knew Owu would not turn their backs to war; they would not return to Owu unless in victory. They will keep hacking at Oyo flesh. The Owu succeeded in dividing the Oyo troop in half; one-half scattered and a half of that one-half ran to Oyo. The other half tried to stand their ground, as wave after wave of Owu beat them down. The Owu sought out the Oyo hiding behind the wall of the hills. They knew the forested hills better than the Oyo and they ambushed the Oyo.

Sango snarled as he threw his machete at an Owu warrior knocking him off his horse, this battle had drawn out long enough. He spat out his distaste for it. He signaled the war drummer to summon the Tapa warriors out of Mejiro. The contingent of Tapa warriors was led by the Dokoyiringi and a lesser ranked warrior, the Sokyara. Both men separated from their men,
dismounted their horses, and bowed to the Alaafin before leading their warriors away. “Kai Dakari,” the Sokyara cried, and the archers let flaming arrows fly into the Owu enclave. They were arrows guided by the winds directed by Oya, and they sought out the Owu even as they retreated and took refuge by the side of a cliff. The remnants of the retreating Owu ran into the Tapa cavalry. “Kai Dokoyiringi,” the Dokoyiringi cried. And the Tapa horsemen clothed in short tunics and chain mail ran through the hind parts Owu troops catching them unawares. They dispersed them further into smaller bits. The Tapa archers let flaming arrows fly into the battle field. They set ablaze dry grasses and started a fire that encircled more Owu than Oyo.

The acrid smell of human flesh and hair burning settled on the leaves of trees and filled the forest. The fires didn’t tell apart which warrior was Owu or Oyo. The fire burned both and they writhed in the flames, Sango turned away from the sight before him. Oya saw his face and channeled down winds and rain in torrents putting off the fire burning bodies. The rain washed away the blood of both Owu and Oyo and carried it into the Epapo River turning it red.

Sango stood in the rain, drenched. He shouted his anger to the skies and peels of lightning lit up dark clouds. He shouted again, and rolls of thunder joined with his voice and both charged the sky over the battlefield. He fell, exhausted. Oyo and Owu warriors took cover in the caves of the hills and glared at each other from different sides. When the torrent stopped, the Oyo warlords rounded up the Owu stragglers and put them in chains. Oba, Sango and Òyá returned to Oyo with the Eso and left the dismantling of the camp to his war chiefs. Olu Ode and Gbonkan were ashamed and angry the Tapa saved the day. They looked at the mangled bodies of Owu warriors in the field and decided to do to their kin what the Owu did to their enemies. “Dead Owu are not our brothers,” Olu Ode said, “we will take their penises back to Oyo.”

Olu Ode grinned at Gbonka and nodded his agreement to the plan. They commanded Oyo
warriors to defile the bodies of their kin. For two days, they cut open the front of Owu trousers
and heaped up penises in baskets. Oyo troops came back to the Aafin, days after they should
have. News of what had happened on the battleground had reached Oyo before their arrival, but
the Alaafin said he wouldn’t believe it until he saw with own eyes. When the Ilari piled baskets
of rotting penises into the Aganju, and the stench of rotting flesh entered the innermost rooms in
the Aafin. Alaafin Sango went to see the baskets for himself. He laughed and laughed and
laughed as he walked about the Aganju.

Olu Ode and Gbonka, who were nervous laughed too. They were happy the Alaafin
found it funny. But they were mistaken, Sango seethed with rage. Oya ran out of her quarters
when she heard that roar, she knew it well. It signaled a rolling rage that wouldn’t be quenched
for days. Oya instructed Afefe, to stay close by. She may need to blow out any fire that may
come out of his mouth. Oya knelt by the Alaafin’s side, and sang his praises to calm him down.

She signaled to the now frightened warlords to empty out the Aafin courtyard of the
penises and leave. Gbonka and Olu Ode scrambled out of the presence of the Alaafin leaving the
Ilari to do cleaning. The Alaafin watched them slither away. He had stopped laughing. He stood
still, listening intently to Òyá’s praises.

*
Ibariba
To the North of Oyo and Ife
South of the bend of the greater river
West of the greater river

Sango sat in the verandah of the kobi, in the shadow of one of the tree pillars that held up a section of the low hanging gabled thatched roof. Lost in the shadow of the pillars that flitted across his face, his mind took him to the banks of the Greater River, and he looked upstream towards the Ibariba crossing at Illo. He breathed in deep of the wetness of the restless waters. He frowned as he remembered the news two Ilari had whispered in his ears. They told him that the Bariba had dammed the crossing of the greater River at Illo. Alaafin Sango knew what this meant. Less traders at Oyo markets; the Ibariba played with the tail of a python to send such a costly message. Sango grunted, and Biri who reclined on a wall next to Sango in a shadow moved into the light of the moon, “call me the Ologbo,” the Alaafin said.

Biri darted into the shadows of the night and went to the Ologbo family compound. He returned with the Ologbo of the Alusekere, one of the two families of Arokin. The old man walked before the Alaafin leaning on the shoulder of one his grandsons. They prostrated before Sango’s beaded leather slipper. He acknowledged their presence with a flick of his right hand.

“Tell me of the Bariba, their stink wafts to my Aafin from the greater River.”

The Ologbo cleared his throat and he taped into the energy and the many histories kept alive in the minds and spirits of his fathers. “May the Alaafin live long,” he said before he sat on a mat to the left side of Sango. His grandson knelt beside him and brought out a sekere and the beaded net of the round bodied gourd moved. The boy held the gourd in his palms and struck the gourd with the beads. It made a soothing rhythm that followed the timbre of the Ologbo’s voice.
“Three Wassangari brothers journeyed from their home in a faraway place; they fled from the muslim armies from the Upper Nile River valley. They travelled northwesterly until they got to the shores of the greater river. They crossed the river and settled on its eastern shore in Bussa, and from there they moved to Nikki and Ilo. The brothers and their descendants conquered many peoples: The Mande and Kamberi that came before them to the rocky lands of the Ibariba; the Baatonu of the Atacora mountains and the Ibariba Plateau, and the remnants of the Mahi of the inland plateau and Holli of the river delta; they also subdued the Mokole that migrated from Oyo and Ife. The Mande could trace their origins back to the Sonnike and Malinke far east of the greater river; the Kamberi kept to themselves in the hard to reach enclaves they chose to live. The Wassangari brothers intermarried with the daughters of the earth priests of the Baatonu. The earth priests were the former rulers of the Ibariba land, and they settled in the Atacora mountains before spreading to the plains and the shores of the Greater River.”

Sango sat up and interrupted the Ologbo’s recitation, “tell me more about the Ibariba land before the Wassangari arrived.” “As you wish, my king,” the Ologbo continued, “Ibariba land had been closed to outsiders until the new rulers of the land, the Wassangari, arrived with their warriors and cavalry, and they opened the borders of the land to all. We know because some Oyo and Ife who moved to Ibariba spoke of this change. The previous rulers of Baatonu hamlets and villages, the lords of the earth, believed that less contact meant no space for spies, or an opening for an army to invade them. But generations of Wangari caravanners had crisscrossed the Ibariba lands long before the Wassangari sons of Kisra arrived. The Baatonu lords of the earth had allowed the Wangari to do business in their market towns. These long-distance Muslim traders drove their caravans through the many trade routes that passed through Ibariba. The
Wangari lived in segregated quarters, as wealthy vassals to the lords who ruled and allowed the Wangari caravans to pull wealth across the west-east and north-west routes; camels, horses and men carried kola nuts, gold and salt. The Wasaangari allowed for more contact with the other nations, and they let the Wangari be. The Wassangari lived among the conquered peoples, and allowed the lords of the earth, who morphed into earth priests to retain religious power. A solution that stopped the lords of the earth from taking their lives for shame of their defeat. But the assimilated Ibariba brought with them connections and sometimes allegiances to their places of origin.”

Sango yawned, “Their major towns?”

The Ologbo touched the arm of his grandson, and the beads of the sekere rested. Silence moved across the Aganju courtyard, and the three pairs of ears straining to listen from shadows relaxed a bit. The Ologbo answered the Alaafin, “three main towns, founded by the three sons of Kisra. Nikki in the midlands prospered and acquired more land and became the most powerful politically of the three. Bussa lay in the very middle of the land; it claimed firstborn status and bullied the other brothers. It tightly held on to traditions and customs, in the hard earth of Bussa. Nikki boasted it could not only trace its roots back to Kisra, the father of the three brothers, but farther back to the land he came from. The other two towns couldn’t care less. Illo lay in the north of Ibariba land, by the western bank of the greater river, a major stop on trading routes to lands to the west, east, north and south of Ibariba.

“You can leave now baba,” Biri said, they could all hear Sango’s snores. The old man and his grandson greeted the sleeping Alaafin, before they slowly walked into the empty Aganju square. It took them awhile to walk across it and through the Aafin’s main gates into the dead open space of Akesan market.
Sango sat up, and Biri crouched by his feet, “what do you know about the Ibariba you
spent three months there.” Biri nodded, “Ibariba country lay south of bend the greater river; its
boundaries are to the northeast of the River Alibori, River Moshi to the south and as far as the
Atakora mountains to the west. It spreads over an arid plateau, but it attracts a diverse people
because of its location, and major caravan routes stopped in Ibariba. The nomadic Bororo move
with the dry and rainy seasons, looking for pasture and waters for their white humped Zebu
cattle. Gungawa live west of the greater river and are known for their medical skills they are
beset by travelers seeking cures to mysterious illnesses. Laru, Shangawa and Lopawa are riverain
people who live near the bend of the greater river grow onions, sweet potatoes and rice. Kambari
lived in remote areas of Ibariba, unconcerned about anything outside their lands, and their
neighbours leave them alone. The Ibariba reside in round huts built in tall grasses and sparse
trees of the savannah. Its highly permeable sandstone soils can’t retain the four months of yearly
rains. The flood waters drain away leaving behind dry brush and sand. Most of Ibariba is without
water except near its southern boundary with our relations to the east. There, mighty trees of the
rainforest grow along the banks of four major rivers, Mekrou, Alibori, Sota and Oli, that poured
into the Greater River. Hunters roamed the meager forests and the savannahs of Ibariba with
their barkless Basenji dogs hunting elephants, lions, antelopes, and rabbits. The loyalties of its
many indigenes to the kings at Bussa, Nikki, and Illo are as the rains that visit the plateau during
the eight-month dry season, fickle.”

“Their kings are the fattened up in united palaces?” Sango said.

“It is a bit complicated. Fraternal successions are the norm on the thrones of Nikki,
Bussa and Illo. Selected princes ascend the thrones in old age and ruled for a handful of years,
but political power devolves among the relatives of the king who kept horse needed to fight the
many wars of the grasslands. Divine-like and protected by rituals and traditions, the kings at Nikki, Bussa, and Illo are independent of each other, and only came together to fight invaders or keep the caravan’s routes open. A king’s murder by the ever present ambitious brood of brothers and cousins would bring many woes to community, so while alive he was safe. Competing princes bide time, waited for the death of the king before beginning another round of the power grabbing frenzy.”

“And wars and warriors?”

“Bussa, Illo and Nikki harnesses its population, sparse when compared to that of their neighbours; they bring down attacks before it reached their lands. In the eight-month dry season, Ibariba lays susceptible to attacks and its three kings came together to fight their enemies. The Ibariba are ferocious fighters who defend themselves on horses armed with spears, poison tipped darts, and arrows. They are surrounded by strong kingdoms; Oyo to the East, the Ashanti, Sonnaike and Songhai to the west, to the south the Dahomian port of Ajase. Kenu, a hard to reach vassal of Nikki is the strong south buffer between us and port town of Ajase. Kenu takes this role seriously and effectively kept wars from reaching Nikki, from reaching Ibariba lands. But Kenu had a strong tie that leads back to Oyo and they honour the tie.”

“What is common to this horde?”

Biri paused until Sango looked at him, “one thing holds them together, they prefer death over shame.”

Sango reclined into the shadows and scowled; he knew Oyo and the Bariba would meet on the banks of the greater River and it wouldn’t not be a friendly one. On that day the waters of the greater river will flow reddened by the blood of men. The three pairs of ears returned to the shadows, but Biri saw them and kept this to himself.
The Wives of the Alaafin

Oba, the first Ayaba knew her place as the least favourite of the Alaafin and she ruled the women courts of the Aafin from a heart filled with hatred and jealousy and a calculating head. She could rule Oyo if allowed; she had the skills no one could question her business skills. Their husband knew this, and he watched her closely and guarded Oyo from her. Their husband also knew that her love for him, which she saw as a weakness, betrayed her emotions. She knew this too and she hated it. Oba fought from their husband’s left in battles and she ran his war camps. The reflection of her polished brass shield assured him on battlefields. Oba’s dark influence fueled by her anger spread beyond her Kaa and her courts. It moved over anyone in its paths in waves of searing air. Oba didn’t keep words in her mouth; she allowed them to tumble out of her, steaming hot, not caring where they landed or who they hurt. Oba came from a lineage of wealthy kola nut merchants. An only child that knew that cowries made others do her bidding. She knew cowries to be a strong spirit that could own people. Oba commanded bags of it and did as she pleased. Her grandmother had taught her that bags of cowries had power. She expected and got everyone’s attention; she did nothing to get it. On happy days, Oba’s face reflected the early sun glittering through dew hanging from leaves. On bad days, her face stank with disdain like the waters of the stagnant Oluwe pond when the rains were still far away. Oba’s skin glowed blue black like the seed of an ackee fruit; sweet like the ackee fruit but deadly if not treated with care. Oba told anyone who cared to listen that Obatala had taken his time to create her. He didn’t imbibe palm wine when he fashioned her from the earth.

Osun’s permanent facemask shifted with her moods. It never reflected what she really felt, hidden deep inside her many layers and rarely seen. She could be sweet as cold water in an earthen pot or a raging flood or as wily as a tortoise. She never forgot a wrong, retribution was one of her names, and deception and loyalty and cunning. Her grandmother called her
Solagbade. She knew Osun would use the wealth of her beauty to get herself a crown. Osun saw the hidden in her dreams, in the same way she could peer into the depths of her dye pots and create unique adire from plain cotton cloth. She changed her clothes many times a day; she made sure the Aafin saw each change. She patronized merchants as far away as the greater river. Ejigba, segi and coral beads, she possessed in hundreds. Camwood and antimony and white powder she lavished on her face until it glistened. Her skin, she lathered in coconut oil, her hair she oiled with shea butter and adorned with sets of coral beaded combs. She owned a thousand aso oke wrappers and decorated her courts with parrot feathers. She sang when she cooked soups, pounding yam in her brass mortar for Sango, or in the bedroom pleasing him as only she could. When Osun walked, she delighted every eye that looked on her form. Her body titillated the senses; her hips and firm buttocks spoke of what they would do to a man. She loved the jangle of rows and rows of brass bangles on her arms. She wove cowries into her thick and lush hair. Her skin glowed as dark as polished camwood. She wore rows of stringed tiny white glass beads around her waist. Her breasts were firm and high; she had never suckled a child. And the lack of this joy shrunk her heart into pumice. A spiteful woman, she trusted no one. Osun didn’t allow people around her to be happy; people hid their happiness from her. She could smell happiness and sucked it out of people

Ôyá, the last Ayaba, roamed the forests of Oyo and Tapa as a beautiful water buffalo before their husband tracked her down in the forest. He had silently followed behind her for days, but he couldn’t shoot at it. He had followed her for days watching its trim red-brown body as it roared in the deep of the forest. Her shout boasted of her strength, and it reverberated through the forest. He watched her pluck tender shoots off the forest floor, chewing slowly. She knew someone watched her but didn’t see anyone. She became jittery and joined a herd; she ate,
drank, chewed the cud and dozed. She left the herd and trotted deep into the forest into a part where their husband had never been to. She stopped by a swamp and romped about in the slushy mud, sighing in content, blowing steam through her nostrils. She stomped out of the mud, her coat covered in mud and walked to a rock cleft. Behind a waterfall, in the cleft created by sprays of water, she took off her buffalo skin and became a woman. She raised her hands high above her head, closed her eyes and stretched her naked lithe body in the light of the moon. The moon bounced off her fair skin, as she ran into the pool, and their husband decided he would possess the buffalo-woman.

The next day, he watched her put on her buffalo skin and he followed her to a market. Her human form sold vegetables. He watched her all day, then he followed her back to her into the forest. He climbed up on a tree and watched her settle behind the waterfall to sleep. Their husband didn’t sleep. He climbed down the tree and stole her skin. He rolled it up and put it in his cowskin bag. He climbed back up the tree and waited for her to come out of the cave at dawn.

In the morning, Òyá looked for her skin but didn’t find it. She had kept it under a rock, the same rock she kept it under always. Devastated, she tried to kill herself. Their husband jumped down from the tree and showed her the skin. She begged him and tried to get in back but couldn’t. He told her to be his wife, he would keep her skin and he would never tell anyone her secret. Her eyes were on her skin as she agreed to be his wife. Their husband knew the day she held the buffalo skin in her hand would be the last day he would see her. She walked quietly back with their husband to Oyo. Her servant Afefe walked behind her mistress in anger pulling down trees in her wake.

Nobody in the Aafin knew her people. She didn’t come to them with bundles of clothes. She came only with the clothes on her back and her servant. Their husband didn’t send out a
delegation to pay her bride price. He plucked her out from somewhere, brought her into the Aafin like a slave captured in war, and the other two Ayaba looked down on her. They called her “the one without family” to her face. They also called her a concubine, since their husband didn’t pay her bride price. Òyá’s was the earth alive, her soul vibrant, and anything she touched flourished. Her red-brown skin shone and rippled like the skin of a water buffalo. She fought by their husband’s right in war and carried his bronze shield. She had command of the winds and tore down whatever she chose. She walked like the princess of the forest, and the elements bowed when her feet touched the earth.
Bayanni--Babayanmi
The one chosen
She wears a caul
Her crown of dreadlocks
She wears a crown of cowries
The little king of Seele

She came out of her mother’s womb with a caul on her head. Three days after, it came off and her mother found out that her baby had tangled locks. The ifa oracle told her mother not to cut off this sign of greatness; her baby girl had chosen a head that grew dreadlocks. The baby’s parents were servants in the palace in the Tapa palace in Jebba; her mother, a childhood friend of Sango’s mother. When the baby’s parents died in the year measles visited Tapa, Sango’s mother had suckled the baby and claimed her as her second child. The child grew up as Sango’s sister, Tapa princess, adopted by the king his uncle.

Sango took Bayanni to his house, when he left Tapa for Koso, and she devoted herself to keeping his house. Sango sampled women the same way he went through gourds of palm wine; they came and went at odd hours. Bayanni didn’t complain. She took care of Sango’s women and her brother. She owned the house; her brother and his women knew and left her alone. The women knew Sango could do wrong in Bayanni’ eyes. Sango’s women steered clear of the strange one and they did all they could to please her. They knew if they would have Sango, they must love his little sister too.

Bayanni could see beyond the veil of appearances, beyond the seen into the unseen. Bayanni like her brother were Dada, born with dreadlocks and a caul. Nothing perturbed her; she would be calm in a house with a burning roof as she looked for a way out. She saw the world
differently, it had a series of underground and aboveground tunnels that could be tapped into.

She knew there were many sides to an argument and she could see them all. She tried to understand people and made her decisions. But Bayanni flourished when her brother sat by her and existed for her alone, but that world didn’t exist, and she knew it too.

When Sango left Tapa for Oyo, he took Bayanni with him, for Sango loved her like his mother, and he called her my little mother. He put her in the void his dead mother left in his heart, and she comforted him. After a few days in Aafin Oyo, Sango gave Bayanni a village to rule over; a village close to Tapa but closer still to Oyo. Her people called the spritely and beautiful woman, their little king. The warriors of Oyo protected her lands, and the rulers of the land that surrounded her knew if you wanted to have your hand ground to mush in Sango’s mouth, touch Bayanni. The hand would either be burned black or bitten off. Bayanni called her village Seele; it sat dainty on the plains full of mounds of termites and tall grasses. Bayanni’s knew her fate and held up her brother. She became the oil who fed his fire, but she would always be in the shadow of his light.

In Seele, the Little King ruled her people like they were family. Seele’s market always flooded on market days, her Aafin’s assembly always filled with her people who had come to visit her. Her Aafin had no wall only surrounded by ring of tall swaying palm trees. Bayanni didn’t wear a fringed beaded crown or a coronet like neighbouring rulers. Her casque crown had rows and rows of cowries. She didn’t cover her face with beaded fringes like her brother’s. Her crown fit tight on her head like a caul. Instead of a fringe of beads, her crown had a fringe of white cowries that covered her face partially. Her dreadlocks uncut from childhood spilled from under her crown and fell down her back. She didn’t marry for she loved her brother greatly, and she couldn’t share herself with another man.
Sango had several weaknesses; he loved Bayanni like his dead mother. But she possessed that which could make the Alaaafin become fear itself; she could make him shake like a leaf heavy with early morning dew. She knew the secrets of his weakness, so his power. The one strong weakness he hid in Bayanni’s heart, and she didn’t judge him. She knew of his deep shame for being Oyo and Tapa. She remembered that they had constantly ridiculed him in Tapa. She knew his shame of not being accepted by both of his homelands birthed his rage. He saw contempt in people’s eyes, because it existed in his mind. She never forgot what he had done to those who had mocked their mother for marrying Alaaafin Oranmiyan, when Sango came into his powers fully he burnt them alive in their houses, on their akete while they were asleep. He didn’t burn them with fire; he had sent bolts of lightning into their bodies.

Bayanni knew Sango loved Oya greatly because of Tapa. Both spoke the same mother tongue, and they both missed a home their hearts longed for. They were also half of half, he, half Oyo and Tapa; she, Tapa and buffalo. They both knew worlds that would never fully accept them. She understood them both; they didn’t allow her to forget that her parents were palace servants. They taunted her too, even more, and when her brother suggested that they leave the palace. She had done so gladly. Sango feared a lesser thing; it scarred him from their childhood, betrayal. His sister tried to keep them away from him. She spoke out for him strongly when people complained of his excesses, and when the greed of the Oyo Mesi weakened him. She dealt with betrayal from the insides of her palm tree fenced Aafin. She reached out and soothed the troublemakers her brother angered. Little fires became bigger ones; she tried to put them out when they were mere grunts in the insides of people. She sent troublemakers a calabash filled with live termites. Bayanni’s calabashes meant that she knew of a hidden anger toward the Alaaafin. If the person valued their life, you sent an empty calabash back to the Little King,
meaning a heart empty of the anger and the person lived. If she didn’t get an empty calabash, she sent one her termites, her warriors. As long as there were mounds of termite in Seele, Babayanni’s termites would sting. During the rainy season when wars were not fought, and warriors became farmers or hunters, her warriors left Seelu like winged termites left their mound to start new colonies after the first rains. They went about collecting information that would help their Little King.

Sango’s uncle, their father chose Bayanni to keep Sango from the war within him. The even-tempered and level headed Bayanni took this task seriously. She tried, and she would wipe all worries from his brows if she could, but his were deep, like the vast networks underneath mounds of termites in Seelu. She doused the fires her brother lit with his temper; but kept burning. She knew a war loomed over Oyo, and she knew she couldn’t stop it from coming. She had received a covered calabash and inside it a termite snapped its large mandibles as it clambered over a stone. The messenger told her, “no matter how much the termite tries, it cannot eat a stone.” The Ibariba king at Nikki sent the termite. It came from his vast kingdom north east of Oyo. He told Bayanni, he would come inside Aafin Oyo in broad day light and plunder it. He would destroy what she loved, unless she became his. Babayanmi didn’t ignore the man or his message, she sought a way to bring him down.

* Osun’s monthly visits to Seelu were one thing Bayanni could do without, but she allowed it for her brother’s sake. The Aafin Oyo would know some peace without Osun there, especially her brother. A sacrifice she could endure for him. Osun stopped at Seelu on the way to the market where Osun sold her adire. Osun came to Seelu with a retinue of slaves and Teetu even though she didn’t need to. Under the large leather umbrella held over her head, her face
bore the assurance of her beauty and power. Bayanni didn’t understand how her brother could stand the vain woman. She cooked good food, but intelligent Oba could have learned if Sango encouraged her.

Bayanni accorded Osun the welcome worthy of one of the Ayaba of her brother, but Osun rolled her eyes at everything. She complained to every ear till they rang: the tiny size of her room, the unseen lumps in her amala, the unsweet water, and the muggy air in Seelu that made her skin break out in heat rashes. After Bayanni saw her on the first day of her visit, she went out of her way not to see Osun again, one day of Osun’s irritations lasted a lifetime.

On this visit, Osun requested to see Bayanni, and the Little King was surprised. Osun too avoided her during her visits. Both women saw each other before Osun left, when she came to say her goodbyes to the one who had become the mother of her husband; the only other time. Bayanni told her she would see her in the evening, in the courtyard of her quarters.

“I saw you in one of my dreams, mother of my husband,” Osun said.

Bayanni yawned, Osun’s dreams. “Really? What did you see?”

“I don’t know how to say this, but I did see.”

“Speak woman, I have a lot to do.”

“I saw someone that looked like you hang herself because someone she loved dearly died.”

“What?”

“Don’t be angry mother of my husband but that was what I saw.”

Bayanni didn’t know what to say. She hadn’t expected this. Surely, Osun knew she loved her brother.
“Please don’t be offended mother of my husband, but I think you should save your lover…”

“Shut up. You seem to have forgotten I’m the mother of your husband. Your mouth is leaking daughter.”

Osun knelt before Bayanmi, her forehead on the ground, and begged for Bayanni’s forgiveness. Bayanni got up and left. Osun waited until she couldn’t hear Bayanni’s footsteps. When Osun raised her head, she had a big smile on her face.

*
Arokin’s song: Edan Ogboni

The eyes should see
The ears should here
The mouth must be silent
The Edan does not crumble, the earth doesn’t die
I become the hill, I become the rock beneath the sea
I will not die

The Ogboni fought for and protected the residents of Ife before the dreadful Alaafin who covered his face with the fringes of his beaded crown. The Ogboni existed before the kings that ruled; they were the earth and the ancestors. These elders walked the land from Ife to Oyo to Ijebu with their brass edan pendants and established member groups. Their iron staffs topped with knobby heads poked holes of the face of earth and these elders gave judgements and enforced laws. The Ogboni and their laws treated the earth as a living being that could be offended and appeased; the people knew that blood unlawfully shed tainted lands and brought bad winds and terror.

In Keshinro, a small town in the Ekun Otun province of Oyo, someone had spilt a young woman’s blood. A man had forcefully torn into her before slitting her neck, and her broken body thrown by the path leading to a farm. Girls in Keshinro felt unsafe walking about after dusk and their mothers hid them inside. Men escorted their wives with sharpened machetes to fetch water from the village streams. A chore that they had done in the dark night or early mornings before the death. The Oyo Ogboni knew they had to walk; they knew the offended earth had to be appeased, restitution must be made for the earth rested again. The woman’s blood soaked into
the earth, and the earth tossed about until the Ogboni came rooting about in Keshinro looking into eyes and souls for the guilty.

They walked around the town with their staffs and edan pendants and people scurried out of their way. They wrapped their colourful oja shaki with its diamond designs around their bodies and met in their Iledi to discuss the death of the young woman killed twice. They met deep in their forest temple in the dark of the night. A square enclosure with four doors held up by two pillar posts; on its walls, elephants, mudfish and leopards sacred to the group frolicked about. There they discussed matters that affected the land, everything below and above it.

Apena, the Ogboni head touched the mud floor of the Iledi and it burned his palm. He beseeched the earth and spoke soothing words to it. “Who caused your anguish earth?” The hot earth coughed and didn’t answer. Apena nodded, he called to Erelu to do the needful. Erelu stood up and stood by one of the doors of the Iledi. She called forth the spirit of the dead woman, “Awoke daughter of Alake come and speak for yourself.” The spirit of Awoke appeared in the Iledi with her back to the elders; she wept and would not be consoled. “Okanlawon, the only son of Agbe killed me twice,” she said before she disappeared, and the earth spewed up the tainted blood and rested. The Ogboni sent Ilari to the Agborin compound, “bring Okanlawon that son of woes to the Aafin.” Before the new day came to Oyo, Okanlawon’s head with his eyes open sat before a shrine in the Aafin Oyo.

Apena woke up the Osi Efa and, the Iya Aafin, and the three woke up the Alaafin.

“What makes you wake up death, the father and mother at this hour?” Alaafin Sango said.

“We have used your authority to take a life to cleanse the earth.”

“Was it a lawful death? Sango said.
“It is,” Osi Efa said.

“The earth required it,” Apena said.

Sango waited for his ears and eyes in the Ogboni Iledi to have her say.

“It is needful,” she said.

“In that case, you have my authority,” Sango said.

News of the Ogboni’s judgement rocked Oyo in the morning. They had delivered it swiftly, and the left behind their edan, two conjoined female and male brass figurines at the door to the Agborin compound to claim responsibility. That night, Oro, the bull-roaring executive branch of the Ogboni brought the judgement of the Ogboni closer to the people. Oro’s blade-like wood pieces created a whirring sound that announced the Ogboni. In town, windows and doors slammed shut and women stayed indoors, especially women, because of Oro the abomination they couldn’t see.

The people feared the Ogboni; they saw them as non-partial officials, who’s kept secrets of the earth and the ancestors. Though the Ogboni were above commoners they were closer to them, closer than the Ooni. These men and women lived in Oyo towns and villages; they slept in compounds the people could point out. The people knew their wives and husbands, and their children played with their children even though they didn’t know what the Ogboni did in their Iledi. These elders of the land also had the power to counterbalance the power of the Ooni if they found him wanting, if the people wanted, if the earth demanded it.

Oya drew close to woman of the Aafin who brought news of the Iledi to their husband’s ears only; this group of people who courted with death and the earth intrigued her. They reminded her of the Kyedye canoe men that lived on the banks of the greater river who rowed the dead and the living to shore at night.
A Broken Gourd of Palmwine
The people surged through the main Aafin Oyo gates filling up the vast space of the Aganju square. They waved the branches and screamed as they stamped their feet. They chanted songs of their dissatisfaction about the rule of the Alaafin and the Oyo Mesi. Sango could hear them from his rooms, and he gritted his teeth at songs they sang. His many ears had failed to report the beginnings of their anger to him. He stood up and walked the length of his room, furious. The eso and slaves outside his quarters heard him and they readied themselves for his orders. He didn’t; he listened to the words his people hurled at him.

“He wants to smoke us out like rats of the field; the Alaafin that belches smokes from his nose and mouth.”

“Hear us, we are here to crawl into your nose and make you uncomfortable.”

“Feel what we are feeling too; allow us to use our noses to breathe.”

The Aganju, the people’s platform, filled with more people and the armed Ilari allowed them to speak because in the square there were no offenders. The faceless crowd in the Aganju could do no wrong. On this hot day, the bodies of the nameless faceless crowd dripped sweat, and their clothes stuck to their bodies. The Oyo Mesi stood inside the Kaa Idi Obi, and they listened to the taunts. They people didn’t come into the Aafin with machetes and clubs, they came waving the branches in the air, and leaves fell to the ground littering the Aganju. They restless crowd moved constantly, crushing leaves underneath their shoes as they chanted.

“They want to kill us with taxes, heartless people.”

“We have children to feed; we do not feed them to war.”

The Oyo Mesi stood under the kobi that lined one side of the Aganju and waited for the people to acknowledge their presence, but they didn’t. The crowd made the Oyo Mesi wait for them, they will see them when they finish what they came here for. The Oyo Mesi couldn’t turn
their backs on the people in the Aganju. In the Aganju the people ruled Oyo, and their words had to be heard. When the sun sapped the strength of the crowd, and they saw the glowering Oyo Mesi.

“We have heard you.”

“We will take your grievances to the Alaafin.”

“Our father the Alaafin will attend to you, he will send word to you.”

But the crowd hissed at their words and shook their now leafless branches at the Oyo Mesi. They knew that their words had reached the ears they were for, so they turned their backs at the Oyo Mesi and left the Aganju.

*

Outside the Aafin walls, in the chief’s quarters, two Oyo warlords Olu Ode and Gbonka sat under a kobi in Olu Ode’s compound with a gourd of palm wine by their feet. Both men sat in recliners, and they used their horse whisks to drive away the flies that buzzed around the frothing palm wine. They could hear the people’s cries, but they ignored the anger and anguish that swirled about in the Aganju. Instead they discussed the Owu war, and the Alaafin’s displeasure with both men. They knew they had to find a way to his favour. Because, they were constantly looking for ways to outdo the other; they both knew that they didn’t fully trust each other but had to work with each other to increase their wealth.

They decided to start another war with one of their unsuspecting neighbours, maybe more wealth for Oyo would make the Alaafin favour them again.

“How many men do we have from the provinces?” Olu Ode said.

“Ten thousand Ilari, tens of thousands of the people, if need be,” Gbonka said.

“How many horses?”
“Ten thousand at the last count.”

“Do we need to buy more from the Fulani and Hausa traders?”

“Look at that.” Gbonka said

“A short old man wearing black.”

“Wearing red, you mean.”

“Are you saying I am so stupid I can’t tell the difference between red and black?”

“Are you saying I am so stupid I can’t tell the difference between red and black?”

“That is what I saw.”

“No, I saw something else.”

Esu limped by them, shaking his head, both men saw the side of him they wanted to see, because he did have on a black and red buba. Both men were so occupied with their argument, they took their eyes off the stranger walking through Oyo; a stranger with no clan marks on his face. If they hadn’t been arguing they would have asked the man where he came from. But they didn’t, they were on their feet shouting at each other. They had knocked the gourd over and the earth soaked in the spilt palm wine.

“Let us look at him again then.”

“Yes, let’s.”

“Where did he go?”

Esu had turned a corner and walked out of their line of sight. The old man of the crossroads mumbled to himself, “If only these people try to see what the other person sees and tries to understand that view. But no, they will not because what they saw is the only view that can be right. I will teach Oyo to see, because views like power shifts constantly, one blink and either can change. If Gbonka and Olu Ode saw what I saw in Ketu many years ago, which would
they say is more powerful of these three? A wasp that chases a great hunter into his hut, in the hunter’s room, the wasp is swallowed by a wall gecko.”
Ibariba Traders bring News of Oyo’s Itch for war

News of Alaafin Sango’s madness reached the Ibariba. They heard he looked westward to Ibariba for more lands and wealth, and that Oyo’s warors would attack soon. The Ibariba suspected that Oyo spies lived among them gathering information for the Oyo king, but they caught none, not even among the Oyo traders they traded with. An offshoot of a major trade route passed through Nikki which lay far west of the greater River, while most of the trade from Borno, Kano, Sokwoto went to the port town of Illo, and then continued to Ilesa, Oyo, and Ijebu Ode. The Oyo traders stopped at markets at Gbegazin and other Mokole towns on the edge of Oyo-Ibariba border. The Ibariba attacked the Mokole that settled in their territories; they turned on them because of their Oyo roots. The Mokole tried to protect themselves and pushed out the outsiders that lived in their towns, and they stayed out of Ibariba towns and villages. But Ibariba suspicion grew deeper and they watched the Mokole closer.

In Nikki, central Ibariba, a few slow flowing streams slinked through rocky soil supporting medium high trees and grasses. Nikki villages clustered around these erratic waters in the dry hard packed earth of the Sudan savannah. In the dry season, these streams dried up, and Nikki women trekked farther for water. Rocky Nikki soil didn’t retain floodwaters, it drained away quickly, and the harsh sun licked up any runoff from the earth. Many streams changed their courses in this dryland, seeking the easiest route to the tributaries of the greater river. Nikki Women taught their girls of the myriad of paths that can lead to water sources, “smell,” they said. The girls learned to feel moisture in the driest of sands and smell water holes far away. The women told their daughters of a time when the greater river had only two branches, the Joliba and Kworra; the women still point out the ancient paths of these rivers, their many traces remain on the surface of the earth.
The young morning had lured people out of their homes to markets and farms, and goats and lizards roamed the empty homesteads. In the northwest of Nikki, rice grew in the fertile ponds of the greater river; in the north farmers slashed and burned tracks of land to grow, guinea corn mixed with beans, beniseed and corn. As the elders settled down to nap under the shade of trees, many Nikki towns and villages quietened down and prepared for the sun at its zenith. People rushed about doing chores before the heat of the day came down hard on them. Girls and women returned from water holes singing ancient songs from the beginnings of the Ibariba. They sang of the many deeds of princes who lived in the memories of the Ibariba at Nikki, of the many wars they won and their many sons and daughters. The women sang not only of pedigree of princes and the house they came from, but also of the daughters of the earth priests they married who gave them the legitimacy to rule. They also sang of Bori, the spirit that united and strengthened the women despite their many ethnic origins.

* 

Magajiya Bussa walked through the Cassava farm near her village and skirted the hind parts of the market. She didn’t want to stop to greet the market women selling under wide brimmed raffia hats. But they saw her and saluted her from afar; she stopped for a while and returned their greeting. Bussa stood on a lower spot of the greater river, where the slow-moving river frothed into rapids. At this strategic point on the greater river, Bussa exacted tolls from travelers and traders that had to break their journey. Magajiya Bussa, sister to the previous king went into the inner rooms of the palace and sat with the king. She whispered to his right ear, “the rainy season approaches, Ibariba must come together to prepare to fight Sango the Oyo king in the dry season.”

“And how do I gather the many language speaking people of the Ibariba to do this?”
“A common enemy.”

* 

Gnon Kogui, sister to the present king of Nikki spoke into both of her younger brother’s ears, “beware of Oyo and the fire that rages within your house.”

“Fire?”

“Flee men and sit in the sun the tongue of men is evil.”

“Many tongues are speaking the language of plotting.

“but many are the languages of the Ibariba.”

“My people speak many dialects.”

“True. But we share a common enemy and we must speak one language to stop him brother.”

In the many courts of Ibariba women which held under the power of bori they discussed the threat of the Oyo. Even the men said nothing at the power of bori; a cult as ancient as they Ibariba itself. In the courts of Bori, with the powers of their numbers, the women could outwit their husbands. The bori women owned cowries and tied them to ends of their wrappers. They supported other women in times of need and domestic troubles, helping infertile women to conceive and setting husbands straight. They formed cooperatives and sold shea butter, brewed beer, made pots and wove clothes. In the bori courts in Nikki, Bussa and Illo women decided on the prince they favoured to be next in line to the three Ibariba thrones. The Ibariba Magajiya, women leaders of each court agreed to these decisions, even though they ruled over and controlled women’s behaviours. In their bori courts, they learned to control their spirits channeling it control the affairs of the Ibariba. During the Gaani festival, the sister of the king at Nikki shaved off the heads of young princes presented to the king and royal drums. The Gnon
Kogui gave them each an ancestral name that will influence them and maybe their kingship in the future.

Last year during the Nikki Ganni festival, Gnon Kogui had laid her hand on the head of a prince and named him the seventh son, the crowd listening gasped, the Magajiya had wrote off the destiny of the boy by naming him after an unlucky ancestor who died after reigning for only six months. The boy would never be a contender to the throne of Nikki. He would be one of the eyes that looked disapprovingly at the king during the Gaani festival; he would pledge his allegiance and that of his house to other princes or undermine another’s ambition to the Nikki. Magajiya favoured the head of Sandiru, she named him, the thunder that strikes his enemies.”

Princes were eligible to contest for the throne only if a father or grandfather had ruled an Ibariba kingdom. Sandiru came from a poor matrimonial line, known in the past for princes that valued and searched for wisdom but had fallen on hard times. The other matrilineal line much richer jostled their princes trying to get the approval of the people while the kingship passed over Sandiru’s line. Sandiru was a Marejobu, one of the many Ibariba children that lived with the Bororo for a while, to cure them of their abnormality. They cut their front teeth first or were delivered facedown. After his cure, Sandiru lived with the family of Gah-sunon for five years until his father sent an uncle to go get him. Gah-sunon, a Nikki court official, who relayed messages between the Bororo community and the king. He taught the boy prince of the world beyond the greater river and its many branches. Of the Oduduwa kingdoms to the east, farther east to the Sudan, the kingdoms of Malinke and Sonaike to the west, and the mighty heaving salty river to the south.

The Nikki royal family didn’t trust the boy-prince even after his cure. They regarded him with suspicion but couldn’t speak their thoughs because they feared the boy and his
Marejobu powers. Though princes from the other five ruling houses were more popular with the men, the bori women supported Sandiru. Since full brothers do not compete against each other, and maternal lines gave their full support to one of their princes to increase their chances of gaining the throne. Sandiru’s matrilineal line chose him and, he became the only contender from his family.

The outcrop of rocks that hugged the easternmost boundary of Nikki provided a lookout for possible attacks from Oyo, but the king at Nikki worried about the rancor building up in the ranks of the Nikki princes. He had been presented eleven hoes by the Sina Gorigui, each hoe stood for the number of years he reigned, and eleven hoes were a record. The people of Nikki knew his time drew near and the king will soon be buried with his hoes. Some said twelve hoes others were more generous and said thirteen, but all agreed that this king would not get fourteen hoes. The Nikki king prayed that he be buried with his faithful war horse and fourteen hoes, so he would be alive to confront the fire breathing Alaafin Oyo.
Small Apomu, husband of high and mighty towns

Apomu, a tiny vassal town formerly under Ile Ife, became a satellite of Owu during Alaafin Sango’s reign. Apomu’s girth on market days spread into the outskirts of Owu lands. Its wealth a constant temptation to the restless Owu, and they wrested it out of Ile Ife domination every few generations. Apomu lies a day north of Owu, to the south of Oyo, and three days away southwest of Ile Ife. Apomu’s ruler didn’t have a beaded fringe crown or a coronet, he was only a baale, although, an Ile-Ife prince Lanrode founded Apomu. The Lanrode who killed an elephant during a hunting expedition at a hill called Oke-Ola-Berinjo. The prince dragged his kill home but returned to Apomu with his family and settled there. His wife sold omu under an orange tree; her bean soup fed the first settlers who were hunters and traders.

Apomu would have been worthless but for the prosperous market that held in its main square every ten days. Apomu’s roots grew into the earth where the Ooni and Alaafin’s highways abutted. The market overran Apomu swelling the population within its tiny borders more than a hundred-fold. Apomu became so crowded on market days that the heads of family compounds rented out the kobi of their verandahs to traders. Neighbours envied the prosperous Apomu market, and many fringed beaded crown kings dreamed of the revenue it amassed every ten days. Transactions of more than forty bags of cowries were regular in Apomu, and instead of carting hundreds of cowries around, traders bartered goods.

The traders that came to Apomu spoke many languages and dialects, so the people of Apomu learned many languages from their visitors and became interpreters for the traders. Traders came from many lands, the Ijebu, Egba and Egbado of the south, Tapa from the east and
the Ibariba in the west, and from villages and towns on the banks of the Greater River, Gao, Timbuctoo, and Jenne and they exchanged their goods for woven upcountry aso ofi. Beyond the Greater River, glassware came from Bida, and Gambari flooded the market with vials of medicine they claimed cured all ailments. Traders came from people farther than the Tapa or Ibariba. Turbaned Berbers travelled across the Sahara to trade their wares at Apomu. Caravans of camels were common at Apomu, and they brought spices and brass rods and exchanged them for kolanuts. The Berbers and Gambari travelled to Apomu to buy kolanuts grown in the forests of Ìlèsà and Owu, where the big four lobed types came from.

A small guard of gatekeepers, Onibode Apomu, whose fierceness and bravery were known by all, guarded Apomu. In groups of six they manned the only gate that led into their tiny walled town and guarded it with their lives. They guaranteed the safety of all within Apomu, and its residents amassed great wealth and were welcoming. The soil of Apomu were not fertile but wealth dwelt in the town.

The Apomu baale, Akingbogun ruled in the time of Alaafin Sango. An old man, wise and experienced in steering the prosperity of his people out of the clutches of greedy overlords who always eyed Apomu. He knew how to stoke their egos or grovel at their feet or murmur the right things in their ears to keep war away from Apomu’s gates. His aimed to keep traders flooding into Apomu and cowries too and not let Apomu trade flow to Omirinmirin a smaller market in the same northern forest region. The Apomu say, “there is no poor person in Apomu, both young and old are blessed with untold riches,” baale Akingbogun intended to keep this so during his reign.

Apomu’s baale knew it would take more than human wisdom to walk unscathed through the greed of surrounding kings. His fathers taught Apomu princes to search for solutions
thoroughly; war was not an option for Apomu. The princes were taught to make decisions with help from the living and dead, chiefs and ancestors. He needed such wisdom today, an Ilari of Oyo, Obalolu, the-king-is-supreme, snored in the courtyard of the Aafin Apomu waiting for Akigbogun’s reply to the Alaafin’s message, “Akigbogun should give Apomu as a wife to Oyo.”

The old baale knew he had to talk to his ancestors in the bara. He told the Ilari to allow him think of a suitable answer to the request of the Alaafin, but he sent a messenger secretly to Owu to tell the Olowu of Oyo’s proposal, and he walked to Iya’s cluster of huts on the southern edge of the Aafin. Iya lived in the graves of the ancestors, where she propitiated and spoke with the spirits of dead. The Baale knelt only for her, she was his father. Iya knelt to greet him too but didn’t rest on her elbows like other women do when they greet royalty. One of her girls rubbed eucalyptus oil into her dry legs when the Baale stepped into her room. The girl dropped to the floor and crept out of the room.

“Are you well, father?” Akigbogun said.

“I am well son, you?” she said

“I am well,” he said

“hmm…”

“How are the ancestors?”

“They sleep well.”

“But your face says otherwise son.”

“The Alaafin is in my affairs, father.”

“That is not new.”

“He wants to marry Apomu.”

“He beats a celebration drum, but I hear war beats.”
“Exactly, father, I am afraid.”

“When a child falls from a height, the earth raises up to catch him, breaking his fall. Apomu will not fall during your time son.”

“Ase.”

When travel weary travelers came into Apomu they rested and ate at one of the many stalls of the sellers of omu and palmwine like they had done in the time of Lanrode’s wife. In these stalls Apomu and its visitors shared news of happenings far and near. They spoke of nothing else but the visiting Oyo Ilari and they speculated about the message he came to deliver. What did the Alaafin want in Owu territory? Owu would not take kindly to this Oyo meddling, specially with their defeat at the hands of the Oyo. They traders knew if Oyo could not have Apomu peaceably, Oyo will not rest until Apomu returned to the forest floor from which it came. If Oyo could not have Apomu, nobody else would, and Owu would not give away Apomu without war. The Baale told the Ilari three days later, after he had received word from the Olowu, “the ancestors say Apomu is married and content, and a woman can only have one husband at a time.”

*

Obalufon, the Ooni of Ife who had been warned by the Ifa Oracle to remain a bystander in the Apomu dispute did otherwise. The loss of one of Ife’s main sources of revenue hurt him, and he joined forces with the Oyo to declare war on Owu. Ooni Obalufon sent his warlords and warriors to Owu to pillage Apomu. Sango gladly allowed the Ife into this war; he wanted the Ooni to fight this war. Ife as an enemy of Owu would make him sleep better at night, both forest kingdom’s as allies would overrun Oyo. The Owu never forgot a gripe; they repaid it with a
measure that exceeded what they were dealt with. When the Owu measure overflowed with revenge, Sango knew he would need Ife as an ally.
Six Roads

Six roads emerged out of the forest and met at the gates of the upcountry Oyo town of Bada like water rivulets flowing down a forested ravine. Bada revered the hunter Oyedotun, because he came from Bada people and rose to be a nobleman. He even built a kobi in his compound after the ones in the courtyards of Oyo Aafin. He told his people that kobis were not only meant for royals or noblemen in Oyo. In Bada, everyone people built gabled houses, but nobody else had a kobi like Oyedotun.

People knew Oyedotun had a fickle mind; he said one thing in the morning and changed his mind by evening. He deeds were as unpredictable like dry season harmattan winds carrying dust from the desert in the north. The hazy winds arrived early this year and it settled in Oyedotun’s bones slowing him down. He stopped hunting in forests for big game and set traps in nearby fields for grasscutters and rabbits instead. He slept with a banked fire in room under layers of cloth. But his bones and big game were the last things that bothered him; he woke up to find by his door a big-headed termite in a covered calabash. That night Oyedotun was without the fire in his room, his anxiety heated up his body as he sat on his akete grinding his molars. The calabash had better not be a prank or he would find the trickster and send him off to his ancestors with a gift.

*

A termite from the little king at Seelu walked into Oyedotun’s compound. Oyedotun had been expecting this visit for days. He led him into his iyewu for their talk. Nobody refused a request from the sister of Sango, whatever Bayanni eyed she got. The termite told Oyedotun that the little king needed a place for her termites to rest before they became Ibariba; they would become Ibariba in Oyedotun’s compound and journey into Nikki, Bussa, and Ilo. The king at Nikki threatened her and her brother’s peace, she would shake his too.
The Virgins

In the outhouse used by the women of the Aafin Oyo, Obà dug a hole in corner and buried an `adó under one of the stones that lined the floor. The `adó overflowed with evil chants and they swirled out when urine from the Aafin women spattered on it. A babalawo from Igbeti had made the ado for Oba. She had gone to Igbeti to sell her kolanuts in the king’s market. On the last evening of her trip, all her goods sold, Obà watched the market wind down from her stall. She wrapped her iborun around her to keep out the cold evening wind blowing. Her servants were away but would soon be back, they had gone to collect her money from the wholesalers who had taken sacks of kolanuts from her on credit in the morning. She tried not to sleep; she had to be sharp to supervise the tallying of the accounts when her servants got back. She thought of their husband Sango and dozed off but felt someone watched her. She opened her eyes to see a boy standing beside her. Her Teetu drove him away but he kept coming back, screaming he had to see her. Tired of the noise, she waved the Teetu away. The boy prostrated before her, the babalawo in Ketu had sent him to her, she had to go see him. She hissed and shooed him away; she dozed off again. Obà had forgotten about the boy when her servants returned. By the time she and her entourage returned to the Aafin Igbeti to sleep, she had forgotten the summons from the babalawo.

Early the next morning, as she and her servants left the Aafin, she saw the boy outside the gates, and she remembered. She went back into the Aafin and asked the Ayaba of this babalawo. They told her he was a powerful one. The people of Igbeti say he sees the past and the future in the present. Curious, Oba asked them for directions to his house, and they told her. Oba told her servants to wait for her at the Aafin, and she went looking for the babalawo. His compound stood in the middle of the village, yet it stood alone. The compounds near it seemed to lean away from it, as if they feared it. The path that led to the compound’s waist high fence
was overgrown with stunted dry grass. Òyá had gone alone; the Ayaba had told her that the babalawo would not see her see otherwise.

The man welcomed her into his iyewu, but he didn’t move out of the shadows that crawled around the room. Òyá looked away from the voice and looked around the room. Things dangled from the rafters, they were tied to it with black and red strips of cloth. And they swayed, calabashes and gourds that had their mouths stopped with leaves; feathers and cowries were stuck on their bottoms She shivered. Clubs and cudgels were also tied to the rafters by ropes. She sat on the edge of a mat by the door and and watched two hands come out the shadows. The hands threw a string of opele down on the opon ifa tray, long fingers smoothened them and caressed the palm fruit seeds. The hands threw the opele on the tray again and laughed, “A woman who weighs like rock, but is seen as a feather, not appreciated. It is because she doesn’t know her strength. It is because she loves. It is because she is sad. It is because she is scorned.”

Obà knew he spoke the truth. Her heart jumped in her chest, and she grabbed her breasts. She looked away from the voice, looked outside the iyewu, a hen walked about in the yard. A black hen and it had only one chick trailing behind her. She watched the hen scratch around a wet patch by a mildewed pot. The chick ran from behind her mother and pecked at the earth disturbed by its mother. Obà watched them, and she became sad. “What do you want us to do?” the voice said. Obà rested her back on the wall and looked at her hands; they shook. “Do you want us to fight for you?” the voice said. She didn’t say anything, and the voice waited, as Oba worked her throat to say a word. She thought about the word. She knew this word, if spoken, would bring consequences.

“Fight,” she said.

“How do we fight for you on earth or do we take the fight to the other world?”
“The earth,” she said.

The babalawo told her to put her hand in the pot by her left and take out whatever her hand touched. Her hand clasped around the ado.

“Bury it in the outhouse and you will be avenged.”

“How much do I owe you baba?”

“One does not pay money at my house daughter. You give me a sacrifice at a crossroad.”

She had tried to see this Babalawo that lived in squalor but couldn’t see through the darkness. She rolled the ado into the edge of her wrapper and knotted the end and walked away from the lonely compound. “How did your journey fare?” the Ayaba asked Oba back at the Aafin Igbeti. She didn’t answer them, and the women didn’t trouble her, they knew Oba’s mood had soured. Oba made the one-week journey back to Oyo absent minded, her mind on the ado and what did it mean to be “avenged” by the “them” the babalawo had talked about, and the possible consequences.

Days after her return from Igbeti, Obà didn’t bury the ado because she felt everyone in the Aafin watched her. Her eunuch son, Ona Efa, knew something happened to his mother, but he didn’t needle her. She would tell him in due time. Oba stayed away from her other Ayaba, especially Osun who had inner eyes. She stayed away from her husband too, she didn’t want to deal with any provocation. She needed time and space to think about the unfamiliar fear lodged in her heart. The night she buried ado, she watched the outhouse all day and she didn’t move far away from. At night, she watched it from her rooms. The babalowo had told her that she bury it in two weeks or the vengeance will come on her. On night of the very last day, she dashed to the
outhouse and prayed nobody saw her. She didn’t know Iwinwande saw her and had told her mistress, Òyá.

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The Aafin, hamlets, villages, towns, farmlands, and settlements of foreigners that traded or resided within the walls of Oyo made up metropolitan section of Oyo. The lands outside Metropolitan Oyo had six provinces – Ekun Osi, Ekun Otun both provinces were divided by the Ogun river, right and left of the capital. The Epo were the provinces south and south west of the capital; the Ibolo southeast to the Ekun Osi province. The heads of the provinces didn’t wear beaded fringed crowns, they wore coronets and they ruled their lands on behalf of the Alaafin. In these broad slices of Oyo, people were loyal to a local nobleman that resided in their province, a small father, their Baba Kekere in the Aafin. They were another administrative go-between between the people and the Aafin, these elders took care of their people’s interests when policies were made in the Aafin.

After Alaafin Sango’s victory over Owu, the various Baba Kekere in the provinces told their wards to select their most beautiful daughters to make new allegiances with the new Alaafin, but they didn’t say they wanted to fill the Aafin with ears and eyes they controlled. They girls and wives of the former Alaafin Ajaka were already relegated to the farthest rooms of the Aafin where they would live out their lives. The Baba Kekere needed knew eyes. The people in the six provinces knew their most beautiful girls, this wasn’t a difficult task; people celebrated beauty in Oyo in songs and stories and ceremonies. A beautiful daughter brought pride to her parents if chosen; they became in-laws of the Alaafin, and her village basked in the glory of having their daughter in the Aafin. But any shame that the girl brought on herself belonged to her family especially the mother.
Six girls were chosen, one from each province, and the six nobles handed them to the three Iwefa, who would hand them over to their mothers, the Ayaba. The wives of the Alaafin would train them to become obedient daughters. The eunuchs put the girls in a room and told them to wait for the Ayaba. The girls chattered about their soon to be mothers, except for Iwinwande. They talked about Osun’s beauty, Obà’s wealth, and Òyá’s serenity. Iwinwande kept to herself; listening and planning how she could make Òyá choose her. She had learned about the Oya from servants during her short stay in the palace. She knew Òyá loved beans and her rooms were the coolest in the Aafin. Òyá’s rooms were also the most fertile; her recent pregnancy, the evidence of that. Iwinwande un-weaved the hairstyle her mother had made the best hairdresser in the Ebolo provinces make. She stood up and tied her wrapper roughly around her body, she made it bulge around her.

They didn’t wait for long, two Ayaba, Obà and Osun stood before them. They stared at the timid girls, and they and mocked them. They weren’t really whispering, so the girls could hear what they said. They called the girls provincials, especially the girl from the Ebolo province. The words didn’t hurt Iwinwande, and their false laughter made her ears hurt. Her father’s wives laughed the same way when they joined forces to ridicule her mother the youngest wife. The two Ayaba saw a Iwinwande, who looked sickly in the corner of the room. The most beautiful of the girls, but they saw an outward frailty and a rough appearance they despised. Her hair had dust in it, a mess. The other girls were humble and cowed, they smiled a lot trying to catch the attention of the women looking at them. That one in the corner looked at the floor, her legs and arms were thin. They didn’t want the demon girl in their quarters.

Òyá come to the room last; she walked in and all the girls felt her presence. Obà and Osun waited for Òyá because they wanted to see her face when they gave her one girl not the
two entitled to her. She had barely sat down when Obà pointed to three girls, “I am the first Ayaba.” she said. Osun pointed, “I am the second Ayaba.” The girls chosen moved to a side of the hut. Oba and Osun turned to Òyá and pointed to the one in the corner, “because you are the third Ayaba,” they said together and laughed. Òyá looked at the girl and she smiled. They women walked out of the room talking derisively about the one girl Oya had. They were happy they left her with their leftovers. The girl stood up and smiled. Oya saw a calm in her eyes that spoke of wisdom, and a gentle nature. Iwinwande knelt before Òyá and pledged her life to her service.

*Iwinwande had seen her mother and her sister wives behave like Obà, especially when they were planning something secret and evil. They were self-conscious and restless. The usually self-involved Ayaba kept glancing around her, really looking at people, something she never did. She seemed to pee a lot too. Iwinwande noticed her servants kept putting water out for her in the outhouse. She decided to watch Oba closely. Her mistress’s rooms were far from Obà’s, but she found ways to sneak away from Afefe. At night, Iwinwande hid in shadows and watched Obà’s rooms. Few things got by Afefe’s attention, but she left the girl be. Iwinwande had earned Afefe’s trust. One night, the Ayaba stopped walking around the outhouse, and Iwinwande thought she may have misread Obà’s restlessness. Iwinwande decided to go to back to Oya’s quarters, when she saw a shadow dart across Obà’s courtyard. She saw Obà dash into the outhouse and cover the opening with the woven palm frond door. Iwinwande moved closer to the outhouse and pinned her ear to the wall. She didn’t hear a trickle of urine hit the floor, instead she heard a grunt and then metal scraping soil.
She heard Obà whisper, “Earth hear my voice, as open your mouth to soak in the urine of my rivals, so should you swallow our husband’s love for them.”
Their Taboos

Obà took her role as the first Ayaba seriously, too seriously. Her grandmother had taught her the importance of marriage and domesticity, like most women did, but her paternal grandmother also taught her to use her head. Oba’s grandmother came from the Egbedade compound, scheming was their ancestral praise name. They were known for it, only bastards didn’t scheme, they told everyone proudly. Her grandmother, a childless wealthy Ife merchant, had married the Ololade compound of Igbon because the Ifa oracle said her child would only come from the loins of an Ololade man.

Oba told her grandmother she didn’t want to sell kolanuts. She wanted to sell beads. Her grandmother apprenticed her to a beads seller in Ife, a childhood friend. During her training, Oba chose three beads and learned the intricacies of trading those three. There were Segi, the blue or blue-green glass beads made only within Ile-Ife walls, polished red orange agate stone beads made in Oyo, Iyun, red coral brought in from Olokun’s house, a symbol of royalty. Oba sold her beads in all the lands of the descendants of Oduduwa. When she married Sango, she switched back to selling kolanuts to feel closer to the woman who had raised her, and to her people for she lived with Sango in Tapa. She expanded her grandmother’s kolanut trading routes when she became an Ayaba, the power of the Aafin opened more markets to her. Cowries didn’t have a hold over Oba, she had known them from an early age. She played with her grandmother’s bags of cowries. She knew the bad they could do; the good they could do didn’t interest her.

Oba’s loyalty to Sango and her grandmother could not be argued; she could walk on any other person. Oba never forgot a wrong. If she sensed a betrayal, a force strong force builds up in her fueling a rage that would never rest until she serves her enemy hot retribution many times over. She would bring down anyone related or close to the person and she didn’t let go until she filled the person’s mouth with sand. Oba knew Sango well before he became the Alaafin; a river
whose banks swell up before one eyes cannot carry one away when it flooded. She knew Sango well, the mixed Tapa prince ridiculed for his non-Tapa half across the greater river. She knew his weakness well and she covered him. Sango knew this too and remembered this when she angered him. He knew Oba remembered him as a tiny stream trickling by mighty trees, and she wasn’t afraid of him.

Nothing living could give birth in Osun’s domains, even the rats and lizards that lived in holes and cracks in walls in Oyo acceded to her decree. They stayed far away from her. The men and women who served her knew this too, they got out of her service as soon as they knew they carried. Osun could smell a week-old pregnancy, and she detested the stench on other people. Pregnant slaves were something different though. She made the woman go through the worst days of her life; unspeakable things that made the woman miscarry. Why should a slave be pregnant when she wasn’t?

When Osun came to the world, she had stopped at the house of the keeper of inner heads like every child did. Osun chose an inner head that detested something she ate indirectly, guinea corn. Osun’s inner head grinned when Osun preened, changed her garments many times a day but Osun didn’t know her inner ori detested guinea corn. She loved grasscutters and they fed mostly on guinea corn. Even though she ate the meat unknowingly, her inner head warred against her desire to have a child, and the inner head is the most powerful Orisa. When the Ifa Oracle told her to sacrifice to her inner head and stop eating guinea corn. Be right with her inner head and all will be well. Osun did as told but a baby didn’t come, her inner head stayed angry with her. She still ate guinea corn through the meat of the grasscutters.

Òyá didn’t eat buffalo meat. An Iyanifa whom she had consulted about her childlessness told her the Ifa Oracle said there were babies holding onto her legs, nine of them. She had to give
up the meat to open the door to bring her babies into the world. When Òyá became a part of Alaafin Sango’s royal household she had raised up a gale of hatred and jealousy in the other Ayaba. They seemed different from them. She kept to herself and spent the most times in their husband’s quarters. Oba and Osun teamed together and took turns in plying their husband with palm wine during his nights with them and they asked him only one question, “What is the secret of Òyá?” He didn’t tell them at first, and he laughed at their many ploys. He couldn’t understand how the two bitter rivals had united because of the need to bring another down. He answered them with a word only, tomorrow. He got them to do things they wouldn’t usually do. They huffed about the Aafin, but he got them to do his requests with one word, tomorrow. Both women gave in to his every wish when he promised them he would tell them tomorrow. When they knew that Sango’s tomorrow would never come but would continuously give birth to other tomorrows, they took drastic measures.

Obà kept the royal regalia, the ejigba, the beaded staves of authority, and beaded fringed crowns. She hid them a week before the annual state address at the Aganju to show how serious she wanted Sango’s response. She knew the Alaafin had to appear in state before the people of Oyo; his not appearing would be a slight. Obà didn’t budge; he did all he could, but she didn’t give him his regalia. He cajoled, threatened, shouted, commanded, she listened to all his he had to say and walked away from him when he finished talking. As the official keeper of the royal paraphernalia and she could do as she pleased. He needed his regalia to placate the Oyo. His Ilari told him his people were getting more restless. He decided not to give in to her, but he had a dream that changed his mind. He dreamed that the world turned on its head, the ground became the top of the world and the skies fell to the ground, one big river. The stars and sun and moon fell into this water and were drowned, so did people and animals.
The next morning Sango told Obà Òyá’s secret. He told her where he kept Òyá’s buffalo skin. He begged her not to use it against Òyá even though he knew she would. Oba smiled and said she wouldn’t; this smile he knew well. He knew Òyá would get it hard from both women. He couldn’t warn her, but she would know he told them her secret and he couldn’t bear to see his betrayal in her eyes. Obà told Osun; Obà made sure Sango stood within hearing distance; they were under his window when she talked to Osun about Òyá.

“She’s a buffalo.”

“A what! Who would have known?”

“She has no kin.”

“What are her children?”

“Human or animal?”

“No wonder she hates buffalo.”

“One cannot eat one’s kind.”

“I want to see her face when we tell her.”

“We?”

“I will tell her. I found out. I am your senior.”

He heard Osun grumble but her hate for Oyo made her submit to Obà reluctantly this time.

“You tell her first. Here she comes.”

“Buffalo woman.”

He heard them both laugh, both in agreement, when they began to sing.

“She has no kin, she has no hometown, and her buffalo coat is hidden in the beams.”
Bussa
Fourteen Kakaki blare for the king
Of the first-born son of Kisra, Woru
The land of the sacred kettledrums and copper stirrups

Bussa the northeast province and spiritual capital of the Ibariba shared a boundary with
Gbegazin a tributary of Bussa’s sister kingdom Nikki. More precisely Bussa’s most volatile
tributary Wawa shared its boundary with Gbegazin of Nikki. In Gbegazin, the ruling class denied
the sonship of Woru, the ancestor of Bussa, they say he was a servant of Kisra not a son, and
Wawa knew of this talk. Wawa sat in the middle of the trade route leading south through the
length Ibariba. The Oli river flowed into Wawa at Kali, northwest, then turned southwest where
it entered the Greater river at Liberaru. Wawa’s many villages clustered along both rivers, and
they peeped into and affected the affairs of Bussa and Nikki without being seen. Wawa’s Muslim
Ture inhabitants were higher ranked than the indigenous peoples, their ancestors had failed to
convert Kisra to Islam failing repeatedly in the royal task assigned. They still looked northward
to their former rulers for guidance, but they lived in Ibariba under the rule of the sons of Kisra.

The king at Bussa who reigned had been a popular prince with the people. A handsome
man with no physical disabilities. He wasn’t a patient man, but he shared his wealth with the
people and led his warriors to war many times. Because the people loved him they assisted him
with charms to find the royal antelope skin the Bussa chief priest Badaburde hung on a kuka tree
in town before the other princes. When he became king he also courted his brethren, the
ineligible sons of the kings, who would later marry the daughters of the earth priests to stay
relevant. When these princes became of age, they went back to their mothers. There in the towns
of their maternal kin, the princes ruled as chiefs and became a link to the courts of their fathers in
the capital. The Bussa king had the loyalty of these chiefs, but he was indebted to them because
they had helped him to get to the throne; they had courted the king makers in his favour. In Bussa, political power moved between to the relationship between these two raucous and silent points; the silent power hub were the earth priests who spoke to the king what the spirits of the land said.

In Bussa, the king’s council met in secret in Magajiya’s house to discuss the possible consequences of the old sick king at Nikki. The council met here to avoid the king’s trusted courtiers, the Masu, who were known to report everything back to the king to court his favor and wealth. Bakarabundi, the custodian of the land lowered his aching back to the floor with a groan. His ancestors had ruled Bussa before they were overthrown by Kisra and his sons. It is said that Bakarabundi’s patience in dealing with the affairs of Bussa stemmed from the fact that it hurt him to stand, so he sat as long as he could to postpone the pain of getting up. He sat beside Bababurde, chief priest and keeper of the royal antelope skin, who supervised the king’s household from the beginning of the day till the last lamp in the king’s quarters died. Bababurde had walked slowly by the palace walls on his way to this meeting. The last time Bababurde and the Nikki king spoke was during the king’s visit to Nikki, for Bababurde couldn’t come into the palace. The king would die if he saw him there, so both men relied on trusted ears to bring words to each other.

Bamoide, brother of the patient Bakarabundi would not be at this meeting, his brother had sent him to Illo to find out how the town fared, and to bring back news from the king at Illo, of any news of a threat to that port town from Oyo. Batafa, deputy to Bakarabundi leaned on a wall, his principal’s brother told him to listen and bring back every word to him. Bamoide wanted to hear report of the meeting twice, from his brother and Batafa. He would add both together to get the actual proceedings of the meeting. Bamoide knew Batafa could never forget
his ancestors ruled with the Bakarabundi. He never tired of reminding everybody of this.

Batafa’s reportage would have the malice, his brother Bakarabundi’s report would lack.

“I told the king not to commit any offence against the will of the people, has he?” Bababurde said.

“Of course, he hasn’t. We are here to talk of Nikki,” Bakarabundi said. Beresonde chief priest mediator between the spirits of the land and kings at Bussa and Beresoni keeper of Bussa’s royal regalia sat beside each other. Both men possessed the leopard skins that allowed them to sit on animal skins in the presence of the Kisra kings. They didn’t want to be here they knew the king would hear of the full details of the meeting, they tried to hide in the shadows of the room.

Madoro, king’s provincial administrator had just led another batch of taxpayers to the palace before joining the meeting. He smelled of guinea corn and chicken sweat. He sat beside Kiwotade, the son of the previous king, who moved slightly away from the man and the stench he carried into the meeting. Magajiya, the Kiwatode’s aunt sat beside Kiwatode. She could never understand why her nephew decided not to compete for the throne instead opted to collect taxes for his father’s half-brother. The last son of Magajiya, brought them cold water from an earthenware pot. He belonged to her alone, a child tied to her title as Magajiya, her husband had no claim to him. He belonged to the ruling family and his loyalty remained unshaken.

“I am not a kingmaker,” she said, starting the meeting.

“I did not want to be king,” Kiwotade said.

“So you both say, but we know better.” Bakarabundi winced when he turned to look at Magajiya and her nephew.

These king makers and earth priests held Bussa together, they were the of the original inhabitants whose ancestors had a pact the king of Bussa. They submitted to these conquerors
and gave them their daughter to marry because the pact gave them the rights to control the religious ceremonies of the Ibariba, the control gave them some power. Bamarubere an Imam, chief of the Muslim quarters of town hissed, “I won’t be part of this.”

“Why?” Batafa said he hated the fact that the man accepted the invite to this meeting. He wasn’t one of them, just a common settler puffed up with mundane responsibilities.

“As you know I take care of the king’s wives and daughters.”

“Batafa hissed, “So we don’t have important things to do unlike you?”

“I need to contract a wedding between a king’s daughter and a king’s son.”

“Which two?” Magajiya said.

“Nikki and Bussa.”

Batafa looked at Bamarubere’s back as he rushed out of the door, “you have had your day; it is time to make room for another.” The same words tradition required him to say to a king’s dead corpse before it was buried. Bamarubere looked back at the jealousy filled man shocked at his audacity. Badaburde who would have supervised the gravediggers at the king’s burial sighed, “Our king isn’t dead Batafa, I would know. I received word of his good health this morning.”

Beresonde moved out of the shadows and spoke for the first time, “I swear by the eight spears of Masu Rawan Gasu, if we don’t find a way to patch our differences, there may be no Ibariba during the next Gaani,” Beresonde said.

Batafa walked out of the meeting not understanding how they could easily swallow the shame and loss of their ancestors. They owned the land, not the sons of Kisra. How could they forget? The two men in the shadows mumbled their excuses and left shortly. Bakarabundi tried to hold on to the reigns of the meeting but it slipped out of his hands, he grunted his angst, “We
didn’t talk about the rumours of Oyo’s attack.” Magajiya smiled and told her boy to bring food for him, “rest your back old man. We would talk.”

*  
Batafa walked into the palace he never stopped to feel the burn in his heart this should have been his or his son’s. He carried about the defeat of his ancestors and it weighed his spirit down. Sarkin Martidi, the chief Bussa drummer recited the king list, he stopped for a while to praise each name. His praise brought the kings of Bussa to life with their deeds written in the soil of Ibariba. The praise started from Woru the son of Kisra, Sarkin Martidi erased the deeds of Batafa’s ancestors. He walked away quickly from the drummer, who had unknowingly added to the anger that Bamarubere, the Imam, had started in the foolish meeting.

A shadow crossed his path and Batafa reached for his dagger. The man greeted him, and Batafa returned the dagger into its sheath. He knew the man. Batafa had saved the Gbede from a mob he had stolen some yams. Batafa had brought the Gbede to the palace. He pleaded the man’s case; the Gbede stole to feed his family because nobody would employ his services; his wife was with child. The king forgave his theft and employed him. The Gbede and his family of blacksmiths now lived on the palace grounds making metal implements for the kings’ household, and weapons for his warriors. The Gbede’s ancestors maybe from Ife, but his children were born in Ibariba. Kolade greeted Batafa and told him he had word for him. Batafa smiled, maybe something good would come of the day. Kolade said, I heard Kenu of the kingdom of Nikki, the Kenu which crouches between the Dahomey and Oduduwa has changed sides.”

*  
Wawa didn’t pay last year’s tribute to the last Bussa King, and this present Bussa king shut up road and communication links to Wawa because of this debt. Wawa didn’t care,
opened its own road, toll free, for its traders and they avoided the Bussa markets. Wawa watched Bussa when it interested it, that interest focused when a Bussa king died. Wawa would throw tantrums when rumours of the Bussa king’s death reached it, testing the might of the soon to be crowned king. Bussa held the attention of Wawa, because it checked to see if a strong king would be enthroned in Bussa. Wawa’s survival rested on this uneven relationship. Bussa’s last king’s ill health hadn’t enabled him to enforce his claim over Wawa and collect taxes owed. This new Bussa king was a warrior of note, and he would come for his dues. But the events in Nikki’s palace slowed him down; he had his eyes on Oyo too. Wawa stood at akimbo and didn’t step in the politicking fervor swirling around the Ibariba ruling houses. If Wawa behaved now maybe the Bussa king would ignore it, but the chief at Wawa knew otherwise. Wawa’s fertile fields, west of the greater river fed most of Bussa whose own fields were less watered and field of stone. But wasn’t totally vulnerable, Wawa had warriors and swarms of bees they called on to help when they were attacked. The king at Bussa knew he needed the cooperation of the chief of Wawa to deflect an attack from Oyo. He sent three men to Wawa to talk peace, even though it meant humbling himself.

The Chief at Wawa sent for his tax collector to get the amount owed to Bussa. Wawa’s slave tax collector, Galadinma, returned to the capital and met Mayaki at its gates. Galadinma moved out of the way for the war captain and his army; they moved out to war against a force that threatened Wawa from the north which wanted to establish an outpost in Wawa. Since Wawa didn’t pay taxes to the King at Bussa, it couldn’t ask Bussa for help. Galadinma hailed Mayaki and his men, he had helped to put this army together. Galadinma had visited each Wawa compound and made their sons line up outside their gates. The army comprised of sons who measured up to a carved stick that went around Wawa, these conscripts joined Wawa’s army.
Galadinma and his chief sat down to talk with the Bussa nobles. The nobles spoke of an impending war with Oyo, the ill health of the king Nikki, and the possibility of Bussa warring with Oyo if Nikki’s defenses failed. Wawa knew it would be the first line of defense if the Oyo came far inland, and it changed its tone during the talks. Galadinma asked that Wawa’s debt be cancelled, and its warriors would defend Bussa.

*
The beginnings of the Ijesa war

Osun’s chief hunter Jenjoke brought her meat every week, freshly trapped grasscutters that he caught in fields planted with rows of guinea corn. His apprentices looked for the of grasscutters, put burning grass down the holes, and smoked them out. The young boys ran after them as they scurried out with machetes, or he caught them by placing traps at the mouths of the holes. Jenjoke sent one of his apprentices with the biggest grasscutter to Aafin Oyo. The boy handed them to one of Osun’s slave girls.

Òyá stayed away from the Aafin on those days. But she was in on this day, the Alaafin had kept her in his rooms. She saw the boy deliver the grasscutter, she saw the girl put them on spikes, and smoked their bristle hair off. It made her nauseous, but she stayed with Alaafin weaving his hair into a suku, but the smoke followed her in. She couldn’t tell their husband, or he would think he had displeased her in some way. She finished with his hair and returned to her quarters. The stench of grasscutter flesh being cooked in a sauce of peppers and vegetables filled her rooms. She ran out and sat far away from Osun’s hearth. She had sent Afefe on an errand, her servant couldn’t help. Oya watched as Osun’s servant laid out the food before her mistress. Osun took in a deep breath of the aroma wafting up from her food and she smiled. She loved efo yanrin made with grasscutter meat. She took a morsel of fluffy pounded yam and dipped it into the vegetable soup. Òyá watched each morsel go down Osun’s throat, and she couldn’t stop the words that came out of her mouth, “Must you eat them?”


“Them.”

“Your four-legged family.”

“You can call them that? You with the thin legs and dry knees.”

“You with the huge forehead and thin neck.”
“Must you eat them?”

“The buffalo, my husband’s concubine speaks.”

“Says the Ayaba that runs after husbands.”

“She opens her mouth wide and stupid words come out.”

“He is our husband, get used to it.”

“I’m your senior.”

“Yes, you are but I am the pregnant one.”

Osun kicked away her bowl of efo yanrin. Òyá smiled as she watched pieces of meat roll in dirt.

“Oh, don’t throw a tantrum now. I’m the least of your problems. Our husband and his warlords have decided to attack your hometown.”

“ahhhh!”

“But what can I say as I don’t have a hometown.”

“…”

“Didn’t our husband tell his favourite?”

“…”

“We will attack Ilesa soon.”

*
Iya Afin and Ayoade

She had to talk with a mother Ayoade decided, her situation had deteriorated farther than she planned. She put her baby on her back and pulled her wrapper up to his neck. She wrapped it around herself and tucked in its edge. She secured him on her slim hips with an oja. She pulled out the coral beads around her neck that were caught in her wrapper. She may not be the wife of the Alaafin on the throne, but she was an Ayaba, an office she held for life. When she walked slowly out of the Aafin gates the Teetu didn’t disturb her. They saw her and looked away. A year ago, two of them would have fallen behind her and followed her wherever she went. She was glad she had become a nobody. A nobody could pretend that the lack of attention allowed her to cover her shame. She yawned and dragged on her tired body. Since her visit to Esu’s mound that night, she had not enjoyed a night of deep sleep. She knew she had to stay awake until Esu avenged her, but the trickster Orisa couldn’t be rushed, and Ayoade had stolen many moments of sleep.

Iya Aafin, the mother of the Aafin, spoke into the ears of Alaafin the words women in the Aafin and markets in Oyo whispered in their hearts and rooms. Both men and women respected her and knew her as one of the mothers who held their meetings at the iroko tree in the night market square, and the Alaafin’s eyes and ears in the Ogboni’s iledi meetings. Ayoade sought her out, because Ayoade’s maternal grandmother the who had raised her as her own and Iya Aafin came from the same village. When one’s in trouble, it is one’s relatives one runs to find a solution.

Iya Aafin’s mouth puckered, when a servant told her that Ayaba Ayoade came to check on her to ask Iya Aafin how old age treated her. Iya Aafin didn’t let the servant hear her hiss of unbelief, but she couldn’t keep her shock from off her face when the servant told Iya Aafin not to allow her visitor sit near her. She couldn’t believe the servant’s audacity. While Iya Aafin waited
for Ayoade to be shown into a room, she recalled seeing the surly young Ayaba many times in the Aafin, during the reign of her husband, Alaafin Ajaka. A rude young woman who let the Iya Aafin know she greeted the older woman reluctantly. Iya Aafin who had seen a lot in her life, wasn’t too concerned by the Ayaba’s behaviour. She had lived through the reigns of three Alaafin, and she knew one thing was common to all times, the effect of power and wealth on the lives of people who didn’t have a good heart—it made them mad.

Iya Aafin’s servants served Ayoade water; she sat on a mat in a room and waited. She had removed her baby from her back, and suckled him when Iya Aafin walked in. Ayoade rose up and knelt to greet her. Iya Aafin couldn’t sit down, not because Ayoade greeted her well, but because she understood the servant’s forwardness now. A swarm of buzzing dunghill flies covered the young women who knelt to greet her, and she stank like a latrine. Iya Aafin moved her stool near the door, covered her nose with her ipele and breathed through her mouth.

“So you do know how to greet your elders,” Iya Aafin said

“Please don’t be angry with your daughter,” Ayoade said.

“Daughter?”

“Please don’t turn me away.”

Iya Aafin waited for her to speak, one doesn’t put words into the mouth of Ayoade’s kind. One waited for them to speak, and one picked through their words, searching for the little truths, if any mistakenly slipped out of their mouths. Iya Aafin knew Ayoade shouldn’t have come to her for help. She had sat in the meeting that sentenced Ayoade’s husband to exile. She had agreed to it for the good of Oyo. She knew Ayoade knew this too and would never forget.

Ayoade leaned on the wall and began to cry, her baby looked up at her and he began to cry too. The older woman turned her face away stretched out her hands and collected the baby
from Ayoade, thankfully, he didn’t stink. Ayoade crumbled to the floor, the flies that had settled on her, rose, hovering over the wailing woman. The child in Ayoade’s hands had propped her up, with him gone, she had no need to hold back her tears. The baby in Iya Aafin’s arms cried louder. Iya Aafin knew Ayoada’s tears were real; this woman had something bigger than her weighing her down. She could feel the Ayoade’s heartbreak and shame. She crooned to the baby and watched his mother hunched on the floor. Her body shook with the force of her tears. Iya Aafin said nothing. When mother and child stopped crying, they both shuddered, and they heaved as one. Iya Aafin allowed her time to compose herself.

“It is okay daughter, tell me what ails you?”

“Nothing mother, I wanted to greet you.”

“Nothing? With all that I see and smell?”

“I wanted to be among my relatives.”

“Your relatives? What have you done, child?”

“I’m sorry for disrespecting you.”

“Forgive me, but I didn’t know we were related.”

“We are.”

“We are?”

“Yes, your grandmother and my parents are from the same village.”

“You are a disgrace.”

“I know mother.”

Ayoade rose on her knees again, she begged Iya Aafin.

“What is the name of your son?

“Oba oke agbejami”
“Ah a weighty name, the king above will fight for me. May his name define him.”

“Thank you, mother.”

“But you didn’t let Olodumare fight for you.”

“I didn’t mother.”

“Have you eaten?”

“I’m not hungry mother. My problem is not food.”

“That’s obvious.”

“I’m here to run under your cover.”

“Sit down, what did you do?”

Ayoade sat down, and tried to tell Iya Aafin what she did, but the words were too heavy, they stuck in her throat. She couldn’t push them out. Iya Aafin waited, “think about your child, the words will come. What did you do?”

“…”

“I’m waiting daughter.”

“I offered palm kernel oil to Esu on behalf of the new Alaafin.”

“Aaah. Abomination! What have you done child?”

The child in Iya Aafin’s arms began to cry again, both women ignored him.

“Can this be reversed?”

“Have you been sleeping.”

“I tried mother not to. I dozed, didn’t sleep.”

“Ah…dozed.”

“It’s been over three months now.”

“Point to your baby with your index finger.”
Ayoade did.

“How many fingers pointed back at you?”

“Four.”

“When you do one evil deed against anyone, four will follow you and yours.”

“I am doomed.

“Ashes follow the one that throws them in the air.”

Ayoade tried to grab the edge of Iya Aafin wrapper, but she didn’t let her.

“Go back to the Aafin and care for your child. I will ask other elders if what you did can be undone.”

“Don’t abandon me mother.”

“I won’t.”

Iya Aafin watched her go. She shook her head at the once proud woman now reduced to a walking dunghill and her own swarm of flies. “And I thought I had seen it all, so there are still new things.” She breathed in deeply and thanked Olodumaare for clean air. “Any servant about, get a broom in here,” she called out. One ran into the room with a new broom, “No, go and get an old one. Sweep away that woman’s feet far from my abode. Sweep it out of my gates, on to the pathway and keep on sweeping until you don’t see the roof on my building. When you’re done burn the broom.”

Iya Aafin knew the number one issue to be discussed at the meeting tonight, the unseen war raging in Oyo. Esu didn’t come for a friendly visit to Oyo, Ayoade had given him his taboo as an offering. He may be the cause of the madness of the Alaafin, the Oyo Mesi, and his warlords. The council must find a way to balance out the evil, or Oyo will perish.
The war against Ile-Ife

On the muddy banks of the Mokuru River men of all ages collected glimmering specks of gold. They sang as they swiveled mounds of mud and water about in potsherds and calabashes; a fast-paced song that took their minds off the backbreaking task off sieving mud for gold that belonged to another. Gold had little value to Ile Ife and the Oduduwa kingdoms that it birthed, but the Berbers that came from the far north coveted the metal and bought it from the Ooni. Ile-Ife kept its gold a secret and only a few traders knew of it. Ife’s gold market lay off the heavily travelled route westward to the land of the Ashanti and Sonke. For Mokuru gold, the Ooni got brass, copper, horses, and salt from the Berbers. The singing miners didn’t own their bodies; they were slaves of the Ooni. They worked completely naked, without body hair, day and night under the watchful eyes of armed Ogungbe.

The Edi festival, a yearly Ife festival in honour of Yemoo Moremi would hold in ten days. Ile-Ife remembered the terrible sacrifice Moremi made to end the attacks of invaders. Ife remembered and celebrated her and their new-found peace. The celebrations consoled the early residents of Ife, the Igbo, of their loss to the new rulers, and the reintegration of many peoples into the walled metropolis of Ife. The five provinces that made up the kingdom also prepared for the festival. It took a five-day week trek to get to Ife capital from the Alaye province; it’s a distance to Ijebu Ode in south took less days. Iwaraw’s sprawl stopped at the Oni River, and its residents traded with the closer kingdom of Ondo. Ido province northwest of Ile Ife could be seen from Ile Ife’s gates, both people were close, and their children married. The boundaries of Ijugbe province were Ikire and a big river that overflowed its boundaries during the rains and covering the section of the Ooni’s highway that passed through the province. Oke Awo the last province sat on the western boundaries of Ife, sat end of the Ooni’s highway near to Oyo.
Obalaye, Obawara, Onpetu of Ido, Obalejugbe of Ijugbe, and Owafegun of Okeawo, the five provincial kings went to Ife with entourages to celebrate the Edi festival. The Ile Ife people resident in the metropolis talked about their processions for days after the festival. People would argue about which king and his wives wore the most beautiful clothes. Did you see the red of the Onpetu’s Ayaba’s alari? I wonder where they got their dye. I saw it another would say, but I’m still in awe of the deep indigo of the etu of Obawara and his wives. Their styles would be replicated in many smaller towns and villages after the festival. The five provinces of metropolitan Ile Ife swelled with the number of people coming to celebrate Moremi. Traders came to Ife markets to make quick sales. Oja Ife in front of Ooni’s Aafin burst with goods from far and near and the Emese and Ogungbe had a hard job of keeping the happy but rowdy crowd in order.

During the Edi festival, the Igbo reenacted their final surrender to Oduduwa every year, many wore their shame over their new Edi garments and tried to laugh and dance. They would have preferred to stay indoors, but the Ooni didn’t permit this, none participants were punished by the Emese with whips. Ife was one and that oneness they celebrated during Edi. Oluyare masquerades from compounds of the descendants of the Igbo paraded the streets. They wore body-covering raffia, mimicking the raffia the Igbo wore when they attacked Ife. They also wore ejigba beads like the Ooni, though theirs were not as spectacular as his. And the history of theirs choked them as they danced about Ife in the hot dry season sun. On their heads were replicas of the are crown Oduduwa took from the head ruler of the Igbo. Their aso oke covered feet kicked up dust as they danced round Ife, and many Ife clapped for them. But to some Ife elders who lived through the Ife wars, the Oluyare masquerades become the Igbo attackers again, and they relived the terror of the wars during the Edi festival.
But the overthrown Igbo ruler Obatala wasn’t forgotten too, Stone sculptures of Obatala and Yemoo Moremi were paraded around the streets of Ife. All day the people of Ife went about eating in each other’s compounds. Groups of children went into family compounds hungry, and they came out with stomachs bulging with amala and egunsi, their lips and hands red with oil from akara. And at night, flaming torches were lit and brandished by charging men and boys, a spectacular show of how Ife drove the Igbo away. At this sacred moment Owu decided to war against Ife, they amassed an army at the western border province of Oke Awo. Owu knew that activities in Ife were winding down for the festival, even the Ogungbe and Emese looked forward to the time of rest. This group of Owu warriors had no conscience, they saw no wrong in attacking Ife, the land that birthed them. They knew metal or wood lifted against Ife will not heed the command of an Oduduwa descendant. Oduduwa had put a covering over Ife, a curse. It protected the land from his sons constant squabbling. But this Ooni knew he had done wrong; he had put his left hand in the Owu – Oyo war by conspiring against Apomu, while befriending Oyo with his right hand. The restless Owu, always hungry for war poked around for Mokuru and sent spies to the river. They turned their gaze to the gold of Ile Ife and coveted it. They would pay back the Oni for his interference. The Olowu provoked Ooni Alayemore; he asked for a huge tribute from Mokuru gold. The Ooni responded by telling him to respect his elders, he after all he fathered of them all. The Olowu replied, elders who do not respect themselves will be disgraced.

The impending Owu war opened new wounds in Ife, and the discounted Ife Igbo, rallied around this threat and began to ferment trouble. They whispered into many ears that the time to shake of the yoke of the descendants of Oduduwa had arrived. They would not fight in a war with their enemy. Oyo heard about this war when Owu conceived it and decided to stay out of the fray. Sango knew the defeated and shamed Owu wanted a war with anyone. Owu always had
a warring boil close to bursting and Sango didn’t want any of its pus on him. He also didn’t want to give Owu an opportunity to avenge their defeat from Oyo. The Alaafin commanded his Basorun and Gbonka and Olu Ode to stay clear of Ile-Ife. He warned Oyo born to stay away from Apomu and the Oja Ife. Oyo would not come for any captured Oyo who traded in the two markets in Owu and Ife.

* The Owu troops walked within sight of Ife’s walls but didn’t come within the range of Ife arrows. They could see Ife warriors stationed behind the bamboo wicker-work that topped its wall. They left as silently as they had come, sneaking up on Ife warriors several times. The Ife walls were three times higher than the tallest Owu and thick enough for six men to walk on its top side-by-side. A deep wide moat bounded the walls and it filled up with slushy mud during the rainy season. During the dry season the mud dried up to reveal stakes and thorns planted in the moat deliberately. Ooni Alayemoore doubled the Ogungbe stationed at the eight gates of Ile-Ife’s outer walls, and had its bridges dismantled. The tollgates on roads near Ife were unmanned as all available men were recalled back to Ile-Ife. Traders avoided Apomu market and the main road around Ife. Using back roads, they diverted their trade to the smaller Ominrinrin market.

Day and night, the Owu taunted the Ife at the walls, their eyes were terrible to look at, bitter and haughty, but they did not battle the Ife.

They quake for their shadows
The sons of the fearful
They are afraid to war
They shame their ancestors
The sons of bastards
Who hide behind the wall built by our ancestors

Owu made sure the Ife knew of their presence then retreated to a plain, a hole in the forest, shut in by group of rocks. They didn’t approach the narrow paths, twisting through the thick forest and undergrowth that would lead them into the hands of waiting Ife warriors. Outside Ife walls, the drums of the Owu continued to insult, “puny Ife and its Ooni who didn’t come out to war but sent his war chiefs to clean up his mess. Olowu fights his battles; our young warriors will deal with your treachery here. Arokin will chant of this war, we will have the glory, you the shame.”

In the Ile-Ife Aafin, behind the closed Enu Geru Afin gates, Oni Alayemoore hid in his rooms behind the massive gates. He could see its colossal ayan rafters from his kobi but he knew the gates didn’t keep him safe. Oduduwa’s curse did. This curse would come on any of his children that attacked Ife. The Ooni knew that the Owu didn’t come to ransack the Aafin Ife, even the hotheaded Owu would not do this. The Owu came to repay him for his treachery, after sending their message they will leave. He feared the price Ife had to pay to quench Owu thirst for war and revenge.

The Ooni looked to his subjects, Ugbo Ife, Tapa, Ehele, and Iyagba to prove they were one with the new Ife. Some looked the other way, others joined the fight and Ooni Alayemoore let them be. He would deal with them after the Owu war. The Iyagba and Elu quarters of Ife provided units of warriors that were proud to fight for Ife. Their commanders led them to war, under the command of Ife war generals.

Both armies met at a field between two strips of forest in Iwo land, but the coronet king of Iwo made his neutrality known to both kings. They could fight on his land and feed their troops off the farms of Iwo, but his people were not to be preyed on. Both kings told him that
those within their walled towns and villages were safe, any loiterer will be seen as a spy and conscripted to the war. The weaker king accepted the conditions. He warned his people to store up on food and stay within their walls and mind their own problems.

Balogun Ogunkeye led Ife warriors to the plain. He knew it well. He had hunted with his brother hunters here. He had killed an elephant on the plains when younger. He knew the tress that grew in the patches near the Ajuwon cave and the tiny river that slithered through rocks at Ijaiye. He knew that Owu had chosen a wall of trees that would not allow for escape. They wanted their message to the Ooni to ring loud. Ife should have remained neutral. The Owu willingly lured Ife into this tight spot that could be disastrous for them. Balogun Ogunkeye knew the Owu never retreat and they didn’t want to give Ife the choice to retreat. Ife and Owu knew whoever wins the war had to go past the other and walk out of this field on blood.

Balogun Ogunkeye, the chief Ife warlord put his deputies, Otun, Osi, and Asipa over three of the five groups of conscripted men from the five provinces of Ife. His circle of personally trained warriors were the heads of Ife’s five thousand select warriors. Akogun headed another group of warriors skilled in face to face combat. Ogunwusi, his childhood friend, headed the last group, the rear guard, made up of old experienced warriors. In Aafin Ife, a war council had held in the Emese balcony. It decided that the troops be split in five parts and Ife should attack the Owu simultaneously, and each head could act independent of Balogun Ogunkeye.

Akogun, the Ile-Ife town warlord and his men unexpectantly ran into some Owu warriors that were bringing in supplies from an Iwo farm. The Akogun on the way to secure their assigned position formed a ring around the Owu warriors and fell on them. When the akogun and his men left that battle field their war drum boomed of how they had struck down thousands of
Owu warriors. Akogun’s men sang and danced and there was silence in the Owu camp that night, their drums didn’t talk.

The next day, Ife swooped on the Owu enclave, attacking them from five fronts but Owu couldn’t be caught unawares. They knew Ife, and its war tactics. The war leaders of both kingdoms had fought on the same side, fighting off the Nupe and Ibariba. The Owu driven by their pride and the Ife driven by the need to survive, fought their brothers on the battlefield of Iwo. The forest rang with metal, grunts and groans; drums rallied troops, reporting events truthfully and deceptively. In the afternoon, the heavens opened its windows and rain fell. It came down in torrents impeding both sides from seeing. The battle stopped, and warriors dispersed into the forest or headed for caves.

The Owu regrouped early the next morning and went after the sheltering Ife. They caught an Ife splinter in a cave. Owu threw brands fire into it and waited at the mouth of the cave for warriors that tried to escape. They hacked them down. The Ife that didn’t come out were killed by smoke or burnt alive. They caught up with another Ife group on a ridge; the warriors drenched from the rain had taken off their clothes and charms and spread them out to dry on the rock. The Owu ran into the gathering. They took off their clothes to even the fight, and both groups fought against each other in loincloths.

In the evening, both sides met in the hole in the forest, the Owu had finally driven most of the Ife warriors into it. Akogun chose a band of trusty war veterans; they cut through the forests and attacked Owu in the rear. They made a path of escape for some Ife warriors, but they could only keep it open for a while before they fell back beyond the machetes of the younger Owu warriors. Ife retreated.
The swords of Owu prevailed on that day in the fields of Iwo. The Owu didn’t want Mokuru gold, they wanted a war to cool their raging blood. They went home satiated; they had bought back a bit of their pride. When news of Ife’s defeat got to Oyo, Alaafin Sango knew that the Owu would attack Oyo again. He had to attack Ilesa, an ally of Owu, only one a day away from Oyo, but he didn’t know how but how to deal with Osun’s tantrums.

The defeated Ile-Ife warriors regrouped and camped at the Ijio boulder, a huge diamond rock that reflected the sun and announced the border of Ile Ife to all that journeyed to it. In the clefts of the hills that surrounded the Ijio rock, the warriors tried to hide, but Ijio lit up their disgrace. They knew they would not be welcomed back home, so under the cover of darkness, each man returned to his compound. The Ife warlord Ogunkeye knew he needed more than darkness to cover his shame. In despair, he stamped his right foot on the ground thrice. The earth opened its mouth to receive him, and Ogunkeye became a living rock.
Songs of Mourning

The wars ushered in unending cycles of forty nights of mourning. Family compounds gripped with many sorrows cried for the loss of their sons and daughters whose blood-soaked lands far away from home. Some received pared nails and hair clipping of sons and daughters, but they couldn’t forget that their bodies became food for animals, and they couldn’t give them a befitting burial. The onset of the four-month rainy season in the Oyo savannah fell between the tenth and the fifth months of the year, and this stalled the movements of the Oyo army. The warriors returned to their farms in metropolitan Oyo and its provinces. Weeds grew tall in the farms of the men that didn’t return and their women cursed the many wars that cut off the lives of the young, and they especially cursed Gbonka and Olu Ode

In the forest, the rainy season lasted for seven months, and in those months the rivers swelled and became unpassable. The many paths and highways that connected Oyo and its many neighbours to its south lay under sheets of water that poured from the skies. Relative peace pervaded in the savannah and the rain forest; people married and birthed and buried their dead.

Baba-ni-kin-joko didn’t return home to Oyo. The only son born to his mother in old age; Romoke had pulled him down from Olodumare with prayers and many offerings. But only his mother knew the baby his old father died before Baba-ni-kin-joko was born. Baba-ni-kin-joko grew up spoilt, not one thing did he learn to do. His mother bathed him till he was thirteen and only stopped when his father’s brothers threatened to take the boy away from her. A delighted Romoke had dances round the family compound when an Eso requested that her son be one of his war boys. She agreed and prayed that her son be greater than the Oyo warrior.

Her son left home and didn’t return, not even his body came back to Oyo. She told her husband’s brothers, “I want to see my son’s grave.” They looked at each other perplexed.
“Romoke’s mourning has made her mad. You know it is an abomination for a parent to know their child’s grave.” But Romoke didn’t mind them, she struck her breasts and cried the more. Romoke wore black clothes and sat in a circle of women and they mourned her son together. The last thing she uttered before she slept at night was a curse, and the first thing she said in the morning was a curse, for Gbonka and Olu Ode.

Confusion that makes mad will not depart your house
It shall cling to your clothes and become one with your inner head
It will cloud your life and push you to misbehave
Your innards will never know peace
Your liver and your bile will never be at ease
With your own hands you will bury your children
With your own hands you will dig your own graves

*
The many tongues of the Ibariba

The three Ibariba kings rule over peoples and not lands

The boundaries of their domains overlap surrounding nations

The peoples of the Ibariba plateau frequently moved from place to place, and their boundaries set in sands shifted when they crossed into Nikki, Illo or Bussa as they pleased. But they knew where they came from and that they were ruled by rulers who were not of their clans, who wanted them out of their towns. The descendants of three sons of Kisra welcomed them but the earth lords who ruled the land before closed the Plateau to foreigners. These earth lords still had power, their daughters birthed the sons that sat on the thrones of the three Ibariba kingdoms.

Gah-sunon and Sarkin Fulani Bussa were already in the meeting place, they were joined by the Fuldunga Nikki, all three men were Fulani. The first man a-go-between his people and Ibariba kings, who spoke the language of the ruling house and that of his people. The other two men collected cattle and milk tax, and royalties on animals for the Ibariba kings.

“The Nikki king is sick, and there is talk of a war with Oyo,” Gah-sunon said. The other men grunted and thought about the possible fallouts for the minorities in Nikki.

“The Ibariba do not trust us, we carry no arms in their lands,” Sarkin Fulani Bussa said.

“We are Gando,” Fuldunga Nikki said.

“Not slaves. We are slightly above slaves,” Gah-sunon said.

Even among the Fulani they were class lines, sedentary Fulani saw themselves as more Ibariba the wandering nomadic Bororo Fulani who were believed to have no allegiances. These three men knew their bloodlines to the seventh generation and that knowledge stood between them. It shaped their thoughts and their behaviors to one another. They kept quiet when the Mokole entered the room. They greeted him, halfheartedly. Mokole of Kandi had ties with Oyo,
and the Ibariba never forgot the source of the Mokole. The Ibariba and the other minorities accused them as being spies for the Oyo and Ijesa and Ife. In the past, the Mokole had been dependents of Songhay. When the choke of Gao, the Songhay king became unbearable. They appealed to the king of Nikki instead of Ife or Oyo for help from Gao’s rampaging Dendi warriors. The Nikki king sent his warriors and they routed the Dendi. The grateful Mokole settled on Nikki land on the Ibariba border with Oyo.

Wanagara had the three perpendicular marks of the Dendi on his cheeks; he had settled in Borgu after his uncle put him in-charge of his long-distance caravans in Nikki. The Ibariba looked down on the Wanagara, and their penchant for carrying Islam wherever their caravans rolled into. The earth gods were enough for them. Wanagara settled on a mat beside Fuldunga Nikki and said,

“I bring news of the restiveness in Oyo, and the cooperation between Oyo and the Tapa.” Four pairs of eyes turned to look at the Mokole man who pretended not to hear what the Wangara man had just said.

The Sina Gorigui, a Woaba, and an official in the Nikki court, whose ceremonial hoes indicated the number of years of the king had sat in the shadows, listening to words spoken in his hallowed presence. Sina Gorigui had spoken with his counterpart in Bussa of a similar meeting that held in Bussa. The kings at Bussa and Nikki didn’t know of these meetings. They were the fire seeds of rebellion. The representatives from the riverine communities of the Gungawa, Laru and Loparu came through the door at the same time. They were late; they had travelled from the western and eastern banks of the greater river. They knew as minorities they had to support each other in this meeting; they sat beside each other, their bodies touching. The ancestors of the
riverine communities had fought against the Ibariba, and after the unsuccessful attack they return home but settled amid their former enemies.

“What would happen to us when the Oyo come?” Fuldunga Nikki

“Is there a prince favoured by the Nikki king makers?” one of the riverine representatives said.

“We can’t even have weapons to defend ourselves,” Sarkin Fulani Bussa said again.

The Mokole man said nothing and tried to make himself smaller.

Beresomi, the gatekeeper of the Kisra kings spoke for them, “we need to be one with our hosts to be at peace.” He had become a chief in the Nikki courts after his kinsmen were overthrown by Kisra and his followers. Beresomi had been in such a meeting like this, it spoke of the cracks that usually appeared in kingdoms where seeds of distrust grew unchecked. Nobody in the meeting heeded his wise words. Ki-Kparu-De, a Mande, the only man from the northern kingdom of Illo, dressed in richly embroidered gown scowled at the complaining men. They reminded him of children fighting over a piece of meat, “this is a waste of my time,” he said to no one in particular. Illo was the last town on the old western boundary of Songhai and it still had ties to the western kingdom, for the Ki-Kparu-De, if the Mande had to choose between Ibariba or Songhai. He knew he would go with Songhai.

The Kamberi highlanders were not at this meeting. They were not invited, even if they been invited, they would refuse to be in a meeting discussing their domination by the descendants of Kisra. Nobody ruled them, and they were not under anyone. The Kamberi lived in near seclusion in rocky enclaves in the highest plateau. They were one of the first peoples in Ibariba land and they retained their rituals; their political relationships were with outsiders and
not the Ibariba. A Shanga speaker spoke up for the Shangawa and Kengawa from eastern Ibariba, “Bussa is the weakest Ibariba point. It rides on the superiority of their origin story.”

“Don’t we all?” the Mokole man muttered.

“We all know we are superior to the other, but we all know we must constantly evolve to survive,” Ki-Kparu-De said.

“How do we survive these times?” Fuldunga Nikki said.

“You forget the king may be old and cold, but he is not yet dead.” Sina Gorigui said, I just gave his thirteenth hoe. The Baatonun and Busa rulers of Nikki, Bussa and Illo were not present at this meeting. They were in their palaces, but they knew, “he that knows you is he that will kill you.”
The Night of Twins

In Oyo, twin royal sons were conceived on a night of consolation, two seeds were planted in Òyá’s womb. When her monthly blood flow didn’t come when it should have, Òyá stayed in her rooms and waited for it. Days went by, her flow or monthly cramps didn’t come. She didn’t tell anyone she had conceived. Òyá tried to cover her happiness from prying eyes. She couldn’t; she glowed, and her servants and slaves gloated. The Aafin found out even though she tried to hide her pregnancy as long as she could. She stayed indoors but the traffic of babalawo, iyanifa, and onisegun that frequented her courts let out her secret, and the Aafin danced giddy with joy. Sango the proud father to be, smiled more and exuded a calmness never seen, and a wind of peace blew over the Oyo. Alaafin Sango forgot about the Ijesa war, the prisoners in the dungeons thinned out. The Aafin celebrated for days, the Alaafin gifted all that came to the Aafin with presents. The babalawo, iyanifa, and onisegun made Òyá eat pots of putrid, peppery, and sweet concoctions; she drank fermented, bitter, slimy brews. She gagged as she swallowed the contents of these pots, but she kept them down. They would make her babies strong and keep her delivery time short and smooth.

During her pregnancy, Alaafin Sango resided in Òyá’s courts, forsaking concubines and other Ayaba. He treated Òyá like an egg, careful not to crack her. He left the running of the kingdom to the Oyo Mesi and the Ogboni. Ona-Efa, Oba’s eunuch briefed him twice daily; he reported the meetings his mother, and she directed the Aafin through him. Iya Aafin reported to the Alaafin once a day and checked on Oya; the buffalo woman’s wellbeing shone. The Alaafin received a version of the truth in each report, the Alaafin knew he had to sift through the clutter to get to the matter. The strange alliance between Oba and Osun became stronger and developed an evil and vindictive vein. They never spoke aloud of this agreement, but they decided to hurt the pregnant Oya. They watched Òyá and Afefe take their evening walks around the Aafin, both
woman locked their eyes on the women from across the main Aafin courtyard; their insides burned with envy.

During the fifth month of her pregnancy, the usually cool airy rooms of the Aafin became too muggy for Òyá, even Afefe’s winds were hot. Òyá and Afefe would sneak out of the Aafin and take walks in the Aafin’s household forest. But her sister Ayaba always knew when she left the Aafin and both of them made sure they were always in the Kaa Ile Koto or the Kaa Adodo courtyards that were adjacent the Ayaba quarters. Oba and Osun sat under verandas of the kaa and talked about Oya. Their voices loud enough to be heard in the women’s quarters

“The buffalo has returned.”

“The one without kin.”

“The cheat.”

“The stick that thinks she’s pregnant with the heir.”

On one such day, Òyá sneaked out during the midday sun, in the humid heat of the dry season. She forgot that pregnant women didn’t walk about at that time of the day, because mischievous child spirits roamed about. Òyá passed by the crossroads that led to the Odan stream, cool winds blew under the bamboo grove that grew along its banks. She sat on a slab of rock that jutted out of the stream and put her feet into the slowly flowing stream. On her way home, by the crossroads one of these spirit children drove out one of the babies in her womb and snuck in. Òyá crumbled to the ground, before Afefe could catch her. Òyá felt her womb deflate and swell up but she didn’t think about it. She didn’t think it strange, so she didn’t tell anyone.

From that day, the two she carried in her womb fought. They would twist her innards, and she would faint from the pain. The changeling’s romping with its twin made Òyá deaf to the taunts of her sister Ayaba, and this made them more determined to crack through her haze of
unconcern. They showed their hate in many ways, but they covered their tracks well because they didn’t want to incur the anger of their husband who eagerly awaited the arrival of his heir. But Òyá’s pregnancy lasted for more than nine months, and the number of babalawo, iyanifa, and onisegun in her quarters doubled. These women and men that spoke the words of the Ifa Oracle couldn’t explain the reason for the delay. Esu had no message for them but they feared the Alaafín’s wrath, so they lied. Tenth month, they said. When it passed, “eleventh month” they said. Their words kindled a fire in Alaafín Sango. The twelfth month passed, and the fire became a roaring blaze, he beheaded them, cut out their lying tongues, stringed them together. But his actions didn’t make them see, it made their stammer and talk rubbish.

By the thirteenth month, Esu lifted the veil; he had covered their divination boards with a haze that made them read messages he didn’t give. They were charlatans that he made into examples to deter others. Esu allowed only one of them to see aright, the only one, who had offered his offerings to him. She sought knowledge and Esu answered her. The iyanifa told Osun, “you would be pregnant for a year and two months. Be strong daughter, you have only one month to go.”

“But why mother?”

“The Oracle didn’t say.”

Osun and Oya heard this and ridiculed the already suffering woman the more.

“It is because she’s a buffalo,” Oba said.

Osun said, “She takes after her kind, they give birth later than we do.”

“Our husband should ask the hunters how long it takes buffaloes to give birth.”

“She doesn’t need a delivery woman, her kin don’t need help, they just give birth.”
Osun could hear them; she had had enough of their hurtful banter. She sent Afefe to them, “Tell them, scorn cannot see honey; but mockery cannot say honey should not be sweet.” As the time of her delivery came near, Alaafin decided not to allow the mothers to tend to his Oya. He stopped Iya Aafin from seeing Oya. He invited delivery women from his and her mother’s land to Oyo. He told Iya Aafin, he did so his wife wouldn’t miss her dead mother. Even though Iya Aafin knew he had other reasons, she said she agreed with his decision. The two delivery women arrived in Aafin Oyo from Tapa, and they were ensconced in Oya’s courts. The women saw the on-going battle between the babies in Òyá they didn’t see the deed done by the mothers, whose offer of help had been spurned by the Alaafin.

The Tapa women tried to help Oya as best as they could. They knew that in Oyo and its sister kingdoms, when twins were about to be birthed the younger sends the older to go see and taste of the world, and report back to the older. If the younger says the world outside looked evil, not conducive for them; the babies returned to where they came from. The changeling in Osun’s womb tried to send the other twin out to see the twin but he didn’t budge. He got here first, he told his changling brother.

On the third day, the mothers sent Iya Aafin to the Alaafin, tell him we are behind this. The distraught father-to-be begged the mothers and did all Iya Aafin demanded he should do to assuage their anger. The mothers had hanged Oya’s pregnancy on a nail in their iroko tree. With their anger spent they took the nail out, and compelled the changeling to come out, his mother’s life he couldn’t take. Oya’s womb contracted violently and became too hot for the changling who had been as still as a pebble in a pot of water in her insides.

The changeling twin came out first bawling his frustration at the mother who made him come out. They named him Taiwo/Taye, the younger twin because he tasted the world first. He
refused to be comforted, even when his mother tried to suckle him. They didn’t know why he came out angry, but they knew that babies could still see through the veil that divided the unseen and seen worlds. The quiet twin came out later riding on a strong contraction. The older twin, Kehinde came out eager to come out to see the world, his twin had failed to tell him about. His eyes were wide open and filled with his mother’s blood. Iya Aafin closed them and rocked him to sleep. The delivery women tended the sickly and small changeling constantly. He breathed in short gasps taking away everybody’s attention from his well-behaved brother. The smile on his jaundiced face looked like that of an adult that got what he wanted, a very content one. He knew what he came to do, and he looked forward to doing it.

The delivery women dunked him in a tub filled with slices of unripe pawpaw and white onions steeped in the barks, leaves, and roots of the stool wool tree. He smiled thorough the ordeal, his yellow eyes trained on them. They gave him a mixture of bitterleaf and lemon juice, he smacked his lips with glee. They noticed that whenever they brought both twins together the Kehinde the older would curl up his fists and cry. The other, Taiwo smiled weakly, as if he relished the agony of his brother, “What manner of children are these?” the women asked themselves and they kept them separate.
Oyo Mesi and the Kaa Idi Obi (Sango’s absence)

Seven were the days the Alaafin spent in the southern forest away from the Aafin, and Oyo didn’t know of his absence. Sango left behind his beaded fringed crown on the throne of his fathers in the Kaa Idi Obi. He exchanged his royal regalia for a hunter’s garb, a leather bag slung across his shoulders, an empty water gourd, a parcel of ekuru, and his double headed axe. Biri went with him, walking behind Sango in his shadows. A power vacuum didn’t exist in power; the other two arms of the Oyo government filled in for his absence. They dispensed justice, and their judgments were stood firm. And the Oyo Mesi met in the Kaa Idi Obi as they had when the Alaafins Oyo were resident.

On the first day of Alaafin Sango’s absence, the Oyo Mesi saw the heads of Oyo villages and hamlets. Early in the morning, the Kaa Esin filled up with the horses of these noblemen that came to renew their yearly allegiance to the Alaafin. They came bearing gifts and detailed reports from the hinterland and surrounding lands. Aafin servants helped them off their horses and showed them into the Kaa Idi Obi. By noon, grass for the horses and their droppings had filled the courtyard, and a storeroom set aside for their gifts overflowed with things unique to each baale’s domain.

On the wooden two-sided door panel of the Kaa Idi Obi, lizards bobbed their heads, snakes slithered across the length of the door and birds flew over their yawning mouths. In the upper left corner, an oba sat on a throne, and his conical crown nearly touched the royal umbrella over him. He looked down on at the lives of his subjects carved in wood. Hunters with slain animals, a woman held an ifa tray, a palm tapper climbed up a bent palm tree, a warrior on horseback accompanied my servants, and near the edge, a man and woman’s entwined bodies were next to the child kicking at their feet. The doors opened to a vast circular enclosure. The walls of the Kaa Idi Obi soaked in words spoken, and the ones not said, still rumbling in the
insides of the occupants of the room. Its insides were dark, no matter the number of lamps lit in it; it hid sneers and hand and eye signals well. What it didn’t hide were farts, snickers or guffaws. It amplified sounds. Bashorun, the prime minister of Oyo presided over the meeting. Basorun spoke for the people of Oyo, and their backing not only gave him confidence, it made his words powerful. As the war general, the loyalty of the Oyo warlords and warriors made his words deadly; he had the largest number of warriors in the capital.

Agbakin, a warrior who loved Oyo, and fought in many of her past wars leaned on a post in the Kaa Idi Obi. Usually he sat to the right of the Alaafin and Sango trusted him to speak his mind even when it meant going against the Alaafin. Agbakin spoke the difficult words everyone feared to speak, and the Alaafin respected him for this. Samu’s insides were filled with greed, and he had a pot belly to show for his gluttony. He looked after his own only; a little man who inherited his family’s title over his disabled older brother, and he knew how to say the right words into the right ears to get what he wanted. Everyone knew that his vote could be bought with the right incentive. Alapini headed the religious cults and believed in the absoluteness of the monarchy. He occupied a difficult position because the Orisa and the Alaafin were sometimes not in alignment. But Alapini managed to reconcile the differences that existed within his many beliefs most of the time. Laguna, the state ambassador, travelled far beyond the length of the greater river and spoke more than ten languages. His mother, a Gambari trader, raised him in her country, and moved from one market to another trading cloth. Laguna returned to Oyo a young man, he spoke Oyo highlighted with the accents of the many languages he spoke. He tabled the problems with Oyo’s diplomatic relationships to the Oyo Mesi, usually he solved them without bring it to the notice of the Alaafin. Akiniku flattered and enjoyed plumping up the ego of everyone. Alaafin Sango knew his Adam’s apple ran along his scrawny throat when he flattered
or lied. Akiniku never spoke his thoughts in a forthright manner. It wasn’t in his nature, but he listened. He knew that the way to flatter a man’s ego hides in words he spoke. Akiniku wasn’t a nobleman. He hated anyone who reminded him that his wealth had gotten him a title and power; a junior member of the Oyo Mesi, he handled the finances, his head rattled with the sums of taxes and tributes from lands his feet have never touched but he knew each intimately. He could tell if the peoples of a land were stubborn or lazy by the consistency of the tribute they gave.

Asipa headed the guilds of Oyo hunters, and he led them out to war when Oyo needed warriors. These seven made up the Oyo Mesi, they are the response Oyo has to any question that bothers it peace.

“Welcome.” Asipa said, his eyes rested on each Oyo Mesi, “I have sent your shares of the Owu war to your houses.

“In the usual manner?” Samu said.

“Yes, half of everything goes to the Alaafin. The other half was halved, half of that goes to Basorun, the other half divided between the six of us,” Asipa said.

“Thank you,” Basorun said, “thank you for the good work. I will pay the warlords and the warriors.”

“Shouldn’t the Alaafin give a portion if his share to the warriors?” Samu said.

“But you know that is not our business,” Alapini said.

“Olu Ode and Gbonka need to be watched.” Agbakin said.

“Have you heard anything we should be afraid of?” Akiniku said.

“No. But I don’t trust those two. We should not go to sleep with a fire on our roofs,” Agbakin said. The truth in those words echoed around in the Kaa Idi Obi, but Agbakin’s advice
was ignored. The truth in words always came back to haunt the Oyo Mesi. The walls would cough them out in the future.

“The case of the prince from the Ekun Osi,” Basorun said, “what new information do you have on it Laguna?”

“It is now a stench in the land and the whole of Oyo waits to see how we deal with the matter,” Laguna said.

“Should we grant the man a pardon and risk the disfavor of the people?” Samu said.

“The family of the woman killed wants justice,” Agbakin said.

“And they will get justice,” Agbakin said, “let us vote.” The Oyomesi voted seven to nil to behead the prince.

“In the case of the Ikoyi prince we have decided to execute the culprit.” Basorun said.

“I took the liberty of inviting the Ogboni,” Alapini said.

The earth cult petrified Samu; he knew their eyes saw all. He hated their processions dressed in Oyo, lording their piety above everyone else. He also knew they saw the corruption that clung to his soul. He moved deeper into the shadows of the room and decided his voice wouldn’t be heard in the Kaa Idi Obi while they were present. An Ilari opened the Kaa Idi Obi’s carved doors for the Ogboni. Oluwo walked at the head of the procession and at the rear came Erelu, one of the titled women in the Ogboni council. The bells on their brass walking sticks shook as they walked in; they were topped with a bird with wings outspread, its head proudly raised. The Ogboni sat to a side of the room dispelling the darkness in that corner, as their white cloth reflected the little light in the room.

“We greet the Oyo Mesi.” Oluwo said.

“Oyo Mesi greets you too.” Basorun said.
“Please tell us the Ikoyi case Laguna,” Olowu said.

“The woman was killed when Prince Adekoya played a prank in the Agboju market,” Laguna said.

“It was a deadly joke,” Alapini said.

“He accused the woman of stealing his iyun because she turned down his advances. The beads were found in the woman’s basket, and the crowd at the market mobbed her. Adekoya went around the province boasting of what he had done. He said, nothing would be done to him a prince of Ikoyi. His father sent his staff of authority to this deliberation,” Laguna pointed to it, “its presence is noted.”

“But it will not sway us from our decision.” Agbakin said.

“It will not,” Basorun said.

“The Ogboni will do as it should,” Oluwo said.

“We will get ready all the necessary preparations for the execution,” Erelu said, the earth will not reject his blood as atonement.

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Sango walked around Oyo, a different part of his kingdom each day, careful not to be recognized. He ate amala and gbegiri at roadside food sellers; it wasn’t as good as Osun’s, but food tasted better eaten in peace. He missed sultry, and Oya raging in his arms. He found that Oba’s constant evil eyes gave him a constant pain in the head. He listened to his people talk about him; they hated and loved him in equal numbers. They hated the Oyo Mesi more and gave some his councilmen disparaging nicknames. Akiniki they called the long-necked turkey, and Samu the man pregnant with a gourd. His people heard of what happened in the capital rolled in layers of lies and truths until he didn’t know these events. Sango danced to bata drums in many
villages, and he remembered his days at Koso. He swum in the many-headed river that slithered through the home forest, and it refreshed him. He hunted in the forest, stalking antelopes and buffalo. Biri and Sango roasted meats with salt and peppers, and they drank sweet waters that tried to quench the rush of the capital in them. The smell of the forest seeped into his skin, dew soaked his clothes, and he remembered Oya and his sons, and they pulled his heart back to Oyo.
Hilly Country

Do shadows live
within town walls made of stone
Or do they only frolic
about in town halls made of mud and mortar

In the northern boundary of Oyo, near the upper western corner of Ogun River, perched Oke Amo and Gbagba towns, and to the east of the river the hilly lands of the Ondo and Ekiti were visible. Oke Amo and Gbagba built their town walls with stones piled high on top of each other without mortar, unlike their neighbours to the south. The people kept the walls up, and each family compound maintained a section of the wall and named it after themselves. Seven hills skipped about the land, dropping stones on the land around them, and restricting the spread of towns and villages. The people looked to the hills to keep out invaders, and the hills did. Amo and Gbagba shared a river, the brown waters of the Alo River splashed through black granite banks, smoothing edges of cleaved rocks and making them slippery. It brought the people of both towns together; they drank from it waters. Amo and Gbagba called themselves, children of the same mother, they didn’t intermarry. The villages in the other towns provided their wives for Amo and Gbagba towns. Their girls married and left for their husband’s towns, so all the married women in the two towns were not born there.

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A tree swayed under the weight of ripe oranges, and the owner of the tree vowed he would harvest them the next day. But before he could harvest the oranges the next day, an unexpected sad event happened. A young woman hung herself from the orange tree the night before. The weight of Molara’s’s dead body broke one of the main branches that held up the
already full crown. The branch gave way, and she fell to the earth, but the rope held tight to her neck and oranges scattered around her body. The farmer got to his farm early in the morning with empty baskets and left with empty baskets. He left Molara’s body by his orange tree, untouched.

Molara’s husband, Baba Agba died old and left behind many children and wives. His sons were older than Molara. Baba Agba married a young wife to renew his sluggish blood and keep him young. When news of Molara’s death reached inside the circle of hills, the men of Gbagba her relatives deliberated on her matter and sent a messenger to the town she died in, “what killed our sister?”

After Baba Agba’s death, his wives were reassigned to the males in the family, nephews, and brothers, and uncles. Gbenro, Baba Agba’s second cousin, got Molara. In her widow clothes, and in seclusion with the other co-wives, Molara had prayed for a younger man closer to her age. When she heard the family’s decision she cried more than ever, Gbenro had three wives and ten children, and much older than her. The women of the family begged her not to kill herself with tears. They thought she mourned their husband, but she cried because of another 10 years of rickety sex; the creaking of old bones and shallow breaths on top of her.

Molara had rejected Baba Agba, and her family had refused her wish. Her mother wrung her hands, as her father commanded Molara to marry the richest farmer in the villages spread outside the enclosure of the seven hills. Molara had wanted a younger man then too. She sobbed as her family sang and danced as they took her husband’s house. Her mother and father had thought nothing of it, all young brides cried. Lakunle stood taller than his brothers, who were short. He was the grandson of Baba Agba’s first cousin. He took after his mother, of medium height but well built. The first time she saw him he napped under an orange tree, after working
on his farm, while he waited for his midday meal from his sister and mother. He had greeted her when she walked by him. Lakunle’s existence kept her sane, she knew she would outlive Baba Agba, and she would get him. Molara had smiled when she heard of her husband’s death, happy his seed didn’t grow in her. She had feared to birth a sickly child, as her husband made only sickly children during his last years.

The orange farmer knew that the event of a suicide polluted a town, this corpse couldn’t be buried the normal way. The earth had to be appeased a life had been taken forcefully. He sent for the Ogboni that they may cleanse his farm and bury the body. That afternoon, the Ogboni procession made its way to his farm, just as the messengers from Gbagbo arrived. The village told the messengers from Gbagba that, “your sister’s covetousness killed her.”

All the town knew Molara, they brought breakfast from her, she made the best ogi and akara outside the seven hills, but they also remembered her for something else. Molara had said to the head of Baba Agba’s family that she wanted Lakunle or she would kill herself. The man had told her, “die if you must, but you will never marry Lakunle.” Even Lakunle’s mother objected to her outburst, “it is not right that the first woman in my son’s house be an old barren widow.” When she knew for sure certain that the family wouldn’t give her Lakunle. Molara untied her gele from her head, tore it into strips, and walked to the nearest orange tree.

When news of this death got to the provincial king in his Aafin, he commanded that the head of the compound be killed; he pushed the girl to her death. But the king only repeated what his young wife had suggested, “death, give both leave to settle this quarrel in heaven.” A servant who’d heard her suggestion told another servant. By the next day, the towns and villages outside the seven hills women whispered that in the provincial Aafin of Ekun Osi the women of Oyo controlled their husbands like Sango’s Ayaba Oya.

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Awolé Compound
The placenta comes with good and bad
First the birth, then the placenta
Together they come
Good and bad walk together

Awotunde walked back to his family compound, a strip of land near the westernmost walls of Oyo. His mother had sent a message to him by a son of a neighbouring compound on his way to buy pots in Ilésà. The boy gave Awotunde his mother’s message, a piece of raffia, and walked away quickly—someone would die soon. It took Awotunde two days to walk from Oyo metropolis to his farmstead. During the rainy season, and he tilled his farm and planted rows of yams and corn. During the dry season he hunted or warred, and his farm lay fallow. He headed home the next day, and he left behind his two teenage sons in the farm. He told them to remove weeds and make sure that the sticks that held up the tendrils of the yams stood up. He left his farm in care of Olaleye, his childhood friend whose farm lay adjacent to his.

The thick forest south of Oyo enclosed his farm, and it shared a boundary with the Alaafin’s highway. He walked by thick trunks of trees, whose wide-reaching canopies held back the bright noon sun, but some light filtered down in streaks of shades of green. He stopped by the tiny stream that halfway mark to Oyo well known to travelers. He stopped by it to wash his head and drink the cool water while resting for a while at the edge of the forest. During the afternoon of the second day, he turned the last corner on the highway and the forest gave way to wider spaced slimmer trees, then shrubs, and they gave way to an expanse of hilly grassland. The sun had set on the evening of the second day when he began the climb up the trail that wove around Ajaka hill. In the distance, he could see the wooden towers of the northern section of the Oyo walls, and Ilari patrolled the top of the wall. He walked through the first gate and crossed the
ditch that went around Oyo. Rainwater filled the ditch. He walked through the second gate and stepped into Oyo metropolis.

Awotunde had passed through eight groups of Ilari stationed at the various gatehouses on the length of the Alaafin’s road. He paid one cowry more than necessary at each gate, because his mother’s message troubled him, he didn’t grumble as he usually did. He didn’t mind paying them if he got home quickly. Usually he would have told the Ilari they were becoming lawless. He would have reminded them that they were servants to the people of Oyo. They would detain him for half a day at the gates, and he complained more of the Alaafin occupied with expanding Oyo territory who didn’t know of their excesses. They would tell him to remind the Alaafin when he got home. Soon he would say, and he kept the rest of his thoughts to himself, Oyo would remind the Alaafin Sango that the Alaafin served his people.

Awotunde knew who the message referred, but she hadn’t showed any sign of sickness when he left for his farmstead one month ago. Nearly home, he slowed down and looked at the thatched roof of the main building in the compound. It looked no different from how he left it. He turned into the tiny lane with two compounds, his closest neighbours, the Alayorinde. He tried to prepare his mind make it strong, but it kept slipping on fear. He greeted his neighbours but their greetings were quick and detached, nobody lingered to greet him like they should have done, nobody made eye contact with him.

He entered his compound, and the family women began to wail. He knew death had entered his compound during his absence. His mother pulled him into her room, she cried too.

“How are you my son?”

“What is wrong?”
She didn’t answer him. She put her head out of her door, “let a child bring your elder brother water.” A child that had been waiting to be summoned for water rushed into the room, thrust a gourd of water at Awotunde and scrambled out so fast he couldn’t tell which of his cousins had brought him water.

“I’m not thirsty mother.”

“Son, you need food and water for the answers to your questions.”

“Or hungry.”

“Let me go call your father’s younger brother. My mouth is too small to say the words.”

She scrambled out of the room nearly overturning the water in front of him. Baba Kekere entered the room and Awotunde tried to read his facial expression. He didn’t have wait long. He greeted his uncle and waited for him to say something.

“Be a man,” Baba Kekere said.

“Who?”

“Be strong, remember your mother.”

“Remilekun.”

“How? She wasn’t sick when I left for the farmstead”

“The usual sickness.”

“Did mother not give her medicine?”

“You know your mother did. It was her time to go again.”

“When?”

“This morning. Remilekun told your mother to send for you.”

“Why?”

“She wanted to see you.”
“Why didn’t she wait then?”

“She said her friends in the spirit world couldn’t wait any longer.”

Awotunde struggled to hold back his tears; he gnashed his teeth and groaned.

Remilekun, the abiku daughter of his first wife had been born six times. Her mother had died giving birth to her the seventh time. He remembered carrying the newborn babe the seven times she came into his life, and he looked sadly into the eyes of a child he knew well. He begged her to stay and help ease the pain of her mother’s death. She’d said she would try, and she’s stayed for eight years this time. The longest she lived. Everyone in the compound loved his fragile intelligent child, who carried joy about in her little body. They treated her with care and tried to convince her stay in the land of the living this time around. But they all failed she had stronger ties with her spirit friend. Awotunde’s body rocked, and he tried to hold in his grief.

He closed his eyes and sounds of joy floated into the room, “who is mocking my grief, Baba Kekere,” Awotunde said. His uncle sighed, “nobody.” Awotunde listened to the sound, it came from the other compound; women sang and laughed. A girlchild was born to them.

“The world is unchanged son, and there will always be people that laugh when others mourn,” his uncle said. Awotunde turned his face to the wall and wept openly.

One of the mothers, Abeni, a midwife delivered the baby into the world. She had to be there for the birth of this special child. She knew of her coming, because her mother had pledged her to the mothers. The council had fought for the baby’s mother; they had avenged her of a wrong done to her. One of the mothers had to be present during her birth to welcome her into the world and give her the gift of her bird, the first time she drew breath.

Iya Abeni had been summoned from the other province when the local midwife couldn’t help the mother bring the baby out. The baby, the old women of the compound said didn’t want
to come into the world. She come out feet first to the collective gasp of the birth women hovering over her mother, as if she knew what waited for her, the choices that had been made on her behalf. She pushed back into her mother’s womb and didn’t come out again for the rest of the day. When Iya Abeni arrived, she felt the heaving woman’s womb, and read the condition of the baby. She transmitted peace to the baby with her hands. She could see the baby’s cord wrapped tightly around the clenched fist of the child. Abeni asked for water, someone gave her a cup of water. She went to a corner of the room and spoke into the water, “You can come out now child. We welcome your arrival. We are here to receive you.” She walked back to the woman birthing and gave her the water to drink. The child came out moments later. Her face turned towards Iya Abeni’s voice as the midwife cut her umbilical cord. Even when her mother held the baby to her breasts and suckled her. The baby turned her unopened eyes to Iya Abeni. Iya Abeni nodded to the baby and left, she had given the baby her bird through her umbilical cord.

Nine days later, the mother and the new baby carried by an aunt stepped outdoors for the first time since coming out of her mother’s womb. An elder threw a bowl of water on the thatched roof of the main hut in the compound and the water dripped on them, the baby cried again. The crowd gathered in the early morning gave a shout of joy filled with laughter. The aunt gave the baby to her grandfather, and he said her names into her ears. Water had cleared sleep out of the child’s eyes, she looked into her grandfather’s eyes listening and owning her names. Abeke came from her grandfather, one we beg to cherish. Ige came from heaven because she tried to come out breech. Enitan from her paternal grandmother, a child with a story. Omolaso, from her maternal grandmother, a child is a covering. Omosalewa from her mother, the child chose her family. Omolaja from her father, the child had settled her parents quarrel. The baby
also had a name nobody at her naming ceremony knew about, only the baby knew it. Esupero the name the mothers gave to her; Esu will return peace to Oyo.
Osun, Oya, and their lovers  
Ogun the road opener owns two machetes  
The day he came down a hill  
A flood of waters  
Down a path by a white cotton silk wood tree tied with palm fronds  
He wore clothes of blood  
And covered his body with clothes of fire  
His war apron heavy with charms and gourds  
They made him angry  
He crushed Ilogbo  
He felled many towns  
And built many more  

In Saki, a baby boy grew up to become the very essence of war; a farmer, a hunter, a blacksmith, and a warrior. He left Saki and headed to Ife where showed his skills at warring, and earned the favour of the ruler of Ife, Oduduwa. Ogun became one of the commanders of Ife’s warriors. Oduduwa unknowingly took Ogun’s woman and wronged Ogun gravely. Ogun, swollen with righteous anger went deep into the forest and attacked Ife from its hind parts. He and his warriors captured towns and set markets ablaze. Ogun stole from the rich and gave to the poor, and the downtrodden swelled the ranks of his warriors. Trying to calm the grieving man, Oduduwa sent many messengers to him but none returned Ife. Ife warriors heard of Ogun’s approach, and their hearts tore within them with fear. They ran from the palm frond clothed warrior who washed in the blood of his enemies. His anger gave way to despair and Ogun drank palm wine to erase his sorrows; his anvil became his pillow and the roaring fire in his smithy died out. The Saki blacksmith could no longer build or repair bridges; his broken heart didn’t let him. Roads and bridges lay in disrepair, and towns and villages were cut off from each other.
Emissaries came to Ogun’s forest abode with construction requests. Ogun looked at those who sought his services with blood shot eyes and didn’t understanding them.

One woman said she could rouse Ogun’s heart and she went after them. Osun lured Ogun to a river in his forest. He followed the tinkle of her brass bangles; she didn’t speak to him. She smiled, as she heard the drunk man lurch through the forest’s tangled undergrowth. She untied her aso oke wrapper and stepped into the river. She walked deeper into the cool water until the river lapped at her hips. Ogun hid behind a tree and watched the woman bathe. Osun walked out of the river and took her time to wrap her wrapper around her body. She walked by Ogun and didn’t acknowledge him. She walked to a clearing in the forest, untied her wrapper and spread it on the ground. Green sunlight filtered through the crowns of trees caught the rows of stringed white beads on her hips. A cool wind blew, and her nipples hardened as she waited for Ogun. She heard a twig snap nearby. She began to dance, she shifted her hips to a drum only she could hear, and her full breasts swayed. Ogun watched openly from behind a tree, the first being, he had seen in a while that wasn’t in multiples. After a while, Osun lay on her side with her back to Ogun, her body slick with sweat. He stepped near her cloth to get a better view of her. He saw Osun eat honey out of a gourd. She smiled at the man looking down at her; she beckoned to him to join her. He joined her on her wrapper and ate the honey she proffered. they both ate to their fill. Ogun took her into his house and for a while Osun took away Ogun’s sorrows and the fire in his smithy lived again. She set his loins on fire; a fire only she could quench within her legs.

When Ogun left to rebuild a bridge carried away by a swollen river, Osun left his house, but she left him a message. She put a couple of her red parrot feathers on his anvil. Ogun roared when he saw it. His fire died and the composition of the metals in his smithy changed. Osun took a part of Ogun’s softness with her.
Ogun went warring again and passed through Ire. He stopped there to ask for palm wine; he knew they had good palm wine. The people of Ire ignored his requests and gave no reply. Angry Ogun unsheathed his two machetes and cut down the people. He didn’t know the people couldn’t answer because they observed a religious day of silence. When he knew, Ogun fell to the ground in despair and cut himself on his machetes. His blood flowed into Ire and he wept. Ogun retreated to a forested hill that looked down into Ire. This solitary man mourned those he killed. For restitution, he descended from the hill many times to save Ire from attackers and the people of Ire made him king over them.

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Osun saved Orunmila from a fire deep in the forest. On her way to Apomu, she’d veered off the forest path to urinate and saw a fire started by a farmer to clear his farm for the planting season. She heard a man cough, and he crawled out from behind a shrub. Osun pulled him into the path and tended his burns. Orunmila created and gave her the sixteen-cowrie divination system to repay her for good deeds. He married her and brought her back to Oke Geeti. Osun married Orunmila. She believed that his wisdom would bring her children, but no child came. Only divinations and visions of many children that surround her. Orunmila loved his wife of the red pigeon tail feathers and brass bangles. He watched her eat the Yanrin and Tete cooked with the grasscutter meat she loved. He watched her look at the children of his other wives, and he saw her vulnerability. In Orunmila’s Osun cast her sixteen cowries on the Ifa tray and saw the substance of issues and not it’s details of issues, but she saw. And people who doubted what she saw, remembered her when her words happened to them. Osun saw that her days in Orunmila’s house were she short, but she didn’t know the last day. Orunmila divorced Osun because she bore no child, but Osun knew this would happen.
Osun left Orunmila for Erinle, but she didn’t stay long in his house. Erinle, who walked like an elephant trashing about in the forest reminded her of lithe Ogun because both men hunted and warred. This hunter-warrior didn’t have Ogun’s rage or Ogun’s strong presence, but he went on military campaigns like Ogun’s long. Erinle also spent most of his time in the forest and came home with games. He talked more than sullen Ogun, and Osun longed for Ogun’s silence. In his house Osun’s wealth melted away, and she couldn’t understand why her servants came back home with unsold rolls of her adire cloth. She couldn’t buy the new wrappers of sanyan, alari, and etu. Her waist purse hung loosely around her waist and it annoyed Osun. “Two woes do not come on a woman, if she doesn’t have children she’ll definitely have cowries,” Osun said, “I can’t do without both.” When Erinle led a group of settlers to the new town of Illobu, she left his house with her red parrot tail feathers, beads, and brass bangles.

Osun went with Sango because she’d seen the man in her dreams. She’d thrown her sixteen cowries and Sango appeared in an Odu on her Ifa tray. In Oyo, Osun watched Sango dance to the bata drums. He danced with abandon, his hips twisted, and his feet threw up dust. The talking drums spoke of his power and lineage. His people clapped and cheered when Sango did a new dance trick. He had returned from rescuing his brother, Alaafin Ajaka, from the Olowu. Sango paused to take a guzzle of palm wine from Biri. He threw his head back and heard a woman laugh, he paused. Osun stared at him and he smiled. This woman feared no man. Osun looked away and thought in her heart, maybe she would have children by him. She followed him into the Aafin Oyo in the evening and when the kingmakers placed the Oyo crown on Sango’s head. Osun sat by the right of Sango’s throne.

*
Ogun couldn’t forget Osun’s rejection. When he heard she lived with Sango, the great warrior and road opener stormed into his forge. He stopped before a pot filled with the water he drenched red hot iron in. He snatched the pot, poured the water over his head, and bathed in his drenching waters, but his anger didn’t abate. It set him aflame from within and his eyes reddened. This anger he knew, and he owned it.

* 

Oya married Ogun as her father commanded. She went with him to Ire and lived in his house on the hill. Few visitors came up the forested hill and lonely Oya longed for the calming waters of the greater river. Ogun hid the little softness he had left in his outward hardness, and Oya raged against his hardened heart. Ogun spoke in grunts a few words to her many. In anger, he stood still then he raged. Oya kept quiet and waited. She didn’t run from him like people did when he stormed. She settled by him and sang his oriki. Oya’s sooting voice broke through his clenched heart and his rage cleared. The few times she succeeded in getting inside of him she saw the man few people knew. Ogun went on journeys and brought back gifts from Tapa. He knew they would delight his wife. She laughed and ran into his smithy when she discovered the gifts thrown carelessly on her Akete. When she thanked him, Ogun grunted, but he couldn’t hide the tiny smile on his face. At night, the rock faced inventor slept and he spoke in his dreams. She could hear him thrash about in his romm. On the days she slept in his room, his callused hands latched on to her slim body as he shook from a cold that made her shiver. He talked of wars and blood and of the lives he took in anger. A part of Oya opened to Ogun, she came to understand that his love for palmwine came from a need to forget. And when he went deep into the forest he sought solitude to commune with his inner head. But Ogun would go for days and months and
would not look back towards his home once. It stifled her, this her need of him. It ade her lose her balance and one day she packed her things and headed for the forests of Oyo.

* 

Ogun sat down in the shambles of his smithy and saw it for the first time. It wasn’t fit for a wife. What if he had explained to Oya that he returned home at nightfall because he didn’t want her to see him dirty and covered with soot. If only he had given Osun more of his time, if only he had complimented her. He made them brass pendants and earrings, but he knew which woman would value his offerings. Osun would covet them not Oya. He destroyed the jewelry and tried to silence both women shouting in his head.

* 

In Apomu, Oya got a stall and sold vegetables in a corner of the market near other vegetable sellers. Oya’s vegetables were the greenest and freshest. She roamed Oyo forests at night and knew where to find the freshest vegetables. People rushed to buy her vegetables and before noon, she’d be done with selling and her waist purse full of cowries. She cleaned her stall and went home leaving behind jealous women who wondered how she did this daily. But she didn’t care for their bitterness, she didn’t understand it. She felt it strange that the company of people she craved at Ogun’s house could be hurtful. She ignored the women and kept to herself like she did on Ogun’s hill.

Sango saw her walking away from bustling Apomu in one hot afternoon. He beckoned to her come join him in a shade under a tree. She’d hissed, rolled her eyes at him, and walked away. Sango smirked at her open rejection. The next day, the Alaafin Oyo who disappeared for seven days from the Aafin Oyo waited for Oya by the crossroads at Apomu. Sango followed Oya into the forest and watched her change into a buffalo in the Oyo forests. Sango stole her buffalo
skin and asked her to be one of his Ayaba. Oya went away with the man who had her buffalo skin. She followed Sango home to the Aafin Oyo with her servant Afefe who blew an angry wind in their wake.

*
Nikki

Of seventy towns

Where twelve Kakaki blare for the king

Nikki, founded by Kisra’s second son Sabi

Suni, the Sina Boko’s brother had been passed over during the last kingship tussle when
the kingship rotated among the Nikki ruling houses. Suni thought he would be the next king, but
his clan chose his younger half-brother over him. Suni who had been the Gobiru; the family chief
and custodian of the copper stirrups of his predecessors should have been Sina Boko but his
experience had not helped his cause. His brother, the present king had started a rumour that he
suffered from epilepsy. Suni never forgave his brother. He didn’t bother to hide his anger inside
of him; he never talked to his brother again. He returned to his mother’s people, and he took with
him half of the clan’s support. He led the people that remained with him and built their numbers
bidding his time until he had over three hundred skilled warriors and fifty horses.

Suni married Zurayya daughter of a rich neighbour, her dowry he used to buy more
horses and marry more wives. His compound filled up with children and his granaries
overflowed. Despite his success, three worry lines appeared on his high forehead; his wives
knew it as evidence of his shame. He rarely looked into the eyes of men, even those younger than
him. He saw his shame and disgrace in their eyes. He went on many caravan raids, and he shared
his loot with his own, as if to buy back their favour and respect which they freely gave. Zurayya
his first wife held his twitching body in her arms at night, and Suni spoke of his shame to her.
She held him harder, wishing away his demons but they stayed. She knew like everyone else
knew, that the Sina Boko did no wrong, he had sought his own glory at the expense of his
brother.
A lying calm settled over Nikki when a king sat on the animal skin throne. But when he closed his eyes and joined his ancestors, a strong storm arose and blew over all the four ruling houses. An internal conflict fed by the eligible princes who journeyed to Nikki with their followers. They and their men battled for the throne in encampments outside Nikki. But when the king lived, the many fragments came together and became loyal to the state.

After the death of the previous king at Nikki, Suni had tried to influence two of the king makers. He courted the favours of the powerful and independent chiefs of Boukay and Kika; both were vassals of Nikki. Kika especially, because Suni’s Ilesha grandmother had married into the clan. Kika. The Seesi and Mwaro/Sawe a clan of the Oduduwa children controlled Kika. And Kika ruled seventy towns like Nikki though Boukay ruled far lesser towns. Princes from both towns couldn’t contest for the Nikki throne, but they wielded political influence from across the Oeme river into the affairs of Nikki.

Suni sent to the Kingmakers at Kika and Boukay many loads of yams and millet. He also gave them two Hausa horses. The Kingmakers at Boukay and Kika responded by inviting him to their palaces. The chiefs took a measure of his person, then decided that, “this one is a hot head.” They knew of the rumour started by his younger, and they told him about it to his face. Suni knew that he could only ascent the throne with their help, and they had told him they wouldn’t help him. He knew his ambition to be king wouldn’t be realized, the next day, he left for his mother’s people.

After he had established himself there, with more than three hundred warriors under his command Suni built a fence around his compound, a direct confrontation against the kings at Nikki, Illo and Bussa, only kings had fences. His brother, Sero Bagri, the king at Nikki sent a Yerima to tell him to take it down. Suni responded by building it higher than the king’s fence.
Suni knew of the secret meetings in Nikki and Busaa. He knew his brother had thirteen hoes and spoke from a sick bed. Sina Boko’s words lacked the strength of a king who could go to war.
Ôyá in Ona-Efa’s Quarters

After the birth of the twins, Ôyá moved into the house of her official son, Ona-Efa, as required by custom. The new mother lived with her official son until she weaned her babies. Osun moved into the best of Ona-Efa’s compound, and his wives, the Awewo, those whose-hands-are-tied welcomed her and the twins into the house. Oya’s entourage included Afefe and Iwiwande, and everything that would make her comfortable.

The Awewo didn’t have any children of their own, their eunuch husband couldn’t either, but Ona-Efa adopted children and his wives raised them as theirs. The compound had less rules than the Aafin, and there were lots of children and laughter in it. Oya loved the children’s antics, as they vied to get her attention. They sang and danced. They cried and made faces, and they fell asleep in her room. Their mothers, on the other hand were enthralled with Oya’s distinctly different sons. Ona-Efa had two Awewo, and they took turns to cuddling the twins, Osun allowed them. It gave her time to think about her life, and home on the other side of the greater river. She tried not to think about her life in the Aafin.

Osun could see the Aafin from her new rooms the back of Ona-Efa’s compound wall abutted the Aafin walls. On days when she missed the Aafin, she would ask Afefe to carry the sounds and smells of the Aafin into her rooms. She would sit by the door, while her sons slept on a mat beside her and looked towards the Aganju. She could smell Osun’s Indigo dye and efo yanrin, and she wondered what the wily Ayaba did, cooking up delicacies and lies for their husband she knew. Oba’s dirges made her sad; the woman secretly loved, and their husband openly scorned her. The pain in Oba’s voice made her cry. It had taken some distance from the Aafin to hear it. She listened for the beats of the Alukoso that woke up the palace every day, and she smiled as the drum boomed about Sango especially when the drum spoke of her two sons in the lineage of the Alaafin Oyo.
Outside the walls of the Aafin, she saw more of the Oyo people. They weren’t cowed by the grandeur of the Aafin and spoke more freely to her. They told her the farms of Oyo were not being cultivated and food had become scarce. The people also complained about the conscriptions for the many wars that Oyo fought. They spoke of their fear; they were afraid of being waylaid on roads for being Oyo. Oyo’s neighbours taunted them in lonely pathways and ganged up against them in markets, starting fights because of mundane things. The rains came but they did not have time to cultivate their farms. The rains were long gone, their farms overgrown with tangled weeds and overrun with vermin. They told her this forced Oyo to rely heavily on its tributaries to supply them with food.

Gbagi, a town in the middle province remained loyal to Òyá. As their mother in the Aafin, they sent word to her in the house of her son. They complained that the Alaafin had increased their tributes by half; they groaned to meet their quota and feed their families. Isale Odan complained that they had stopped going to the river closest to their village because of their closest neighbours. Isale Odan avoided the people at Oke Odan, it switched sides and pled their allegiance to Owu. Oke Odan and Isale Odan lived in this grassy field since the time their ancestors had settled on either side of the river that cut the field in two. The sloping grassland became the farmlands of two friends, they had happened on it after breaking free of the unending forest they travelled in for days. One friend took the top of the field Oke Odan, and the other the bottom Isale Odan. Both had settled on their farms with their family. The field belonged to Owu and Oyo now; Isale Odan and Oke Odan were enemies. The people of Oke Odan poured their rubbish into the boundary at their part of the river, and the water carried the trash into the Isale Odan making its water unusable.
Oya could do nothing for the people who came to see her. She listened until her ears began to ache, then their complaints weighed down her spirit and soured her milk. She couldn’t feed her twins and had to wean them early.

“What is happening in the Aafin?” Oya said to her son.

“Olu Ode and Gbonka have been drumming war songs into the Alaafin’s ears,” he said.

“Ijesa.”

“Yes, mother.”

“How is Osun taking this?”

“Depressed, and barely eating.”

“Our husband?”

“He has refused to see her.”

“Why is he bent on this war?”

“Olu Ode and Gbonka have convinced the Alaafin that Oyo’s reserves need to practice.”

“So he is willing to go to war with Ilesa and start a raging fire under his clothes?”

“What does Oba say?”

“The Ayaba is preparing for the war.”

“What is she saying? I didn’t mean what she’s doing for our husband.”

“She isn’t saying anything.”

“Oba is always saying something. People don’t listen to her. Listen to her.”

*
The war for practice (Ijesa)

The message from Esu that the babalawo read a cryptic message on the ifa tray:

The same rain that fell and filled a pot, fell into a basket but it wasn’t full.

The same rain that fell over sugarcane, fell over a bitterleaf plant

See the pot and sugarcane rejoicing all over town

Tell the pot and sugarcane to stop rejoicing

There will be a time when the rain will stop, and the basket will become useful

There will be a time when bitterleaf will be needed to make medicine and soup

Olu Ode and Gbonka convinced Basorun that the war against the Ijesa had to be fought.

They twisted and twisted Esu’s words so much that even the Basorun wasn’t sure of what the babalawo had said. Both men became mosquitoes in Basorun’s ears whining and buzzing. They didn’t allow him to think. He tried to drive them away, but he couldn’t. When they got into his nose and eyes, Basorun gave the command for war so that he might have some respite.

Oyo troops went out of Oyo’s southernmost gates at dawn. They continued to march south of Oyo towards the hilly forests of Ilesa. By noon of the fourth day, the warriors in the vanguard stepped across the patchy forest line leaving behind them the plains of Oyo. Their party distorted, trees and shrubs blocked their way. Oyo got to Ilete at sundown and camped there.

Ilete stood halfway between Oyo and Ìlèsà. A farm village loyal to Oyo, the last one before the forests became hilly. The people of Ilete gave food and water but didn’t join the war. Early the next morning, Oyo moved on into the thicker forest, narrow paths choked the warriors on all sides and forced them to walk in twos, slowing them down. Very little sunlight got through the forest canopy that the shadows of the warriors hid under their feet. The Oyo camped in the dark forest, uneasy. Shadows moved behind trees, and sleeping birds fell from branches high above with large thuds. At night strange cries floated around the men keeping them awake.
The troops were restless the next day, damp and cold from a night on the wet forest ground. The inexperienced warriors among them complained. A war council met under an araba tree whose tangled roots spread far from its huge trunk. Olu Ode, Gbonka and their deputies decided that the troops be splintered into smaller groups. Olu Ode and Gbonka’s war aprons were not heavy usually both were dragged down by the weight of charms that hung on them. They knew, they had stoked until it blew up into raging flames. They believed the Ijesa would be a walkover, and they didn’t take this war serious.

Warriors fought wars in the dry season, when the streams that bubbled in the rainy season were weak barely flowing through their dry beds. After two days, the Oyo camp drank the Ado and Egbin streams dry. The men dug around cracked bed of streams, sponging up drops of water to drink. Olu Ode and Gbonka didn’t know the rocky plains of the Ijesa and its many caves and waterfalls. The hills of the Ijesa were green, even though many rivers dried up, they were watered by the many silent rivers that only the Ijesa knew about. The Ijesa warlords, Lemodun and Lejoka hid their warriors in damp caves, and they made some wait by these rivers. They knew the Oyo would come looking for water. Lemodun and Lejoka told their warriors to attack anyone or thing that spoke or smelled Oyo; even their shadows weren’t to be spared.

The Owa Obokun called his people together for ideas to conquer the Oyo horde that would descend on them soon. An Ijesa woman suggested they pour oil palm fruits on the roads that led into Ilesa. “A good idea,” the Owa said, “those left behind in towns and villages, the children and the old, should harvest palm fruits from his farms.” They poured the fruits on the roads that led into Ìlèsà. Ilesa didn’t have a town wall and moat like Oyo and Owu. The Owa decided that young men be drafted to the outer perimeter of the town. These sentries stood on the many hills that surrounded Ilesa and watched the way from which Oyo would come.
When Oyo’s cavalry rode into the lands outlying Ìlésà, the hooves of their horses couldn’t stay on the earth. Their horses slipped and fell. They threw their riders off bringing them within the reach of the agedengbe of the Owa’s warriors hiding in the long grasses that lined the roads. They backed Oyo’s cavalry into a tiny pass between two mountains exposing its hind parts to attack. The Ijesa shot arrows into the huddle from above, and not one Oyo warrior escaped. They spooked another Oyo faction into a ravine by rocks pushed off a ledge; the Oyo thought they were running to safety, but they ran into Owu warriors.

Sango and Òyá didn’t fight in the Ijesa war. The Alaafin stayed in the Aafin, and Oya in her son’s compound. Osun mourned the death of her own until her voice became hoarse. She and her household ran from her rooms, and Sando didn’t do anything to stop her. Oba stopped her dirges and went to buy Segi, Ikun, and Okun beads in Oja Ife. She knew the other Ayaba would outperform her. Olu Ode and Gbonka had convinced them and the Oyo Mesi of Ijesa’s stupidity. They didn’t seem stupid during the war because the warriors of Ijesa ran through the Oyo troops like torrents of water flowing into cracks and corners. Like water they flooded tight places and broke off large chunks of rock, Oyo had underestimated provincial Ijesa. Their troops were attacked on so many fronts that they were dazed. In this confusion, the Oyo warriors fell to the more organised Ijesa who used their intimacy with their land to fight off the invaders. Ijesa Rivers turned red from the blood of the Oyo, a waterfall near the battlefield spilled red water over its cliff for days. The Ijesa cut the Oyo into so many pieces that their leaders could only direct a small number of their warriors. Oyo stragglers scattered into the Ijesa forests, lost, they wandered for weeks. Olu Ode and Gbonka couldn’t talk with their deputies, and their deputies couldn’t rally their warriors. Oyo ran.
The spirits of the forest, angry with the men disturbing their peace, put on human bodies and misled the lost warriors. Many starved to death in the forest, others died from the Tse-tse flies that Esu sent, and their horses weren’t spared either. A week after the war, a few Oyo made it back to Ilete. The met a deserted town not a lizard or bird remained. Ilete feared retaliation form the Ijesa. They knew far away Oyo couldn’t save them, besides how Oyo could help when Oyo itself couldn’t help themselves. The warriors who had looked forward to some relief at Ilete were dejected.

Olu Ode and Gbonka were already in Oyo, they had disappeared on the morning of the last battle on their horses leaving their warriors and deputies behind. More warriors regrouped at the Ilete and when they found out that their leaders had deserted them. They cursed them with madness, measles, and hot earth. The Oyo journeyed much slower back home, yet they tried to make it longer. But each step brought them closer home, they dreaded the gates of Oyo because of the shame of defeat.

When news of their return spread around Oyo, people came out to see them. Mothers, wives, and sisters went through the throng of weary men looking for sons and husbands and fathers and brothers. That night, around fires heating pots of water, mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters used hot water steeped in leaves to bind up wounds. The wounded cursed their leaders, their curses dropped into the fire like dead flies, and they sizzled in the crackling fire. The acrid smell hung over Oyo with each curse and moan, the fires burned brighter, and the people’s discontent fueled fires across the land. Those fires were visible from within the Aafin Oyo. Sango’s angry frown could be seen on the face of his shadow, and all avoided the furious man. Osun laughed not only in her rooms, she sang and danced all over the palace, “Olu Ode and Gbonka decided to practice war with the Ijesa. They said they heard that Ijesa descended from
dimwitted stick people. Stupid men, didn’t they know that the horses of one’s enemies aren’t described as tall; they all look like short donkeys.”

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The forest that surrounds the town of Ire warpped itself around Ogun’s compound high on the hill. A screeching owl flew over his house. He felt a chill rise on the skin of the night, and a fear cut deep into the night. His hunting dogs howled, but they stopped abruptly as a flock of birds cawed over his smithy. “The mothers return home,” he said staring at the sleepy flame of the oil lamp in his room. He hadn’t snuffed it out because he couldn’t sleep; he missed Oya. The longing and frustration stored in his body kept him awake for his wife. The more he thought about her new husband Sango, the more his pain grew. He decided to go to Oke Geeti in Ile Ife to talk with Orunmila his friend.

Orunmila heard the barks of Ogun’s dogs before Ogun stepped into his compound. Orunmila ordered a servant to go get cold freshly tapped palmwine. When Ogun bent his long frame and entered the door of Orunmila’s Iyewu, his friend’s voice greeted him:

Ogun kills to the right and destroys the left
Ogun builds roads
Ogun tears down walls
Ogun’s laughter is terrible
He is the master of iron
Who kills in silence
He bathes in blood
And paints his hearth red
Ogun laughed heartily, sat beside his friend on a mat and replied:

My wise friend
The strong man
Who brings order to the world
Beneath the heavens
Who says wisdom and virtue
Opens paths

“What brings you to Oke Geeti great warrior?” Orunmila said.

“My heart is heavy?” Ogun said, “throw down your opele and inquire of the matter for me.”

Orunmila brought out his divining ifa tray and gathered up the Opele chain in his hands and proffered it to Ogun, “speak to ifa.” Ogun sighed on the chain a couple times before handing it over to Orunmila. Orunmila taped his short ifa staff to the face of Esu engraved on the slightly raised edge of the sand filled tray. “Do not tempt me to do evil Esu. Tempt others. Let me see well,” Orunmila said. He put a seventeenth palm nut in front the tray, the chief of the nuts employed, and appealed to Esu for wisdom and guidance. He gathered the sixteen nuts in his hands and held them. They warmed up from the heat of his hands. He beat them against each other, one full palm against the other. He threw the nuts in the ifa tray and made marks in the sand. As he read the opele, he recited stanzas of odu, and made marks in the sand. He does this eight times, and the marks in the sand add up to an Odu.

Ogun stepped out of his friend’s iyewu bent from the waist. He shrugged off the woven palm fronds he wore over his clothes and folded his frame into the reclining chair beside his friend. Orunmila sat on in reclining chair with a calabash of palmwine beside him.

“What brings you away from the splendid palmwine of Ire?”

“I want my wife back.”
Orunmila who knew his hot-headed friend well sighed, “me too but they weren’t taken forcibly from us.”

“I will bring down my might and my warriors against Oyo. I will get her back.”

“I have no doubt you can friend.”

Ogun didn’t have to say it out, but Orunmila knew Ogun remembered his other wife Desoju. Ogun had been in warlord in Oduduwa’s army. An angry force that swept away everything that raised a weapon before him in battle. An inventor, he built bridges and roads, season marking calendar stones, granite menhir sundials, and four-hole compasses—his hammer and anvil and furnace made many things for Ife. Ogun fought Obatala and the Igbo during the Ife revolution. Trees that witnessed the war shed their leaves and shrubs grew thorns, a bloody affair the war. Ogun killed to the right and to the left, until the Igbo surrendered to Oduduwa. Ogun returned to his smithy in Oke Ori and to his wife Oya. He returned from Ife to an empty hearth; the fire of his smithy long dead and Oya gone. He returned to Ife and continued to fight for Oduduwa, and he threw his heart into warring to drown his heartache, but he only succeeded in pushing it under his fury. During one of his conquests, he fell in love again with one of his war prisoners Desoju and married her. He returned with her to Ife. Some said Oduduwa had been looking for a way to bring down the proud warlord, snatched Desoju from him. Others said Oduduwa had asked about the woman and Ogun said he wasn’t interested in her. Oduduwa married her, Ogun fled for his life, and never returned to Ife. Ogun didn’t return to Oke Ori instead he conquered Ire and became its king. A king who hid in his smithy making things from iron. He went about his work dressed in palm fronds and tried to forget his heartache in gulps of frothing palmwine.
Ogun touched his friend and Orunmila backed away from his recall, “The grandson has repeated the sin of his grandfather,” Ogun said. Orunmila looked away from his sad friend and recited the odu that corresponds to the marks on of his divining board.

I’m not bothered, you shouldn’t be
I’m not ruffled, by brawn
Hold your peace
We have made sacrifices to aoid disaster
Unlike Ogbe who didn’t.
When it rains
He hides in a hole
Was it a tree hole or an ant hole?
No, it was the anus of an elephant
And the elephant closed his anus
But when sacrifices were not made
The elephant passed him out as excreta

“You speak in riddles like you always do old friend, I don’t know how this applies to me.”

“I saw Esu on the way to Oyo the other day; and he told me would sit at the crossroads by the Aafin until he gives out his correct measure of good and bad to the small and great.”
Oba’s one

Sango married Òba before he became Alaafin; a son of two kings who danced to entertain crowds of commoners at Koso. Oba loved the handsome and inscrutable man who asked for her hand in marriage. After her wedding, her single friends escorted her to her husband’s house. Her eru iyawo filled two canoes, her friends the third. Sango showered his new wife with gifts, bemebe and baskets filled with clothes and jewelry. Oba’s mother sent her away with pots, a mortar and grinding stone. “A wife who satisfies her husband with good food owns him,” she said though she knew her daughter didn’t know how to cook. Òba lived with him in Tapa’s royal courts for three years a young wife in a strange land. The first time Òba crossed the greater water, swollen with new rains, she felt it pull at her heart as its rolling waters sloshed under the canoe. She looked back towards the other side of the muddy river. She felt alone even though she chatted with her friends who teased her about her wedding night. Her friends decided that her sharp mouth would be dealt with, they pitied her. She told her friends they should reserve their pity for her husband. Her friends giggled, nearly tipping the canoe over to the consternation of the Kyedye canoeman.

The night wasn’t unbearable. Her husband took her swiftly and fell asleep immediately. His snores rattled the rafters. She stood up from the akete and cleaned herself with a white cloth. She came back to sleep but couldn’t instead she looked at her husband’s face until daybreak. He looked younger, less mysterious, his slackened face more open. In the morning, he bragged to all that would listen that Oba came to him a virgin. He showed her friends the piece of white cloth stained with blood, evidence that her maiden head had been intact, and gave to her friends and family gifts worthy of that honour. They left for Igbon on the third day. With her friends gone, Oba knew she would be sad in her husband’s house. She missed Igbon already. She missed the thrill of travelling to find perfect beads and going on more travels to sell them. She missed
hearing people speak a language she understood or knowing the family tree of people she met in
the market to the seventh generation. The Tapa didn’t value the beads her people did. The
undiscernable tinkle of Tapa beads in pots failed to soothe her. They dulled her spirit.

During her three years in Tapa, she got pregnant thrice. She gave birth to stillborn baby
boys before their due time. Each time she had cried in her rooms never outside. She felt the
women in the palace laughed at her the incomplete woman that couldn’t carry a baby to term.
Sango comforted her as best as he could but Oba’s heart couldn’t be comforted. She discovered
something cowries could not get her. She felt powerless. A vein of sadness wrapped around
Oba’s heart, worry lines appeared on her face, and she lost weight. She became uninterested in
beads the new glass beads made in Ile-Ife failed to rouse her spirits. Her hurt pushed her away
from her husband. He tried to get to her through the haze of darkness that settled over her, but
she ignored him. His hands roving all over her in the night didn’t interest her too; she endured.
She froze in his arms. She didn’t want more sadness in her life. She’d had enough. She prayed
not to get pregnant and clenched her womb tight against Sango’s seed.

Oba went about, far and near, seeking wisdoms to solve her problem. She sought out the
wise and they were unanimous in telling her to be patient, “children bring children into
existence,” they said “all things in its own time.” She ignored them travelled farther still and paid
bags of cowries to charlatans that duped her. She bathed in dirty waterbodies that stank from the
unspeakable things that floated in in them. She ate things she didn’t know, creepy crawlies still
alive when she swallowed them. She ate slimy leaves and itched in places she couldn’t reach, all
for nothing, she didn’t get pregnant in Tapa again.

When Osun gave birth to her first set of twins, Oba did what the wise had told her, “be
kind to the children of her household, and children will come.” Oba shielded the two boys from
Osun’s wrath without allowing her to suspect she no longer wanted to torture Òyá. She gave them sets of segi and coral beads for their wrists and legs. Osun didn’t put them on her sons. Oba made treats of palm oil drenched adun for them. Osun threw them to the floor and rubbed them into the ground with her heel in her presence. “Stay away from my children,” she said. Oba kept being kind to the twins she believed they would help her bring her own children into the world.

A year after Òyá’s first twins were born, Oba became pregnant but didn’t tell her husband until she showed, she feared the child would go the way of the other three. She took a trip to Igbon and didn’t return to the Aafin until she gave birth. When she had him, an easy delivery, he had slipped out off her like someone had rubbed his tiny body with okra slime. Oba put a metal bracelet on his ankle and a kele around his neck to tie him to this world. At three months, she took him to Kobomoje, the land where they chained the wandering spirits of the Abiku to the seen world. The head herbalist drove away from the baby hovering spirit friends that reminded him of the other world. The healer slashed the baby’s body with marks, and the unseen world rejected his mutilated body. His friends turned their backs on him and left him in this world. Then the healer immersed the baby in a vat of concoctions and charms for seven days. When mother and son came back to the Aafin, Oba hid him in her quarters, away from Osun and nosy eyes. Sango named his son Adekunle, but Oba named her son, Adegorite, and the name she gave became the boy’s, he would sit on the throne.

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The howling pain in Osun’s heart drove her to the mothers’ iroko tree every night, the only Oyo Ayaba without a child. Depressed, she clung to the trunk of the tree and wept from sunset to sunrise, unconcerned about who saw her. When the mothers had enough of her wailing,
they told her to give away all her clothes and parrot feathers and beads, give to the poor, if she could do that she would have a child.

*
Their Slaves

Abebi and Ajani were slaves from Igbeti, a town on the northernmost border of Oyo. Oyo had fought with Igbeti to expand its boundaries, so they could look into the lands of the Ibariba from theirs. The Igbeti negotiated for peace by agreeing to give Oyo 10 male and female slaves every year. Abebi and Ajani were brought to the Aafin as a show of good faith that Igbeti will honour the agreement come next year. Ona Efa, Oba’s eunuch, made Ajani an Arepeju, a few months after he got to the Aafin, his eyelids were sliced off. He had spied for the Owu and an Ilari caught him talking with an Owu spy. He joined the ranks of the Arepeju a group of guards that kept vigil in the outercourts of the Alaafin’s sanctum while he slept, since they didn’t have eyelids they couldn’t really sleep. Abebi became a slave in the women’s quarters, one of Osun’s cooks. Abebi held her head and cursed her bad inner head daily. She could have been a slave of the other Ayaba, but no, her ori led her to Osun. Ajani and Abebi looked out for each other in Aafin, they tried to see at least once a day, comforting each other in their loneliness. They felt closer to home when they spoke their dialect and talked about home.

Abebi’s head brought her more bad luck. She got the one thing Osun wanted but couldn’t have. Abebi found love in the arms of one of the many woodcarvers that frequented the Aafin to practice their craft. She became pregnant. She couldn’t tell the father of her baby that she carried his child because he had returned to his town, and she didn’t know how to reach him. When she told Ajani, his lidless eyes stared at her in shock. He told her to throw away the child. He knew women who could help her. He would bring her the medicine. She ignored him and decided to keep the baby. She would find a way to give birth to this child outside the Aafin.

Abebi stayed away from Osun. She hid behind the other slaves in the mornings and tried to hide her growing belly. Each day, she deceived herself that she could hide it but she would wake up in the middle of the night, cold and afraid. Ajani tried to keep her safe too. He did her
tasks when he could, and they tried to keep her secret away from the other slaves. But one day, Abebi caught the full glare of Osun’s attention. Her inner head deserted her, she peeled the yam for Osun’s pounded yam wrong. Osun preferred the tuber to be peeled while whole instead of cutting the tuber into pieces and then peeling the skin off the pieces. She said it made yam sweeter, everyone knew it wasn’t true, but nobody argued with Osun.

Osun had grabbed the pot of boiling water off a roaring fire, in anger, with bare hands. She didn’t feel the blisters forming on her palms as she rolled the pot at Abebi. Most of the hot water missed her, but hot steam sprayed on the left side of her face. She fell to the ground. Osun pranced on her, livid that she missed, and rained blows on Abebi. When she satisfied herself, she made Abebi sit before her and made her eat the uncooked yam. Abebi chomped on the yam, and blisters formed around her lips. Her insides rolled and heaved but she kept the yam down. Osun told her to sit in the hot sun until evening, “enough time for the sun to cook the yam in you.”

Later in the day, Ajani smuggled a bowl of palm oil to Abebi to help calm her stomach and ease the itch of the yam on her face and arms.

“How could you forget?” he said.

“Are you on her side now?” she said.

“You know whose side I’m on, but the truth remains a person who has never had one will never know how to appreciate one.”

“That woman is evil.”

“You do know where her anger comes from.”

“Because she doesn’t have a child, must she kill another person’s child?”

Oba slaves were not taken care of, she didn’t see them. They didn’t exist in her world. They could do as they pleased as long as they did their tasks. They knew what would happen to
them when they failed. She gave them to Osun. The ones she took care of were the ones that were useful to her business. She made sure she got the ones that could add the fastest; the ones who could keep a straight face, as they lied to get the best bargains. She got the Ete slaves. Osun never failed to ridicule Oba that she had more Ete slaves than anyone. Oba didn’t mind that they had had their lips cut off as punishment for lying, they served her purpose well.

Òyá’s slaves were the happiest, her courts rang with their laughter. They smiled as they did her bidding. They ran with joy to her give her what she wanted. They outdid themselves to please her, to see her smile. Osun tried to correct the excesses of the of the Ayaba, “a slave has father and mother, they are only far away.” An unexplainable ease existed in Oya’s courts, a cool wind that comforted, and eased their nightmares. The other slaves wanted to be hers but Oya only chose those that still had their souls in them. She could sense if it was alive or in chains or dead in them.

Abebi made the best moin moin and akara in the Aafin, and Osun made sure the other women knew this, especially Òyá who loved akara. Osun, still angry that the water she threw had missed its mark sent for Abebi late in the evening. She couldn’t stop the tears that welled in her eyes when a slave came to tell her that Osun wanted her to make moin-moin. Abebi took a calabash of beans and soaked it in water. She cried as she rubbed the beans together in her palms, peeling off the skin. The skins floated to the top of water and she skimmed them off – she knew what would happen. She ground the beans on a grinding stone and her tears fell into the smooth creamy paste. She ground peppers into the paste too, her hands shook as she poured the bean paste in leaves and wrapped it. She arranaged the wraps in a pot and put it on the fire. She waited for them to cook. She knew it wasn’t going to cook. The paste would never become moin-moin. Pregnant women don’t cook moin-moin, the bean paste would never solidify.
Beyond and Around Tapa

Jebba, Oya’s hometown, drifted between the banks of the greater and lesser rivers. On the other side of the great river stretched out Dokomba, the horse place, where servants tended to the Geeba’s 5000 horses. The Geeba palace made of red earth melded into the red landscape on hot afternoons when people stayed indoors away from the angry noon sun. Around the grounds of palace were four esozi of slaves, and they farmed the lands of the Geeba providing food for their chief and his household.

The other lands of the Tapa spread out farther than the length of the lesser and greater rivers. In towns and villages, people lived in efu, compounds made up of clusters of cylindrical huts and granaries. Their thatched roofs and spaced out farmlands were visible from flattop rock outcrops that rose intermittently throughout the land. On the western side of Tapaland the greater river moved sluggishly along its ancient bed, unconcerned about its young tributary born by the tearing of the black cloth. This tributary roared with the strength of youth forcing its way through ragged rocks and broke through the chain of hills the greater river skirted.

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The rainy season arrived and both rivers flooded their banks; their waters travelled farther inland covering forests and savannah turning them into vast swamplands several arm lengths deep. The waters of the lesser river surged into Tapa’s low-lying into villages ebbing at thresholds. It submerged community boundary stones set by Tapa ancestors long dead with still brown waters that rose daily, and these stones became stepping-stones for the villagers. This flood rose higher than anyone known, and the elders who had seen many wondered why.

The rains had been a welcomed respite from the humid heat of the dry season, but when the rain clouds didn’t empty in weeks Tapa complained of the encroaching crocodiles that came to their doors and the haze of mosquitoes that rose from stagnant waters in the evenings. In the
river forest town of Baro, the waters of the greater river submerged forest paths. The floods peeled off the outer barks of trees and the submerged trees lost their leaves in the waters. People rowed their canoes by submerged trees that once lined familiar paths but now stood in the rising waters. Fishermen caught fishes trapped inland from the doors of their compounds. In the marshlands of the Bataci, in one of the many hamlets hugging the backwaters of the greater river, there were complaints too. In the marshlands, the efu were closely arranged together, and compounds were separated by narrow roads. People could hear through the mud walls of their huts the many complaints of their neighbours. They knew them well, they spoke them too.

A submerged crocodile lurking outside the hut of a man snatched him up as he stepped into his compound. It reared its head out of the waters as the man tried to jump from his canoe to a stepping stone. The men of Bataci killed the crocodile and buried the man. They gave its skin to his wife and only son, and she draped it over the rafters. She pointed to it when mourners visited, and they all sighed about the unending rains. But after the eight and forty-day funeral rites, the man’s family had to bury him again, because the waters opened his grave. His corpse floated on the waters and carried the corpse to his door. The rains were different this year, the Tapa agreed, the rivers didn’t return quickly to their beds the flood waters lingered. In Taro, it clinged to their huts and the surrounding forest the confining these forest dwellers to their huts.

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The Kuta, the Kyedye chief of the riverine areas sent an emissary to Jeba with the customary two white bulls to appease the greater river. He chose from his herd white cattle from birth and and fattened for this single purpose. The Kuta sent them to Jeba when their humps stood high on their backs, and their wide horns and deep mooes set them apart from the rest of his bulls. The Kuta sent relative to Jeba, his uncle, his father’s younger brother. At Jeba, the high
priests sacrificed both cows to the river. They took the cows to the shrine by the river and cut their necks. Both men watched the blood flow into the river, but it didn’t mix with the waters. It floated like oil on water. The greater river pushed the blood to the edge of its bank and smeared the tail grasses that lined its banks red. The Kuta’s uncle brought back a message from the priests, “the greater river rejected the annual sacrifice.” The Kuta told his people the priests’ message and the Kyedeye became distressed. Women cried into the night mourning the death of the river. Their men watched the walls of their huts and noted that the waters rose higher still that night.

In the small Beni hamlet of Pichi, waters came into huts and refused to leave. The people raised everything inside their huts on stones to keep them dry. The couldn’t save their grains as the insides of granaries were soaked and the grains became mouldy. The people sat on tree stumps and slept with their legs in the water that had taken over their houses. In Beni, the old ones from each efu met in fours, then in multiples of four. They talked and decided to choose four old ones to talk with their chief, the Tafie.

The Gbara of northern Tapa lived on undulating plains and they complained of bloated cow floating by their lands. Tse-tse flies breeding in stagnant waters bit their herd and they slept all day. They couldn’t find dry grass for fodder, so they fed them wet tree barks. Their emaciated cattle mooed weakly as they starved to death in pools of water. The Gbara mourned during the rains the death of their cattle as they would mourn a child.

In Kusopa, the land of dense forests west of the lesser river didn’t flood, but they worried kolanut and oil palm trees don’t do well in water logged land. When news of the rising greater River reached them in their enclave, they knew their farms could be wiped out if they
didn’t find a way to make the rising water level fall. The Kusopa chief sent word to the Kyedye and Beni chiefs, “Our people will soon starve if we do not act.”

The Twelve Beni towns on the otherside of the greater river formed a confederacy that helped each other anytime the troops of an enemy stood outside a Beni town. From the hilltops of the Beni could see Oyo, if the milky sight hadn’t dimmed the pair of eyes. Beni land shook when Oyo warriors and their cavalry trooped to battle. The twelve Beni towns were Bida, Tafie, Esa, Doko, Towagi, Egbe, Gaba, Nupeko, Eda, Panjurru, Ewu, Yesa, and the head town was Tafie. The other eleven paid a small tribute to Tafie. A purse that the Tafie put his hand into in times of emergency only.

The eleven chiefs walked through the big doors of the Katamba of the Tafie chief; they wore blue turbans and brass bangles on their wrists. The chief’s bodyguards welcomed the old men. They ushered them into the main hut it had motifs worked on the surface of the wall more intricate and unlike any in the town. The men sat on leopard skins in a circle with their backs resting against the Katamba wall. Young messengers squatted by the Katamba’s entrance watching for any beckoning hand. A young boy moved around on his kness and placed calabashes of kolanut by the chiefs. When the young boy left the Katamba the chiefs thanked their host the Tafie and started to chew on their kolanuts. Their host allowed them settle down before he spoke, “gather your many thoughts and then we will talk,” he said. He also took a bite of his kolanut nut, but he couldn’t think. The Tafie sent a messanger outside the Katamba, “the Tafie says his drummers should stop beating the take, and his singers should stop singing the chiefs’ kirari. It wasn’t a time for merry or praise singing.” The Tafie signaled to the other palace messangers to leave. The Beni cheifs had matters to discuss within this hut, and only noble ears could hear it. The messengers and closed the doors of the Katamba.
“What goes on in Beni. Tell me the state of your domains,” the Tafie said. Each chief recounted what his old ones reported to them of their compounds and hamlets. The rising of the waters of the greater and lesser river, and the disappearance of grazing and farming land. This strong matter troubled them all, and they had to find a way to stop the rising waters. The chiefs consoled each other and decided to take the strong matter to the twelve priests of the Beni.

The priests of the twelve formed a sacred council that spoke for the divine. They told the messangers of the Tafie that they had seen a falling star in a near moonless sky, and they had done all they could do to make it fall in the lands on the other side of the greater river. This very bright star fell from a very high place. The star showered across the sky, covering the shine of other stars in its wake. It lit the sky on its paths downwards as it passed by the thinnest of moons. When it disappeared, bright and dull stars filled the sky again. The twelve said, when the star shot through the sky it would be heard of and seen from different lands. The same with its plunge, a noisy one, before dropping into the waters of the greater river and its brilliance would drown in the muddy waters. But most importantly, they said the waters would continue to rise until the star fell. The Tafie sent the message of the twelve to the Kyedye and the Geeba. The Geeba sent messangers to his chiefs, “the waters will subside after the star of a great kingdom falls but nobody knew the name of the king.”

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Beyond the lands of the Kyedye and Jeba and Beni confederacy, Iyagba hid behind tall grasses near the confluence of the two great rivers. Some of its people fled Oyo and Sango’s rule and his taxes. In the beginning, Iyagba had been a place of refuge for a man who had found disfavor with his king. He started a family and they lived in this new town away from the reach of the hard overlord. His wife who outlived him sold food to other refugees and the town
outgrew its early boundaries. The old woman, from whose name the town of Iyagba got its name was long dead, her children also, but Iyagba remained by the waters of both mighty rivers when their waters flooded her pathways every season. It stood on high ground.

Other strangers and not only Oyo made Iyagba home. The people spoke different languages but were united in their quest to survive the tyranny of their rulers. They had run to Iyagba for diverse reasons, but Iyagba accepted them all like a mother accepted all her children. The Oyo outnumbered the others, and Iyagba became an extension of Oyo. The Oyo Iyagba were aware of the floods that swept through the land of their neighbours. For the first time in years the Oyo Iyagba thought of returning to Oyo.

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The War of Sounds

A tongue starts a war

Many times, bigger than it

In the Epo province near the boundaries of Oyo to the north lived a sub-group of the Oyo that couldn’t say the soft s sound in any word. They could only say the harsh sh sound. In the Ekun Osi province, the province that wrapped itself around half of the Oyo capital, the reverse was the case. The people there couldn’t say the sh sound, the harsh s in any word came out of their mouths always as a soft s. Every Oyo knew about this linguistic difference. It helped to separate the Ekun Osi from the Epo when listening to snippets of their conversations. This phonetic difference also tore both provinces apart fueling a rivalry, one felt it was better than the other. The people of Ekun Osi believed that they spoke the purest form of the Oyo language, and were always quick to point out this to the people of the Epo province.

Esu passed through the crossroads in Ekun Osi province, and saw they were empty of his offerings. As he passed through its towns and villages, he became irritated with the pride that oozed from the people. They walked liked they owned the earth, and they looked down at others because they lived close the Oyo capital. He decided to teach them a lesson; too much pride didn’t do anyone good. He decided to come in through the opening of distrust both provinces had created. An Epo residing in Ikoyi, a town in the Ekun Osi district, and his Ikoyi friend talked after the delicious ishapa soup they had just eaten. The Epo man said Ishapa, rendering the s as with a harsh s. The Ekun Osi man disagreed and said it in his way with the soft s, “Do you have to open your mouth that wide to say the word. It doesn’t require that much strength to say.” The Epo man ignored his friend’s rudeness and said, “The Ishapa had lot of meat in it.”

“That isn’t the correct way to say it, the correct way is Isapa,” said the Ekun Osi man,
“No, my way is the correct way, Ishapa,” said the Epo man.

“Said that way, you mean something else,” said the Ekun Osi man.

“What else do I mean; did we not eat the same soup?” said the Epo man.

“Yes, but your way is provincial,” said the Ekun Osi man.

“Are you trying to start a fight. You do not want to pay for the goods you bought from me?”

“Why won’t I pay? I’m just pointing out that you it’s not refined to talk that way?”

“You do know that you have just insulted me.”

“Insult? I only speak the truth.”

“I don’t understand how your kind can insult the same province that feeds your refined belly with food from our farms.”

“My kind?”

“Yes, lazy, entitled kinds like you that live off our taxes.”

“What?”

“Don’t be angry. I only speak the truth.”

The Ekun Osi man lunged at his Epo friend and struck him with an amulet. The Epo man fell to the ground, convulsing. His body shook, and he foamed in the mouth. He swallowed his tongue, and his eyes rolled into his head. The Ikoyi man tried to run away from his friend. A crowd of onlookers had gathered, and two angry men grabbed the Ikoyi man by the neck of his embroidered cloth. The crowd told him to carry the corpse of his friend to the Aafin. The Ikoyi man backed his friend and the crowd sang after him, “murderer, any man that kills a man, shall be killed.”
When the crowd passed by a shed of the palmwine seller filled with men eating the second meal of the day. The shed emptied of men and a brawl started between the Epo and Ekun Osi. By sun down over a hundred people were dead. Oyebode, a well-known thug had escalated the fight. The Ilari allowed Oyebode liberties as the crown prince of one of the prime towns in Ekun Osi. He led a gang of miscreants that followed him about, they had swooped into the fight.

The fight would have turned into a war between both provinces, if not for the intervention of the Ilari, who stepped in to keep the peace. The Ikoyi town council met and sent the town crier and his iron gong to the people, “a dusk to dawn curfew has been placed on Ikoyi. Stay indoors after dusk.” Oyebode and his gang were rounded up and arrested by the Ilari; they flogged them with supple raffia canes until their backs were covered with thick welts. Oyebode, they spared because they knew his father. The people told the council to hand the prince over to the council in the Epo province, but they would keep him pending the time his father sent word them.

The provincial heads sat down to discuss the disturbance. The Epo provincial head didn’t come to the meeting, and he would not return until the council sorted out this injustice. When the heads found out that Oyebode started the fight they were angry. Towns and villages in Oyo knew the rogue prince and his exploits well. He relished causing trouble and starting fights wherever he went. Young boys left the hinterland to join his gang and he welcomed them. He wasn’t welcome anywhere. In his hometown, he became a by word for shame and distress; a spoilt Aremo who disgraced them. One who did as he pleased because his dying father couldn’t control him. The provincial heads sent word to his father that he should come and discipline his stray goat, or they will deal with him according to the laws of the land. They said this because
they didn’t want any problem from the Epo. The Epo were known throughout Oyo for their strong charms and brave warriors.

The Aremo’s father sent his Otun to the provincial heads meeting. Otun couldn’t say a word when the council told him of the Aremo’s deeds. He begged the provincial heads that they let the matter be dealt with in his town, but the heads disagreed. “Your king hasn’t dealt with it in the past years why would he deal with it now. He should rest; we will help him deal with his spoilt child. How can we tell the Epo we let your Aremo go? We know they will avenge the death of theirs.” With that they dismissed the Otun and threw the Aremo into a dungeon, pending the Otun went back home to report to his king.

When the king heard Otun’s report, he gnashed his teeth, “what does one do with the only painful tooth one has, should one do away with it and be toothless or should one keep on managing it?” The wise and kind king who wanted his people to be spared the wrath of the Epo gathered his ebbing strength and went to the next provincial heads meeting. The shocked council couldn’t see the kind king they knew well in the sick man propped up by his Ilari. They welcomed him into their meeting and asked him why he didn’t send his Otun to them. He told them he came because they had to hear his reply from his own mouth.

“I have come to tell you a true story,” the old king said. “You see the Aremo was my creditor in the other world. When I couldn’t pay him, I ran down to this world to escape him. He looked for me until he found me, and he came after me to this world as my son.” No wonder the he couldn’t deal with the son, the assembly whispered. They couldn’t deliberate on it. Only the laws of the heavens matter could decide this case. “I have paid him the debt several times over here,” the old king said, “but he insists that I pay him in the other world too, the very place where I collected the loan from him. How can I do that if I am still alive?”
“Ah ah what a wicked son, he wants to kill you before your time,” the councilly cried.

“That is why I have come to tell you my story,” the old king said, coughing.

“I request that you spare me and my people when you dispense justice. Tell the Epo that the Aremo is theirs.”

Esu rested at the crossroad that led to the Epo province, he had decided to go to the province to fan their desire for revenge into a putrid boil. He poked about the Epo offerings with his walking stick, when he heard two men walk by him. They talked about the unusual decision of the provincial heads. Esu laughed hard, he threw away his staff and held his belly. He had to give it to the wily oba – the man had just saved the Ekun Osi from his scheming.

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Illo
Where Twelve Kakakki blare for the king

Named after Bio the third son of Kisra

Illo stretched to the limits of its boundaries because of the influx of traders remained smaller than Ibariba kingdoms of Bussa and Nikki, but it prospered more because of its position on a major trade route. Illo lay on the eastwest road that went through Koomasie, Gonja, the ferry at Illo across the greater river, then farther on to Kano and Borno. Gonja attracted many traders to the very heart of the Ashanti kolanut producing region. Long distance traders sought the nuts, a favorite stimulant, and they frequented Illo a major stop on the greater river. Bussa too held a strategic point on the greater river, but it lay a bit off the major trade routes. Rapids besieged its section of the greater river, and Bussa lost most of the long-distance trade that passed through Ibariba land to Illo.

The king at Bussa looked for conflict where none existed when it came to Illo. Their competition for revenue from the ferries and taxes strained their brotherly relationship. On these two Ibariba points on the greater river, caravans were ferried across the width of the greater river. The many rapids of the greater river protected the Ibariba from their neighbours to the east. Both kings at Illo and Bussa knew that they had to cooperate to keep the peace on their roads and to keep invaders from the east at bay. For the Ashanti, Malinke, and Songhai, Ibariba’s distance didn’t make it interesting or worth a war. But the Songhai raided Ibariba on occasion though half-heartedly, their warriors often acting without the knowledge of their superiors.

Illo’s location in the northwaest of Ibariba land far from the rainforest, made it ideal for livestock and horses. Its ports Gere, Taru and Kurukuru swarmed with caravanserai on the Kano-Salaga trade route that crossed the greater river at all times of the year. They hauled gold from the gold fields of Bitu then travelled on to Borno and Sokwoto. Kolanuts form Gonja were
exchanged on the trail for bags of cowries or textiles, salt and potash. Gaya to the northwest of Illo and Bussa on the lower reaches of the greater river also competed for traders to cross at their ports but caravaners favoured Illo because of its location on the route. Only poor merchants travelled off the main route into smaller towns and villages to do business. It wasn’t worth the time of the richer ones.

During the dry season when the risk of contracting trypanosomiasises reduced, and the rivers became fordable and trade increased in Illo. On the eastern bank of the greater river merchants congregated at Jega, they joined other caravans and made the crossing at Illo. They sorted and counted their loads as Ibariba women pushed themselves to carry loads on short distances. Otherwise men, horses, donkeys and slaves made the long trip east to Songhai or Ashanti. A group of poorly dressed headporters stood to a side complaining of the unfair wages the long traders paid for their services. They believed the Ibariba allowed them to cheat foreigners within its borders.

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These Kengawa commoners, disdainfully called Talakawa by the Ibariba elite followed Sarkin Taku, who fought for their rights in the courts of the king of Illo. Sarkin Taku stood before the council and the king at Illo and said, “their wages have been slashed again. The reason? The princes raid caravans daily now instead of once a week.” Kirikassa, the custodian and chief priest of the land sat beside his second in command, Ki-Kparu-De. The short man had to raise his neck to look into the eyes his senior before sneering at the Sarkin Taku. Both men deemed it a bother to answer this commoner chief. Sunni, the third in command didn’t sneer, he worried. He knew some elders said Ilo descendened from a slave of the first king of Illo, Aguza. This was before the arrival of Kisra and his sons in Bussa. Some remembered Aguzo as Kisra’s
brother. In not so far history, the people of Ilo may have rewritten the beginning of Illo. Sunni understood Sarkin Taku more the two noblemen, a slave can become nobility. He also knew the power of the Talakawa had in their numbers, the king had to control their anger. “Something must be done,” Sunni muttered.

“What, we must now listen to the wretched?” Ki-Kparu-De said.

“But why are you surprised, he speaks as one of them,” Kirikasa said.

The king said not a word. He listened to his noblemen. He also heard words that they didn’t speak. Sunni bit his tongue and rocked his torso sideways trying to control his anger, he knew they goaded him. The arrival of another nobleman saved Sunni from responding to the two men. Ba-Peru-De stepped into the Ilo throne room with the coolness of the rain clouds he controlled and the animosity in the room returned into the mouths they came out from. Sunni sighed, Ba-Peru-De arrived at that time. Ba-Peru-De nodded at Sunni before he sat down. “Go Sarkin Taku we will deal with the matter,” Sunni said.

Ba-Peru-De, brought news of the trading conditions, “Illo’s section of the trading routes are good, the armed convoys have been effective in deterring would be raiders.” Sunni added, “The reason that happened is because the young warrior princes have promised not to raid this month.”

“Oh no wonder,” Ba-Peru-De said.

Ki-Kparu-De said, “Is Sunni too busy with the princes to tell us about the agents providing credits for traders? Or would he continue to speak for the wretched?”

“But that post has been filled by the commoner chief Sarkin Taka.” Kirikassa said chuckling.
The raiding parties of princes from the ruling houses of Bussa, Nikki, and Illo roamed the trading routes. They stole frequently from caravans with the boldness that common thieves lacked. They took whatever they liked and didn’t ride off before they were recognized. This glory they craved for. The Kings at Bussa, Nikki, and Ilo could only try to curb the excesses of the princes. They had done same as princes and understood that the princes needed the raids to support their towns and villages. The kings also knew that commerce from the caravans supported their kingdoms. They provided armed escorts for important caravans in and out of Ibariba territory. Their agents in Bussa and Illo underwrote these trips making huge profits or losses. Sunni turned to the king and said, “The agents are keeping with the agreed interest rates.”

“Kirkassa, I want you to go to the Sero Bagri, King at Nikki and see how he fares. Also bring to the next meeting reports of how his protracted illness may affect Illo and its commerce.” Kirkassa left with Ki-Paru-De and the mood in the room lightened. The king at Illo told Sunni, “tell the caravaneers to pay the agreed wages to the Talakawa or else I will increase the fares at the crossing.” His nobleman bowed their foreheads to the ground and the king retired to his rooms.

*

In a walled-up hut in the edge of Illo were the royal drums of white metal and copper. Woru Bate the son of Kisra had refused to share them with his two brothers, Aguza and Kwashi. Aguza’s curse against his brother’s selfishness banned the use of the royal metal drums at Illo. Aguza parted ways with his brothers. He preferred to stay at the river town of Illo than move on to arid Bussa. The Kisra lineage didn’t have a direct branch at Illo, Aguzo had prevented Kisra’s twin sons Waru Shika and Sabi Shika from having a foothold in Illo when they passed through. Aguzo’s descendents prided themselves as being independent of Bussa and able to resist
domination by Songahai to the east and the Hausa kings to the north. Located at a fordable part of the greater river, Illo attracted to more attacks than Nikki, but Illo always succeeded in shaking off invaders lusting for the revenue it collected.

*

The night after the meeting, Sarkin Taku had walked by Kirikassa at a crossroads near his compound but he didn’t greet the older man. Kirikasaa fumed at the commoner’s disrespect. He thought about of ways to deal with him and couldn’t sleep. He was still awake when he heard a drumbeat. That night a rat crawled through a hole in the thatched roof of the walled-up hut. Its falling curled-up body hit one of the drums and Illo heard that hollow drumbeat for the second time in a century. Kirikasaa sat up in the middle of the night. His fathers had passed down the sound of the drums to him. He knew it even though he’d never heard it. The drumbeat bounced inside his head and his heart stopped beating for while. He began to pant and sweat. He knew the consequences of the drum beat.

*

Illo always kept its eyes on its Fulani neighbours weary of a collusion between them and the Fulani within Illo. The Nikki king’s council met with the head of the Fulani families, and tried to find any discontentment before it created trouble. The kings of the Ibariba at Bussa, Nikki and Illo not only exchanged gifts at ceremonial occasions, they also exchanged lists of troublemakers, horses, animal skins, spears, and kolanuts. This cooperation aided the peaceful transportation of goods in their domains, and their common history that kept them together, a harness against a common enemy, the enemy within their boundary lines. They knew that if Ibariba mouths were united they could lift an elephant, but they weren’t.

*
At the tsamya tree outside the palace of Illo, Doguwa Fara, the spirit in the tree watched the people that came into the palace. It said, “The Fulani whispers with the Wangara.” Kirikassa its priest reported its message into the ears of the king at Illo. The enraged king promised to pluck out the eyes of the conspirators. When the words of Doguwa Fara reached the chief counsellor of the king at Illo, Bedde of Kassati, that Ba-Parakpe, chief merchant of the Wangara Caravanserai conspired with the Fulani. He sought out the king at Illo and whispered into his ears, “Caution, and prove the words yourself before you use your words to destroy the calm in Illo. For men have been known to put words into the mouths of the spirits.”

* 

Caravaneers crossed the greater river at Illo or Bussa on their way back to the north after several months down south or west. Qozeem one of the head drivers, a man of twenty-five years stopped at Gonja and bought camel loads of its prized kola nuts. He decided to stop at Illo, not Bussa, and use the King’s ferry at Komi to the east bank of the greater river and then continue his journey home to Borno. Long-distance traders usually stayed at the edge of the greater river waiting for their numbers to increase before crossing. Large numbers dissuaded Kambari, Shangawa, and Kengawa raiding canoes that attacked straggling canoes.

A mobile market followed Wangara Caravanserai and Hausa traders along the recognised trade routes. Women and men spread their wares in baskets, in heaps, and pots. They sold cloth, snuff, yams, plantains, bananas, curdled and fresh Fulani milk, and horses from Kano and Borno. The Caravaners also rested at the stop, they fed their anmails, and stocked up for the next stop, west or south. These markets never sleep, though lethargic on some nights, the markets remained open as long as cowries were being exchanged for goods. A Seelu man, one of the little king’s termites working in Ibariba sat in the company of other traders. Each man spoke
his language mixed with some words spoken by those that sat around him. The Seelu man joked he would move to Ibariba, probably Ilo.

“Why?” Qozeem said.

“Do you not know that Ibariba men do not marry our women?” the Seelu man said.

“Truly?”

“Truly. I know my wife will be safe here.” The men laughed.

A Fulani man said, I once heard that the priest at Kali, near Kaiama/Gbegazin of Nikki would lose his powers if he slept with a woman from one of the Oduduwa kingdoms.”

“I heard differently,” a Wangara said.

“What did you hear?” Qozeem said.

“That a Kali chief married a woman from those parts and she had a son for the chief,” he said.

“And?” Qozeem said.

“Well, war broke out between the Ibariba and the Oyo. The mixed son helped the Oyo by removing arrow heads from the arrows of the Kali warriors,” said the Wangara man.

The men were divided into three groups.

“A bastard son, brings hame to his father’s house.”

“A son pulled apart by the two houses that made him.”

“He is still a son; his deeds do not change his bloodlines.”

The Wangara continued, “When this was discovered, the priest at Kali forbid marriage with the women and it became law in Ibariba.”

“I heard even differently,” said a Tapa man

“Even more?” said Qozeem
“In Kamenji of Gbegazin, it is forbidden to sleep with either a man or woman of Oduduwa.”

“What will happen?” Qozeem said.

“Both spiritual and physical deaths, unless purified at a shrine.”

“Your women must be strong,” Qozeem said.

The Seelu man rose up and shook his buttocks, “I hail them, they that tie two hundred wrappers around their chests, and none reach their ankles.”

“Don’t you think this is strange?” Qozeem said.

“How so?” the Seelu man asked.

“The Kisra kings married the daughters of the earth priests to validate their rule. Why did they not do same and marry your women?”

“Bariba is not Oyo or Ife besides our women are stronger,” the Seelu man said.

While they had been talking swollen rainclouds moved across the greater river into Ilo. The winds whipped up loose sands around them before the heaving clouds emptied their insides over Ilo and the traders disbanded running to cover their animals and goods.

*
May paths do not pass through the evil forest, only one goes into it and after a few steps even it gets lost in the green tangle of trees, shrubs, vines, and roots. This place of death overflowed with life that lived vivaciously. An abundance of animals and other things echoed in it, drifting and trapped spirits too. Machetes or hoes don’t keep this forest in check, they weren’t allowed in it, and the forest did as it pleased. The forest started outside the south wall of the Aafin Oyo. It belonged to the Alaafin, and he did with it as he pleased. Just like the forbidden forest, the heart of people grew many twists and knots. Some they planted with their own hands and forgot about until the thorns of the bushes choked life out of them. Esu knew of and thrived in both places well.

The Alaafin weary of his wives and their politics and jealousies avoided them. Osun wanted to live in his rooms. She needed him to do his job and make her pregnant. She no longer found joy to be in his arms. She became a receptacle for his seed. She did everything to make him sleep with her, chasing younger wives and concubines away. She wanted her heart’s desire – a child. Oya overwhelmed by her three sets of twins and their many needs came to him only when he demanded it. She complained of being tired all the time, even though she had many servants and slaves. She didn’t leave her children alone with them. When summoned her to the Alaafin’s rooms, she sat before barely awake. Once he asked her, “if Oyo should go to war against Tapa?” She’d said yes. She said yes to everything now. Sango shook his head at his
Ayaba who had agreed that Oyo should war with her homeland, his mother’s homeland. Oba overly concerned with her one ignored him. The boy now three years old grew strong and healthy, but Oba didn’t allow him to be. She cuddled him and kept him by her side all the time. Kept busy by her kolanuts and the constant fear of death coming for her son, Sango didn’t exist in her life. In a way, he’d became less in their eyes.

Sango turned his eyes from them and left the tending of his ego, and the satisfaction of his desire to the concubines that were gifts from his people proving their allegiance to him. They were happy for his attention, and they prayed for a night with him. Sango invited one of the concubines, a girl from the Ekun Otun province to the Alaafin’s rooms. She spent a whole week pleasing him and reminded Sango of the old Osun, nearly as flamboyant and coy. News of the happenings in his rooms reached the three Ayaba, they pretended to be unconcerned until they were told the concubine would soon become a favourite. This stirred up the three senior Ayaba and turned their attention away from children. They started to grumble about Sango’s activities and the girl who greeted them through her nose now. The girl’s over wife, Oba couldn’t reel in her madness, so she let her be for now.

The girl Asake walked about the Aafin with her self-proclaimed importance, but because Sango liked her he had her secluded in his quarters. One day, Asake sated in the arms of her lover and Alaafin looked at him and smiled, “Is this the man Oyo and 6600 towns and villages fear so?”

Alaafin Sango laughed and dismissed her the next day. After she left his quarters, he sent a servant for a Teetu and a specific Ilari. A Teetu and the Ilari, Ikutiya, it-is-time-to die, were sent to Ekun Osi province only a day away from Oyo metropolis. The Alaafin gave both men a
message and a task that had to be carried out as soon as they got to the village he sent them. They must also return to Oyo by tomorrow.

The Teetu and Ilari departed for Ekun Osi immediately. They came back with two covered calabashes, and Sango summoned the concubine into the Alaafin’s rooms. She danced around the women’s quarter, telling everybody the Alaafin favoured her. So far only Iwinwande, Oya’s new small wife, received this honour, and she had only received two summonses in a month. But she, Asake, daughter of Amope the firewood seller, received an uncountable number of summonses in two weeks. The senior Ayaba hissed in their rooms and snapped at their servants and slaves. Only Osun came out of her rooms to have a look at the stupid girl the Alaafin amused himself with. Oba didn’t bother to see her because she knew the girl didn’t know she toyed with banked fire. Osun swelled with rage and jealousy and her servants suffered from her outbursts.

Asake walked into the Alaafin’s Iyewu she knew Oya looked at her, so she rolled her hips. She knelt before the Alaafin and greeted him. In her excitement, she didn’t think of why Biri and a Teetu were in the room with Alaafin and herelf. “Sit before these two calabashes,” Biri said and she did. She waited for the Alaafin to tell his men to leave the iyewu. He didn’t, instead, the Alaafin pointed to the calabashes. “Open them,” Biri said.

Asake opened both and covered the scream that erupted out of her with her hands. She swallowed her terror. Her eyes bulged at what she saw. She closed her eyes. She couldn’t scream or shout in the Alaafin’s rooms because both were abomination. The Teetu touched her shoulder with his cold machete, she opened her eyes to see him brandish it before her eyes.
“Look,” he said. She did, then quickly looked away from the contents of the calabashes because inside the calabash were two heads. The Teetu touched her again with his machete and frowned at her, and Asake looked into the calabash again.

“Better,” the Teetu said.

“Do you know them?” Alaafin said.

“Yes, I do.”

“Did you give the owners of the heads my message?” Sango said.

“Yes Kabiyesi,” the Teetu said.

“Give Asake the message.”

“We told the owners of the head; your daughter asked the Alaafin a question. He decided that your heads will be his response to her.”

“Now you know why I’m feared in Oyo and in 6600 towns and villages,” Sango said

Now bored, he dismissed her with a flick of his hand, and she ran from his inner chambers still holding in her tears. When she got to the people’s courtyard, the Aganju, she rolled on the ground finally letting out her grief. She heaved and threw up. Her cries roused the women in their quarters and her fellow concubines surrounded her. She told them what happened to her, and even her rivals forgot about their jealousy. They carried her indoors and tried to console her.

The next the morning, a Teetu raised an alarm, the body of Asake dangled from one of the branches of a mango tree that grew in the grounds of the Aafin. The girl feared for her life. She hung herself during the night. The Ogboni decreed her body a taboo to the earth. They couldn’t bury her the Ogboni threw her body into the tangled forbidden forest that lined the south of the Aafin Oyo.
In the province of the Ebolo lived a man and a woman who were lovers, but the woman was married to hunter. Her husband found out about the affair and put a firebrand on the steps leading to the back door of her lover. A message that said her husband knew of the man’s affair with his wife, but this didn’t deter the lovers. The husband didn’t tell the wife he knew, neither did her lover tell her they had been caught. They continued to see each other on days when the husband hunted in the forest at night.

One day, the husband mixed a charm into the pot of his wife’s coconut oil without her knowing. He told her he planned on going to the part of a forest farthest from home, “the forest I’ve been hunting in this year seems to be empty of big game.” He didn’t know when he would be back since he didn’t know, “take care of the compound.” She said, “Be careful and may your steps be ordered towards the places big game rest.” He watched her rub her oil all over her body, as he put his charm apron on and carried his leather hunting bag. He stepped out of their house and his wife closed the door behind him.

The woman waited before leaving for her lover’s and she slipped into the night when she felt her neighbourhood slept. She pushed open the door of her lover’s compounds. He left a lamp for her in the corridor like he did. Careful not to wake his compound up, she crept into his room. They fell on a mat and took off their clothes, giggling. They held themselves, and covered the others mouth with their hands. The man climbed on top of her when she stuggled at his trousers. Her lover heaved and grunted. She laughed, “we haven’t even done anything yet old man. I told to conserve your energy.” He didn’t respond, he collapsed on her, sweating. She tried to push him off her but couldn’t. He tried to get up and found that he couldn’t. She pulled trying to take his penis out of her, but it seemed to have grown barbs that hooked him to her insides.
Her cries of pain brought the man’s family, and neighbouring compounds, then the whole village came. They trooped in to see the conjoined couple that couldn’t be pulled apart. They died by sundown, still joined. The Ogboni said that their joined bodies be dumped in the tangled greens of forbidden forest that touched the Ebolo province of Oyo.

These bodies were thrown on the bones and rotting bodies of those that were there before them. Criminals executed by the Ogboni, or bodies deformed by life sucking disease so that the diseases don’t find their way back into the society, and the bodies of those that took their own lives.

In the Ebolo province, children sang songs and danced under the full moon

Beware of the hunters’ wife

Who is hunting the streets

Who will blame him

When he uses his magun on her
Sand devils dance in Oyo
They gathered dirt and grew
They twirled and grew
Throwing gusts of sand and wind
Into peoples’ eyes and paths
On the crossroads of Oyo
Twisters grew into rage
And the Aafin Oyo couldn’t stop them

During Sango’s reign, the evil forest swelled with dead bodies dangling from its evergreen trees. Forlon, Oyo stank with an air that made people forget social norms. The concerned mother-birds summoned the Aalafin to their meeting under the tree at Akesan, but he spurned their invitation. The assembly shook with anger and people stayed away from the tree because of the outraged noise they heard. The chief mother-bird shrugged off the insult, “we will be here when he needs us.”

“Ah ah we will be here,” the assembly of birds said.

“We will be here when the sandstorm gets stronger and stronger.”

“Ah ah we will be here.”

“We will be here when the sandstorm gathers goats and chickens.”

“Ah ah we will be here.”

“We will be here when it carries away children and day-old babies.”

“Aah then he will come running to us.”

“And we will remind him we never forget insults.”

“And as mother-birds will cover our ears to his cries.”
Oba’s anger
Esu sleeps in a hut
It is too small for him
He lies on his back
And his head hits the roof
Standing up he can’t see into a pot
Yet the yard is too small for him
Esu crawls into a palmnut shell
He finally has enough room to sleep

Oba sent two of her ete slaves to Gbonka and Oluode, “Tell them your mother has done her sums, and she knows that you shortchanged her. She wants her balance.” The men knew what Oba could do yet they didn’t regard her message. Oba’s anger swirled like a river overflowing its banks when she heard the response of the men. Gbonka said, “tell your mother to put her hands where they should be.” OluOde sent a longer message. “the mouth of the bird shall kill the bird. It is the mouth of a gossip that will kill the gossip. The gossip shouts to all who would hear I have two children until strangers went into her house and took away her children.”

Two captains of Oyo had turned their backs to Oba’s servants cries for help when the one eared thief, one of the thugs of Oyebode the prince, fell on her servants as they returned from Oja Ife. The thief took away her bags of cowries. Her servants reported ro her, “mother, the captains stayed their hands and allowed the one eared thief to rob us. It seemed their lords would get a cut of the robbery.”

Sango’s anger burned against Oba, but it raged against those two sly warlords who talked with his Ayaba behind his back and short changed her. By disrespecting her they sent a message to him. But Sango knew Oba’s anger split rocks and felled mighty trees in her path. If
those men knew the depths of her flood they would stay away from her. He didn’t want her anger unconfined in the Aafin. He had to confine Gbonka and OluOde’s growing arrogance. That night, Death, the father and son couldn’t sleep. Alaafin Sango walked around the Aganju through the gnashing his teeth at their audacity. He had to cast away their slight off his person. His eyes glowed red in the darkness, and Biri walked with him. In the morning, Alaafin Sango sent for the two warlords and they came to the Aafin. Not a word did the Alaafin speak to the men prostrate before him. One of the Ilari sitting at Sango’s feet said, “Death, the father and mother says you stink.” The men remained on the floor waiting for the Alaafin to speak or tell them to rise. He didn’t instead he left them there and went to his quarters.

Both men sat up and looked into an empty hall and dared not speak their thoughts in the Kaa Idi Obi with its many hidden ears and eyes. They crept out of the room but ran into Oba who waited for them in the Aganju. “I will get my balance,” she told them. They didn’t answer the woman and walked out of the Aafin into the noise of Akesan market. Oba laughed at the men’s folly, “I use blow the eared thief’s nostrils like a trumpet, and I will crush you both beneath my feet like a cockroach.”

*
The War of Importance

The worries of the rich
Are better than the worries of the poor
Whoever said the poor had worries
And the rich none

Don’t know the rich

This wasn’t a just war, it spun out of jealousies that ran deep within the walled towns of Owu and Oyo. Owu hearts heaved with a shame they couldn’t keep down, their humiliating Oyo defeat. The wounded Owu waited for any slight provocation from the Oyo. Gbonka and Olu Ode knew this, so they deliberately scratched the putrid Owu sore by making fun of their defeat. They sent an aroko to the Olowu, a coded message to their gates. It spoke of Oyo’s humbling of the Owu kingdom. They delivered an empty calabash wrapped in blood-soaked cloth to the gates of Owu, and both warlords knew it would bring nothing but war Oyo.

The Oyo army cut away trees saplings from its path, as the army in a single file moved south towards the capital of Owu nestled deep in the rainforest. Olu Ode and Gbonka sent warriors into an outlying Owu town to mislead them of their route. Instead of coming through the south, the Oyo army circumvented the well travelled path, and went through the rocky pass of northern Oyo, a route farther and less travelled than the southern route.

The two armies met on a field beside one of the farm villages of the Owu. On this cold morning; the ground was slick from the rain that fell overnight. The little village called Agbe emptied its inhabitants by noon when news of the war reached it. The talking drums from both sides boomed about the feats of their generals. The Oyo troops moved into the village, its chiefs into the best huts and they overran it. Early the next morning, young warriors were conscripted to
uproot tubers of yams from mounds that reached up to their waists and they made a show of their going and comings. They danced as they carried large yams covered with brown earth in their arms. They laughed at the stupid Owu who provided them with such a bounty. They made up a song and they sang it at the top of their voices.

Owu has abandoned its own

Owu only knows how to make noise of wars

But runs away at the sight of war

Whoever said the Owu were warriors should be flogged

The song rang allover in the camp of the Owu, but Oyo didn’t get a response. Owu didn’t reply the young warriors with a song that defended their valour. The Oyo camp could hear the quiet in the Owu camp, even the crown of trees in the camp didn’t stir. They warriors sang:

Perhaps they have fled, as they always do

Or they slinked to Owo in the middle of the night

The spirts of the forests have deserted Owu

Oyo will teach them another lesson

Owu didn’t attack Oyo it settled comfortably in its camp and watched Oyo starve. Their rations were low and their store of ekuuru long depleted. Owu heard movements in the Oyo camp, as its warriors trampled about in nearby abandoned Owu farms. One young warrior tapped gourds of frothing palmwine and offered it to the chiefs of the war. Owu heard Oyo’s long merry into the night. Amid Oyo’s scavenging and merry making, two Owu spies openly walked through the Oyo camp. A noisy crowd of Oyo warriors dragged them by the rope of their trousers to the house of Olu Ode and Gbonka. The two Owu men stopped struggling when they
saw the warlords. They had not come to spy but to deliver a message from the Olowu to the two warlords.

The two men didn’t prostrate to greet the warlords but stood and stared down at them. Two warriors slapped the back of their heads, and their caps fell off their heads, then they kicked at their shins and tripped them off balance. The fell to the earth by feet of Oyo warriors and they placed their feet on their necks. They shouldn’t have bothered the Owu didn’t struggle.

“What do you want?”

The men didn’t answer, because they couldn’t, their mouths were crushed to the ground.

“Let them speak,” Gbonka said. The feet on the back of their heads were raised, and one of the men said, “You shall not eat of the yams you took from our farms. Turn back and go home by the way you came while you still can.” The words were received with disbelief, silence, and raucous laughter. A barrage of blows fell on the back of the men. They were beaten with the flat side of machetes. Its sharp edges cut thin lines on their back, and the broad side of matchetes imprinted on their backs. The warlords left the spies at the mercy of the crowd, and the young warriors made a sport of toying with them. They were still poking at them when the crowd heard the war drums of the Owu accompanied by shouts of men advancing. Oyo scrambled to its feet and rushed to meet the Owu warriors running at their camp.

The warriors of both sides met with the rage of water forcing it way through a tight hole. The iron faces of machetes sparked as they encountered another. They clanged but thumped as they passed through flesh and bones. Blades covered with blood dulled the sound of ringing metal. Body parts dangled held by threads of sinew, shallow breaths gurgled through leaking lungs and men fell on both sides. A deluge of arrows from the Owu hit Oyo in its flank, stopping its halting advance. But the arrows from the Owu didn’t hit its intended mark, the Oyo were too
far away. Owu archers were set on a high hill looking down on the battle. The Oyo certain of winning went to harvest yams and didn’t secure their positions. During that time the Owu warlord, Ogunmola, positioned his warriors on the vantage points that could change the course of the war.

Oyo warriors backed away from the onslaught from all sides only to be cut down by the Owu arrows. Oyo retreated disorderly and the Owu gained more ground on the field. The battle continued like this, waves of attack from the Owu and painful retreats by the Oyo, and slain Owu and Oyo lined the paths of the ebbing battle. The Oyo tried several times to rally but failed. They tried to attack in full force but met with the brutal force of the Owu that stood its ground and until they cleared Oyo off the field. Bands of Owu warriors were ready to move into the space of fallen brothers. They did this in such an orderly way that there wasn’t a time when Owu warriors weren’t prevailing on the battle field.

Thus, the words of the Olowu spoken by the two men became truth. Oyo didn’t eat the yams taken from Owu farms. The few yams cut and put on fire never made it into Oyo stomachs, and the fire under the pots licked the water dry and burned the yam. The stench of wounds and death mixed with acrid stench of burnt yam and Owu looked at the back of the retreating Oyo. An Owu man caught in the fleeing ranks of the Oyo was dragged with them as they retreated. An Oyo warrior had struck his right leg with a dagger and he fell to the ground. Another Oyo stood over him his machete raised up ready to bring it down on the man’s head. The Owu man grinned at the machete raised up against the sun. His feral eyes reflected the glint of the metal, and his smile fueled the rage of Oyo warriors.

Gbonka stepped into the gathering and told the warrior to sheath his machete. He commanded that the man’s face be cut with a blunt jagged blade, “skin the smile and his Owu
pride off his face,” he said. Fear invaded the Owu’s body, and he tried to writhe out of the hands that held him down, but he couldn’t. A warrior pushed a dirty blade against his cheeks, and slashes were made from his cheek bone to his jaw. A cry of rage escaped from the insides of the man, and a warrior slapped the side of his head. The slap closed the Owu’s mouth and he bit his tongue, so blood from his cut face dripped into his mouth mixed together. Gbonka said, “I hope your king can hear your cries.” Olu Ode said, “we are doing you good.” Gbonka said, “Remember those yams we couldn’t eat boys? Wipe his tears with the peels.” The warriors grabbed the man again and rubbed the yam peels on his cuts. The itchy fluid mixed with his tears and blood and the man clawed his face because it itched from the insides of his wound. The scars would not heal well. They would be puckered and thick marring his handsome face. They left him in the path of Oyo’s retreat.

The pursing Owu met him there writhing and crying in anguish. Ogunmola commanded that the Owu stopped pursing the Oyo and his warriors converged around the man with the bleeding face. Owu’s war drums pounded away promising that there would be another battle. Oyo must know that there will be consequences for this unforgivable action. The two sleazy Oyo warlords had made an Owu royal into an Oyo man by making Oyo marks on his face. The Owu returned to Owu and prepared to do battle with Oyo again, because when a goat looks back at the one that disturbs its peace, it curses them with their curses.

*
Ife and Black Death
The community needs a life to hold a contagion
A stranger’s blood will do
Let strangers stay out of Ife
Only life will stay the hands
Of Esu’s eight evils

Black Death scourged the land of Ife, and the earth become too hot for its inhabitants. It burned through the soles of peoples’ feet and they stayed indoors, coming out only in the dark of the night. Their feverish moaned and they joined keening of the ghosts and beings that frolicked in the night. In daytime, visitors stayed away from Ife, many left without saying good bye to family and friends. The gates of Ife were left open, and barely guared. The guards lacked the peace of mind to be and the strength to do. Nobody traded in Oja ife. Its tables and stalls were covered with dust. This Black Death reached into every compound and dealt witth people as it wanted.

The gates of the Aafin Ife closed to people, and only Emese could go and come. The Alaafin sat secluded in his hot rooms but was well. The dry season kept Ife in its grip and it didn’t relent with the prayers of Ife. The Ooni fasted and prayed to his ancestors to lift the scourge, to forgive his sins and that of his people may not come to an end during his reign. He poured libations on Aafin shrines and sent sacrifices to ones outside the walls of the Aafin. He poured Esu bowls of sweet red palmoil but the Black Dealth killed more. The cries of his people roamed about in his sleep. He tossed about on his akete, and none of his olori could calm him.

When word came to the Ooni that his detractors brought on more deaths by infecting them with black death. He restrained himself from cursing them. He left his council in anger, so as not to speak the evil that tried to gurgle out of his being. He knew his curse would stick on
them for generations. That night as he slept, an old man who walked with one short and one long leg led him into a room filled with statues. Obalufon walked through the room looking at the likeness of the sculptures. They were of different sizes and were made of brass. He bent to see the details of their jewelry he knew somehow that this one wore coral, another agate, and another segi beads. The sculptures talked together, different dialects of the same language. They laughed too, a pleasant sound without malice. He smiled at the room, and as he backed out of the room, he saw that they shone. This couldn’t be from the metal alone, he thought. There in that room roamed an aura of the greatness of the deeds of these men and women. The old man turned to him, his angry face stared at the Ooni, “this could have been Ife but because you stepped into what didn’t concern you. I led the eight Ajogun evils into Ife because you disobeyed me. You betrayed Owu. Whoever betrays the earth will have the earth pulled from under him or worse the earth will become taller than them.” Obalufon fell to the ground and cried, “Woe. I have sinned against the old man at the crossroads.”

Osanyin, a healer, gave poultices to people to put on their boils. His servants went into the forest collecting herbs and tree barks. He prescribed pots of herbal brews, and in Ife his giant milk weed, and corn concoctions were fed to the sick three times a day. Men hung Akoko leaves on their doors, and women threw Tangiri pods into houses to ward off infection, but the spirits that spread the hotness continued to throw Black Death in the air, unrelenting. Women neglected themselves and spent themselves trying to take care of their children and husbands. Osanyin tried to keep the infected isolated but the uninfected women found a way to see their family. And soon enough they began to show the symptoms of Black Death, red eyes, headaches, chesty coughs and colds, the forerunners of the rash. The numbers of the dead increased especially in the
compounds of the poor. Travellers ran or walked faster away from the gates of Ife, snapping their fingers over their heads thrice to ward off evil. News of the black death got to Oyo, “the air around Ife is cursed” and Sango stayed his hands, he withdrew his gaze from Ife. His Ayaba sent their goods to other markets.

Osanyin supervised the gathering of bodies in a heap outside the town walls, because there weren’t enough grave diggers. The murals around Ife’s compounds became dark reflecting the many deaths. Carvers and sculptors made gaunt bodies with deformities. Their faces showed tears and pain; their mouths were distorted and eyes grimaced. They didn’t have full cheeks or round stomachs, instead tongues lolled out of mouths. They didn’t wear jewelry, neither did they carry staves, and the sorrows of the people found room in the bodies of these images.

The Orunmila sent Esu’s word to Aafin Ife, “I have seen your repentence Obalufon. A life for thousands of lives, a healthy life can redeem a lot. I require a sacrifice and Ife will be healed. It will be lifted out of dust.” The Ogboni sent a town crier and his gong to Ife, “all must remain indoors.” They set a curfew for sundown till sunup for seven days. “If you lose a goat look for it. If your chicken doesn’t come to roost in the evening look for it. If you look for a lost human being in the morning, do not look for them. Let the ears that can hear, hear. I have spoken.”

By sundown, Ife’s paths were deserted. It’s gates though unguarded and open didn’t welcome a soul not even an ant crawled into Ife. But some eyes went about town for that ear that would disobey. The Ogboni knew some ears were blocked with wax and did as they pleased but there were some that were unaware of spoken words.

A stranger came into Ife on the night of the sixth day. His ear did not hear the town crier’s message, neither did he know of the scourge. He came from afar to buy Ife’s Segi beads.
He wanted Ife’s iridescent blue-green glass beads for his betrothed. He walked through the empty square of Oja Ife. Three men emerged from the night, their white clothes dazzled. They surrounded the man and grabbed the stranger. He struggled with his captors swiping a cheek with his nails. He bit a nose, but he couldn’t get free. They held him tight. One of them reached into his pocket and put a twisted brass ring on his left hand’s little finger and struck the stranger on his chest. The stranger stopped struggling, his eyes bulged, and his mouth slackened dripping saliva on the hot earth. He fell to the ground and his saliva sizzled in his ears as it evaporated into air and goose bumps covered him. The earth burned his skin. He screamed but his cry of anguished remained in him, silent. One of his captors passed a lamp across his face, “no marks,” he said. He raised the stranger’s cloth and searched for marks on his body, “no marks there too.” His captors didn’t tie his hands and legs with the rope they had brought, they threw it away. One lifted the stranger’s legs, the the other his arms, and the last one followed with the lamp. He said, to the other two carrying the stranger, “Maybe he dropped from the heavens. An answer to our prayers.” They took the stranger to the Ogboni and before morning his spilled blood soaked into the earth, and it became cool.

The debt of the Ooni Obalufulon was paid with Ife blood, and when paid in full the black death removed its hands over Ife.
Olu Ode and Gbonka

A brotherhood steeped in rivalry

Power and glory seeking

It is only snakes that walk alone that get killed

Both men didn’t aspire to be the Balogun Oyo that post allowed for too much attention and nearness to the Alaa who sees and knows all by smelling. Gbonka and Olu Ode became two little mice that nibbled at the skin between fingers covered in soup, while blowing air on it. They conspired with the other warlords in their rank and became like a wooden spoon stirring up trouble. Gbonka and Olu-Ode gossiped about Sango, but they were not men who denied things said when called have their say. Only cowards do that and both men certainly were not. They did not fear death. And the cared for the family, they would fall on double edged daggers to halt the Alaafin’s command to destroy their compounds if it came to that.

Gbonka fell out of favour with the Alaafin, when he went to war against a town where a cousin of Sango’s mother lived without Sango’s consent. That war took not only her life and that of her children, but also swept away her entire village. Gbonka brought the Aafin’s share of the booty to the Aaфин. The Alaafin sneered at the bloodied loot, “give to the strangers at Apomu,” he told an Ilari. Sango ignored Gonka throughout his visit to the Aafin and didn’t respond to him. Later in the day, Sango raged in his room. He didn’t want to take out and leave the other, who would become the cut-off head of a python. He would deal with both men. He would wait.

Olu Ode sought the Alaafin’s favour and waged a battle against Aro a tiny village to the west of Oyo. This village rebelled against the rule of Bayaani, the little king. Olu-Ode’s supposed good deed made him fall into disfavour with the Alaafin. Bayaani sent word to OluOde, “No man, not even a chief can stretch out his hands to kill without the Alaafin’s
blessings. The owner of the land doesn’t need your help. After all the Alaafin would deal with the matter as he sees fit.”

Their many journeys to plead for the Alaafin’s favour yielded no results. They sought out the three Ayaba and gave them gifts. They begged them to entreat their husband. Oba, Osun, and Oya welcomed them to the Aafin, and received the gifts. “We will do all we can,” Oba said. The other women nodded. When they left left, Oya kicked the things about the kobi, “worms” she said hissing after the men. They knew their husband’s fury at the power drunken exploits of these men; Sango spoke about them in his sleep. The women knew they had to come together to war against these men even though they would never say or agree to this.

More hunters and warriors joined the company of the warlords, and they went about raiding and warring. They even stopped sharing the spoils of war with the Aafin Oyo, and they gave them people. Gbonka and Olu-Ode’s fame spread all over Oyo, even children sang of their exploits. Esu watched all of this from the mound in on the crossroads that led into Oyo and listened to the chattering of people; both men were mad, the Alaafin dazed. The innocent killed before their time shouted the loudest, their keening spirits roved about the middle earth, living out the rest of their lives. They cried at crossroads that Esu avenge them, but he waited. His cudgel, he raised in the air and waited; he worked in his own time and dealt with people with his own measurements of vengeance.

They had large farms and many children and many wives, two these men. They confiscated farmlands in every province of Oyo. Their power base of younger warriors closed ranks and played the Oyo Mesi and the Basorun Oyo. They knew a division of the power blocks in the Aafin Oyo favoured them, the downtrodden an wretched of Oyo. But Esu hid it from both men that they didn’t trust each other until an incident happened. A group of wandering musicians
sang of their greatness as being equal. Both men jumped up to silent the man singing, “I’m the greatest.” That day, as they sat down, both knew in their insides that only one could be the greatest.

The compounds of Olu Ode and Gbonka lay to the east of the Aafin. Both were within the inner circle of compounds of noblemen and chiefs that went around the Aafin Oyo. Only the Bashorun Oyo’s compound was bigger and all three swelled with the number of war boys retained by the war-chiefs in their employ. Sango joked to his Ayaba that he could smell the food cooking in the hearth of his chiefs. But in his heart, he wished he couldn’t smell the contention brewing in them.

*
An Oyo hunter, Odewale returned from a week of hunting in the grasslands of Oyo. He didn’t kill game nor did his traps catch anything. He came back home empty handed but for bunches of leaves he stuffed into his game bag. The last widow of his great grandfather sat at the entrance of the agbole as she often did, and her rheumy eyes never missed anything that went on in the Agbole.

“I greet you mother.” Odewale said, as he prostrated.

“Welcome my son,” she said.

“Thank you, mother.”

“Did the forests yield anything.” She said eyeing his bulging bag.

“No mother, it was dry and silent.

“Truly.”

“Truly mother.”

He walked away from her in need of sleep and a bath. She watched him walk away from her and hissed. She had been looking forward to the grasscutters he gave her; she planned to cook it with tete leaves, roughly ground pepper and palm oil. Her stomach growled and with anger she waddled to her room. “What is wrong with children of this age,” she said to herself “thinking they could deceive an elder with bad eyes.” She reached for her calabash, “these children that forget to feed their hungry parents.” She opened her calabash and spoke into it, “Because you have not fed me that which you have kept from
me will make your bowels move for a week.”

She returned her calabash to its spot under her bundle of clothes and went back to her post on the steps. Soon enough, she heard Odekunle’s wife move around in the backyard cooking her husband meal. “And he said he didn’t catch anything,” the old woman said, and her stomach growled again. She could smell the soup sputter on the fire in the hearth. Odekunle’s wife took her the soup into their room to feed her child and husband and the old woman’s eyes followed her. She heard them laugh, their words were muffled by the words of their room. She watched the wife come out again with the dirty the bowls, and before she could set the bowl down to wash them. Her husband ran by her, but he didn’t get to the pit before he defecated in his trousers.

It continued all through the night, this run to the pit. Odekunle’s insides heaved as it tried to empty everything in them. The old woman saw him groan outside their room when she flew to the Iroko tree in the middle of the market square. He sat in the courtyard holding his stomach with his wife and child crying beside him. When her bird flew back into her room, she came back into her lifeless body, and she came out of the room and walked by the now prone man.

“What did he eat?” she asked the wife.

“Nothing that I’ve never cooked for him.”

“May be the meat he caught yesterday was spoilt.

“Meat? We didn’t eat meat last night.”

“No meat?”

“Our mother we ate locust beans and igbo leaves.”

“No meat?”
Odekunle’s wife didn’t answer her. She held on to her husband’s head cradled in her laps and resumed her crying. “And he told me,” the old woman said as she walked back to her room, “he’s not a stingy son after all. Maybe the many battles drove the game away.” She brought out her calabash again, “he’s a good son.” She opened the calabash and spoke into it and her words stayed Odekunle raging bowels. In the morning, the mother saw Odekunle on a mat recovering from his ordeal last night. He could barely talk but he grunted at the mother as she walked by him. “Rest well son,” she said, your wife told me you didn’t bring game home last night,” and she walked to her spot by the steps. Odekunle remembered his conversation with the mother yesterday, he told her several times that he didn’t have any meat. When his wife came out to feed him a bowl of watery ogi, he asked her about her converged on with the mother. She told him, “she asked about his health and meat. Odekunle swallowed the thin corn gruel, and he put all the sides of the conversation together inside of him. He decided he would never come home without meat for the mother, even if he had to by some from other hunters.
Gudugudu
She is the mighty buffalo that eats the hunter like grass
She terrifies young hunters, and they run
Sango listens to those that Oya heeds
His wrath he freely gives to them
That don’t listen to her

Gudugudu sent a thousand tubers of yam every year to Oyo as tribute, and on the eve of
the day Gudugudu’s envoy and load carriers would leave for Oyo. An Ilari from Aafin Oyo
stepped over a border and set foot in Gudugudu. He made for the Aafin of the small town and
with the insignia of his office, his green and red fan, he waved to people. News of his arrival got
to the Aafin before he did, and Aafin prepared to receive the presence of the Alaafin Oyo. The
Ilari prostrated to the king and said, “Alaafin asks if the day broke well over Gudugudu.”

“Only the Alaafin knows,” the king said.

“What is your name?” Balogun of Gudugudu said.

“Oba-lolu, the King-is-supreme, but my fan’s name is Oya seek’s justice.”

“We greet your fan,” the Balogun said.

“The Alaafin says Gudugudu’s tribute is now 1000 yams by a 100.”

“Ah,” the Gudugudu court said.

“Alaafin asks if the day broke well over Gudugudu.”

“Only the Alaafin knows,” said the Balogun.

The Oyo Ilari walked out the throne room and Gudugudu remembere what they had
done wrong. Oya passed through Gudugudu a month ago on her way to Oja Ife. The people in
the had failed to accored her respect as an Ayaba of the Alaafin. They had insulted the staff of
the king that trailed behind her. They didn’t reverence Oya. Ayaba. They didn’t reverence Oyo
either or its Alaafin, the people of Gudugudu turned their back to the entourage as it passed through. They turned their back to Oyo just as it had to them in time of need. It failed to defend them from thieves that raided their farms.

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Gudugudu provoked Oyo to a war its Balogun couldn’t win. Gbonka’s son, Atolagbe died in the meaningless fracas that ensued in Gudugudu. They rolled in mangled body in a raffia mat and returned to his father. And while it taken to the Oyo forest to be buried by his agemates, his mother and father stood at the front of their compound waiting for their return. The hands of many women held up his mother, and they tried to console her. Olu Ode tried to comfort his friend, but he couldn’t. Gbonka’s new found companions frothing cold palmwine and millet beer controlled his head and diluted the pain of the death of his only son. The crazed man, muttered around his Iyewu, “fire burned me.” He touched his charms and amuleta and recited his oriki and that of his warrior fathers and by the third day his grief congealed into rage. He roused himself and threw off his grief. He emerged from his Iyewu and said, “the Alaafin wasted the life of his only son on a woman’s war. He, the father would never forget, he would avenge his death.”

* 

From the many fires of battles set by Oyo warriors, the bodies of some of the dead were returned on the shoulders of their brother warriors who chanted the heroic deeds of the dead all the way back to Oyo. When the soles of their feet touched Oyo, dogs from all over Oyo howled for the dead they saw roaming about at night and during the day. When men set stiff bodies rolled up in raffia mats on the grounds of a compound the women rushed out and threw themselves on the earth pulling their hair and crying out in anguish. They their breasts and remembered the day they knelt to bring up children into the world. They passed on their grief to
one another. It spread round villages and towns, and the atmosphere soured like a three-day old pot of beans. But they also comforted themselves, the widows, grandmother, mothers, aunts, and sisters. And the grieving widows, fathers, uncles, brothers and husbands comforted each other.

The tree that is handsome doesn’t last in the forest. Its trunk is fondled by carvers. They sigh as they chop these trees down with axes. They don’t last in the forests. They become the raw material to create beauty and the new. In the compound of many dead warriors sat a chief hunter and his brother hunters sang ijala chants into the night as the prepared body would lay in state for three days. The hunters’ drums wept as the men remembered and ate tobacco leaves and kola nuts and they drank palmwine and corn beer.

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When news of the Gudugudu war got to Oya from her servants and son. Oya’s heart mourned the loss of lives. Angry winds swept up sands in the Aganju courtyard and over Osun’s courts a storm gathered that darkened the skies of Oyo. The insides of swollen dark clouds held flashes of lightning and when they were released they split the tallest iroko trees in the Oyo forests into burning splinters. Swirling winds blew away roofs and carried their thatch far away to the waters of the greater river already swollen with the waters of its second coming. The brackish waters carried life, but they also carried the mourning of Oyo in their waters and both churned and became one.

*
A child is a child even in Nikki
A child with a good mind holds on to spoken words
If you do not know how to speak,
You should know how to be silent

In the month millet flowers blossomed, girls gathered in village and town squares in Nikki. They went in groups dancing and singing and eating from compound to compound greeting the women These host matrons shaved off the girls’ hair and purified them for the next day. Their mothers welcomed them back home in the evening. They remembered when they did the same and told their daughters of the day. The girls didn’t sleep in their mother’s huts that night. The eyes of their mothers followed them into the huts of their paternal aunts from their doors.

The next morning, the girls danced in the village square in a big wobbly circle throwing up dry red dust into the cold white harmattan winds. The Sin Burobu, a group of older women pushed into the circle and snatched the girls one by one into the hut where two of them held down a girl. They cut a part of her clitoris.

The last girl in the circle kept on dancing. She danced in a circle drawn by the feet of the girls taken. Her body tensed each time the girl next to her disappeared into the hut, and she heard their cries, sometimes muffled, sometimes piercing. When her time came she wasn’t dragged, the old women were tired. The Sin Burobu who came for her panted, and they drew her into the hut gently. She entered the hut with her head bent. She lay on the mat, and her legs were thrown open by a woman whose stall leaned on her mother’s stall in the market. Another one pried her lips open and gave her food, so she wouldn’t faint. Another one, dipped her head into the girl’s legs and her clitoris received an incison and it bled. The last girl’s cry was muffled. They lifted
her up and led her to a courtyard. She joined other girls who shared the pains and joys of becoming women.

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The last girl healed before the Kigali feast like the other girls did. The feast where young men of Nikki villages gathered to impress the girls. Many of them would soon acquire women; their Kuro Kpaaru ceremonies were being planned. The girls watched as the boys beat themselves with the supple branches they’d collected. The girls noted those that flinched or threw away their bodies from the canes. The men tried to impress their betrothed, but many fell by the way rolling under the welts that formed under their gowns. They cried like babies, some had snot coming out of their nose, and their girls slinked away shamed.

Kuro Kpaaru ceremonies formed alliances between two families gained from the union of their children. The last girl’s fiance came from the Boro clan, and they were renowned hunters. She passed by a farm on her way to the stream every morning the morning. He had a small farm were his yam tendrils grew higher than those from surrounding farms. She sneered at the size of the farm much smaller than that of her father and her uncles. She liked his lean torso covered with red streaked welts. His eyes stayed for long on last girl, and his friends converged on him. They beat him till he fell, not once did he utter a groan. He got up and received even more canes. The last boy standing looked about him, no other boy came to cane him.

The last girl sold shea butter in the market at Nikki. She kept the butter cool in calabashes filled with water. In the market, she cut it into chunks and sold it to women wrapped in leaves. Hers was highly sought after by woman. She didn’t mix it with animal fat, it didn’t have a rancid smell, and it kept well. Anakaari, the youth delegate to the king at Nikki checked on her at the market regaling her with stories of the splendour of the king’s palace. She pretended
not to be interested in his tales, but she loved his attention. She told him, “the market women said the king at Nikki might be sick, the council had failed to hold in three weeks.” He said, that is true. It is whispered that the king’s disgruntled older brother Suni had tried to poison him.” Then he thought better of what he said, and laughed, “pay no attention to what I say, my words slip off my tongue today.”

When the men of the last boy’s compound went on long hunting expeditions into the rugged landscape of the Ibariba plateau or the patches of rainforest in the east. The last boy’s arrows fell on many antelopes and killed them. He brought some game to the last girl’s compound, and he boasted that he would kill an elephant soon. When she saw him in the village, she walked by him, and smiled to the ground. Two days ago, he had been in her compound to help her maternal uncle store his yam in the barn. He also helped to build a new hut for her grand uncle, and she watched him heap Banco clay near the reach of the men building. The women of the last girl’s compound teased her when the last boy came around. She stayed out of his sight and tried to face her many tasks, women were busy during the dry season.

The last boy’s uncles and cousins were also revered soldiers, their poisoned arrows helped keep out invaders out of Nikki. They took turns camping at one of the many rocky outcrops that dotted Bariba. These sentries that watched the gates while others slept. Boy had gone for sentry duties many times too. “He would make a good husband,” one of last girl’s paternal aunts said. “Yes,” another said, your paternal uncle chose well.”

Last girl kept what Anakaari told her inside her. She prayed to Gunusu to keep her betrothed safe from the war coming. Nikki knew that the king at Oyo looked towards Nikki and her warriors readied for war. Last girl’s name was Yon and last boy’s name was Woru. Both were the first born of their mothers.
Esu by the River Mowe

Esu’s huge phallus stood ramrod straight

When he dances, the women – maidens, married or widowed – are not spared from his exhuberant lusting

In dreams, he sometimes visits

At the crossroad, he ravishes

At Oke-Odo, rocks smoothened with years pounded with soap and clothes littered the bend of River Lumiwo. The lower section of the river set aside for washing. Everyday, the rushing waters Lumiwo listened to the age grade of girls next in line to be married gossip as they washed clothes. Abayomi, one of the hunters of Oyo came down the path of the river. And the girls nudged each other to look at the man, and only one of them turned her back to him. He greeted them all and waded into the water. The girls dropped their clothes and waded after him. The one girl stood away from the rest and started to sing. The girls chortled after him. They said, “Take my soap. Take my bowl. Take me.” Abayomi laughed and stopped by Alake, “why do you turn your back to me?” Alake tried not to smile but her dimpled cheeks did, “Can you stand my mother’s sharp mouth?” she said. Abayomi said, “I have a sharp mouth too.” The other girls went back to their clothes, huffing and puffing, but their ears were trained on the conversation.

Esu hid by a path near the river overgrown by tall grasses. Not one of the girls had noticed him. They all stared at Abayomi and Alake. Esu looked at the group with disdain, and his lower lip curled with disgust. He watched Abayomi and Alake frolick about in the river. He wanted what they had. In his very thin voice, he called out to the girls, “beautiful maidens I greet you.” They ignored the dirty old man whose legs were of differing lengths. The looked at his seedy cloths and his well-worncap as it draped over the back of his long head.
In anger Esu, commanded that the waters of the river to turn backwards. “Ah, ah, ah,” the girls said “my eyes shall not see evil.” The girls scrambled back the village, leaving behind their clothes and baskets. When they got to the village and told their story to the villagers. Nobody believed them, “Stop this madness,” they said. But the girls didn’t stop until a group of old men went to the stream and they said same. But people still murmured, “water doesn’t flow that way.”

“The river flows down stream from Oke-Odo.” Then another group of younger men went, and they said otherwise. The stream flowed as normal. The village was divided. There must be an epidemic of small pox or hot earth coming. The village mourned, as they supplicated that the disease should not come near them. They didn’t hear Esu dragging his shorter leg, laughing as he walked through the market square on his way to another town in Oyo. He stopped abruptly, by the crossroads at Oke Odo and tasted the food set before him in two potsherds. Someone had poured a good measure of palm oil and kolanuts and agidi and smiled. He turned towards the house of the woman that placed it there. He walked uprightly into the house and became the man that slept by the woman. On her mat, Salewa thrashed about in the throes of passion, her insides wet, clutching the huge flesh throbbing in her. Esu planted his seed inside her and ten months later, she would have a child, Esubiyi. She had asked for a child at a crossroads. A child born by Esu.

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A Journey of Pleas

The Alaafin shook the walls of Aafin Oyo with his shout when he heard of Olu Ode and Gbonka’s dastardly act at the last Owu war. They would have successfully hidden it from him if Oba’s Eunuch had not whispered into his right ear that they made an Owu man into an Oyo man. They didn’t accord respect to an Owu nobleman off the battlefield. Even if they knew of this norm practiced by war generals in Oyo and beyond. The Alaafin sent an Ilari immediately to Owu to explain the situation. Agbejero-Oba, the-one-who-pleads-the-case-of-the-king, didn’t know what would become of him in Owu. He knew the Alaafin’s staff of authority of the Alaafin may not be to keep him alive after he delivered his message; the Olowu could do with him as he pleased. He had no choice; the bearer of a message doesn’t fear the one he’s been sent. He fears the one who sends him on an errand.

Agbejero-Oba, the-one-who-pleads-the-case-of-the-king wasn’t allowed to enter Owu, a sentry at the Owu gates shouted the Owu council’s response to him, “your message die within you. The Owu council of chiefs will only talk with nobility, not with glorified messenger slaves. Our gates will only open to worthy chiefs.”

Agbojero-Oba, the-one-who-pleads-the-case-of-the-king took this message back to Oyo. A delegation of Oyo nobleman left for Owo three days later, they were tasked to bring all hostilities to a close. In their absence, Oyo readied a gift to appease the anger of Owu. Three members of the Oyo Mesi, Basorun, Agbakin, Samu stayed in Owu for a week. The three chiefs didn’t see the Olowu. They talked with the lowest rung of Owu nobles who made a show of going back and forth to the hierarchy of Owu chiefs to deliver messages and waste time. The Oyo delegation had no choice but to accept the shame measured out to them in full by the Owu, because of Olu Ode and Gbonka’s stupidity. They rubbed the shame on their skin, until their faces were grey and merry far removed from their eyes.
While the talks were going on in Owu, the heads of Oyo market women met with Oba’s Eunuch, Ona Efa, to pass their discontentment at the protracted talks. He met with them in the verandah of an Afin Kobi nearest to the Aganju courtyard. They brought gifts to the Alaafin, pots of palm oil and lengths of silk, “they were suffering,” they said. The continued closure of the main road to Oyo’s Akesan market because of rumours of an impending Oyo/Owu war affected them, harshly. “The Alaafin hears you and feels your pain; the husband of Oyo will act on your behalf,” Ona Efa assured them. He gave them gifts, each received a bag of cowrie.

After days of talks, Owu and Oyo declared truce to last until the next dry season. Owu and Oyo warriors returned to their farm and planted corn and yams. But a thick unease remained between the two kingdoms. Oyo careful not to anger the Owu, the Owu on the other hand did all to provoke them except march out against Oyo. Traders didn’t return fully to the Akesan market on market days. They went to smaller markets where they’re goods were safe, and no harm would come to them.

Owu received an Ilari from Oyo, Obasetan, the king is ready, and gave nine cowries tied together by a string to Owu an Iwarefa. The message, it is preferably so, Oyo said. Alaafin Sango sued for peace because war didn’t help his reputation with his people. However, before the ears of corn yellowed or the tendrils of yams died that season. A planned skirmish broke the truce, the Olowu sent his warriors to start a fight at the Alabata junction. Seven Oyo died in their farms. Oyo killed three Owu at Imeta junction, and both sides denied the skirmishes.

*
The death a hunter warrior
A hunter dies
And Iremoje is performed
Will go to heaven
And he shall be one of crying demons
In the deep of forests

Mourning Oyo compounds performed the rites of Iremoje dirge for fallen warriors to escort them out of this world and into the next that they may be born again as babes. At night, people sat in groups in the open spaces of family compounds. Groups of Iremoje chanters and drummers sat in a corner; they were hunters and warriors. Before the moody assembly hung the war clothes of the dead from a forked branch, and his collection of charms and amulets weighed down his hunting cap. A group of his brother hunters from far and near readied themselves to sing verses of the Iremoje as they sipped palmwine and ate and chatted. The hunters tied palm fronds to the upright branch, and at its bottom, the hunter’s his widow placed bowls of roast beans, palm oil, palm kernels, salt, and more of his charms in a basket filled with his hunting tools.

Those dozing in pockets of the night roused themselves as the piercing voice of a brother hunter sang from his corner. Abayomi remembered his friend and his voice shook as he said:

Alas Akanda has fallen
He became a dead brave
In the future
May we never go hunting again
There is a boundary between
The living and the dead

The chief hunter, Asipa, came later in the night and sat over the proceedings. He would visit all the Iremoje gatherings that night to pay respect to his brothers. The Iremoje chanters saluted him:

This Ashipa can kill himself
He isn’t afraid of death
Who challenges a charging elephant?
Who looks a raging buffalo in the eye?
He possesses charms like an aroni
And removes his ear wax with the teeth of an elephant

Oyo’s reserves were made up of experienced hunters and the main contingent were hunters who doubled as scouts or foot soldiers. These men fought side by side in many battles; they hunted elephants, and buffalos, crocodiles, and overcame spirits and demons in tangled forests and grass lined paths. A hunter stood before the effigy and rummaged around in the basket at its feet. He brought out the dead man’s needle out and raised it to the crowd.

A needle is small
In the forest its worth to a hunter’s clothes
Cannot be over emphasized
My brother you were worth more than a needle
You are more precious than one
A chanter said,
Who does not know what we are here to do?
Death has taken a brave one from us
Who does not know what we are here to do?
I salute the dead
I salute the living before we continue

Another said,
A great tree has been cut down
A flower had been cut
And we grieve
Akanda we grieve you
The father of Bamiji
We do not know where the owner of the family has gone

Another said,
I called on a house
There was no answer
A house filled with noise
Echoes with silence
The owner of the house has gone the way of our world
We that are must take heart
He didn’t die a bad earth

Another said,
When a warrior dies
His brothers do not mourn
They do not shed tears
Akanda a smooth passage to heaven
Like the morning cry of a bird

   Another said,
Death didn’t visit this house alone

It came with seven other ajogun

These evils came before death

But to everyone death and birth salutes

Akanda has become a sun

That will dry our clothes

And light our paths

   With each verse of the Iremoje, chan ters lifted the edges of the heavy layers of grief draped over the night. Someone stood up and began to shuffle to the drums beaten quietly in a corner, then another joined, and another, and another. Most of the gathered crowd danced till another day visited Oyo, and some swayed on mats as they remembered the dead man, wistful smiles on their faces. But before the old day went away from Oyo, the spirit of Akanda filled his hunting clothes and they fluttered in the breeze sweeping across the compound. Sleeping dogs rose up and howled with their tails tucked between their legs. They saw the dead lead the dead into the gathering and they mixed with the living. Akanda’s spirit moved across the faces of people gathered and said farewell to his family and brother hunters. The voices of many mourners became one at night and they echoed all over the land. In Aafin Oyo, Alaafin Sango and his household heard the Iremoje drums night after night as they wept and talked about the deeds of the dead. On some nights, Oya slipped out of the Aafin without her royal beads and became a commoner. She walked to many Iremoje gatherings and sat far from the flickering oil lamps that light lit the compounds. When someone peered into her face, Afe fe, her servant snuffed out the closest lamp throwing Oya’s surroundings into darkness. In the shadows, she
watched widows surrounded by other women hold their children and weep. Oya listened to the emotions of the warriors. They mourned their brother hunters as they remembered their bravery. Oya sat down and mourned with the people of Oyo and eased the passing of the dead across the boundary that separated the living from the spaces of the dead.

*
War enters seven villages
It pulled down walls
And drew new boundaries
In the earth
Erased by the blood of those slain

Alaafin Sango sent gifts to his mother’s town across the greater river at Tapa. Two slaves, a Hausa and Teetu led the party to Tapa; the Alaafin sent horses, cattle, cowries, and clothes. “I send you both to worship at my mother’s grave. Bring me a handful of the earth that covers her,” Sango said. Elempe, a Tapa chief gave both men a big welcome. He spread before them a huge feast. Both men drank and ate from evening till morning. The Hausa drank too much corn beer and forgot the Alaafin’s directive, while he slept the Elempe led the Teetu to the burial site of the royal family and pointed out the grave of Sango’s mother to him.

The Teetu filled his pockets with sand from the grave and walked back to Oyo with the half-drunk Hausa who begged him for a pinch of the sand he knew his companion had. The Teetu showed him the contents of his leather bag, “I forgot about the sand too.” The Hausa believed his companion but worried about Sango’s anger. He continued to Oyo reassured that the same fate would happen to them, because he had someone to share the Alaafin’s anger with.

At Oyo, the Alaafin asked both men, “what is the name of my mother?” He knew that her name had to be mentioned during the ceremonies at her grave. “Torosi,” Teetu said and gave the Alaafin two pockets of sand just like the red earth he knew well from his childhood. The Hausa fell to the ground in a dead faint. Sango looked at him and waited for him to open his eyes, shadows of Ilari with whips stood over him. Alaafin Sango gave the Teetu presents and his freedom. For the Hausa slave, Alaafin Sango ordered that one hundred and twenty-two marks be
cut all over his body. When the scars healed, Sango’s concubines said, “they made the man handsome.” They sighed and giggled at the man everytime he passed by them. Sango became jealous and commanded that they bring him an olola to come make the same marks on his body.

But Sango could only endure two cuts on each arm, and he forbade the olola to proceed any further. He commanded that his children be given the same marks to set them apart from Oyo people, a distinct mark of royalty. The two broad marks were cut on the bodies of his children from the shoulder to the wrist. It took days to heal, and he missed his children. The mothers hid them in their courts and tended to their wounds. He missed their antics as they vied for his attention, a much more innocent affair when compared with their mothers’ tricks. On one of those lonely days he had an idea and a mischievous smile appeared on his face. Biri uttered a prayer for the Alaafin and the people. He knew that smile. The Alaafin didn’t smile often. He had only three types of smiles, one he reserved for his wives, the other for palmwine, and the last one, the one Biri saw on his face meant war.

That same day Sango sent one of his Ilari – Ma ko wun – do-not-disregard-the-voice and the marked Hausa slave to Oloyo-koro, a coronet king to show off the one hundred and twenty-two marks on his body. Oloyo-koro ruled over Oko a town the size of one of the smallest hamlets in one of the six provinces of Oyo. Nonetheless, the king’s allegiance belonged to the Ooni of Ife, and the Oko didn’t belong under the Alaafin’s jurisdiction. Oko’s warriors were known to fight for the highest bidder, they were a standby army for Ife close to the eastern borders of Oyo.

Sango’s Ilari and Hausa slave were welcomed with food and drink by the Oloyo-Koro. After he invited into his kobi to tell him and his chiefs the message of Sango.

“What brings you to my town?” Oloyo-Koro said.
“Do not disregard my voice it is the voice of the Alaafin.”

“I know Ilari, nobody dares to disregard the voice of the man that sent you.”

The Ilari turned to the Hausa and said, “take off your clothes.” The man removed his sokoto and buba and the Oloyo-koro and his chiefs gasped at the marks slashed all over the man’s body. “The Alaafin says you should look at this slave and tell him if these marks are beautiful.”

“What do you want me to say Ilari?”

“That they are.”

“They are the most beautiful marks I have ever seen on any person.”

Ma ko wun, then told him the Alaafin’s real reason for sending him here, “The Alaafin commands that your people be marked like this man, all one hundred and twenty-two marks.”

“When does the Alaafin command we do this?”

“This very day.”

Oloyo-Koro commanded his people and chiefs to get the marks. He couldn’t call on Ife for help, it grappled with the black death. It will take awhile to recover. Most of Oko’s warriors were far south fighting for a town in need of their services. With so much work to be done and with only two olola in town, the Oloyo-Koro called to other olola from the neighboring hamlets. It took them three days to mark all the people of the Oloyo-koro. News of Sango’s incursion reached the Ooni, because olola in Ife talked about the actions of the Alaafin. It turned the Ooni’s stomach at the audacity of the Alaafin putting his mark on his subjects, but the Ooni could not to come to the aid of the Oloyo-koro. He didn’t know Sango had more base acts in mind, while the Oko people recovered Sango attacked Oloyo-koro and leveled it to the ground. Its people scampered out of their compounds those that weren’t burned in their huts. Nobody
except Sango understood this joke; his iyewu rang with laughter after Ma ko wun brought him news of Oloyo-koro’s demise. The Ooni’s ears couldn’t believe the acts of Alaafin but he didn’t do anything. He couldn’t raise an army of the dead to fight on behalf of the dead.

And so, on days when the Alaafin wanted to laugh, or reports of his subjects planning to protest made him lose sleep. He sent Ma ko wun and the Hausa slave to the hamlets around Oyo. Ma ko wun had the same conversation with their heads as he had with the Oloyo-koro, and after the Oyo warriors swooped on these hamlets. Two hamlets abandoned their hamlets. They knew they were already dead when Ma ko wun appeared in their chief’s domains.

When the arokin added this deed to his oriki and chanted it. Sango had shrugged at the soft rebuke, he said to Biri, “It is the child that says his mother wouldn’t sleep that won’t see sleep.”

Seven hamlets burned before Alaafin Sango got bored of this prank. He knew had done enough to starve them. These were the farm hamlets that provided food for Oyo’s metropolis. These peoples fled their hamlets and left their farms untended. Weeds choked up crops, and yams reseeded. Corn stalks yellowed, and cassava roots shriveled in the ground. The price of food rose in the Akesan Market yams and cassava sold for twice as much cowries. One of burnt hamlet sat on the edge of marsh land beside the Ose River, and its farmers brought tete, soko, igbo and gbure to the market. Akesan no longer had fresh vegetables. The ones in the market were withered and yellow with thin leaves. Oyo added another epithet to the Alaafin’s name. He became the king who kills his people by starving them because he wants to amuse himself.
One’s enemy’s enemy
Maybe one’s friend is not one’s friend?
If the brother of that friend is one’s enemy?
Can one’s friend love the enemy of a brother?

The three kings of Ibariba at Ilo, Nikki and Bussa exchanged gifts when kingmakers installed a new brother-king ruled in any of their capitals, symbols of an alliance of equals. This gifting echoed back to the common ancestry of the ruling houses, Kisra. They gave horses, robes, spears, swords and shields, and a pledge that each would stand up for the other if need be. They reminded themselves yearly of the need to survive amid their multilingual subjects with gifts, Nikki especially. The Nikki kings came from ruling houses derived from the many wives of earlier kings. The princes were raised to see their brothers and cousins as rivals. Nikki royalty married women from the Nikki ruling families close to the capital, especially those that trade routes passed through their clan land or fertile lands or resources. The sons of these unions returned to their mothers’ houses, and became chiefs, indirect connections to the ruling house in Nikki. These women came from all over Ibariba, and Tapa, and absorbed immigrants from the Oduduwa kingdoms, and they planted a love for their homelands into their sons and daughters.

But these ruling houses were held together by their common ancestor Kisra, religions of priests of the earth, the powers of these erstwhile rulers, and the dread of bringing shame to one’s name and honour. Sometimes, the Ibariba kings forgot about these ties when their chests puffed up with glory. Kibageri, King at Bussa, a man of great stature who wielded a war club as thick as a man’s thigh in war repelled a great Songhay army. Kibageri and his troops had stopped the Songhay’s southward expansion into Ibariba. Kigaberi’s head swelled and forgot his alliance with Illo and Nikki. He felt he could stand alone. He sent a Gando to Nikki and Illo, “my warriors alone can defend Bussa. Do not expect help from me. If the Oyo king comes across the
greater river into Ibariba land.” He forgot that a three-legged pot standing on two legs tumbles to
the ground and spills its contents in sand. Kigaberi knew Bussa lay in the arid the north out of the
path of the Oyo. His two richer brother-kings would have to deal with the Alaafin on their own.

* 

The chief at Zagi, the village where a shrine of Lashi was situated spoke the languages
of animals. The chief couldn’t farm with his hoe, wrongly used he could offend the spirit of the
earth. These days the chief sat in his farm and listened to animals that paid him more visits. They
said, “the animals in the forests and grasslands of Oyo speak of bloodless battles in Oyo and a
bloody war coming to the highlands of the Ibariba.” The man sent word to the Kings at Nikki,
Illo, and Bussa. They sent offerings to Lashi and didn’t take the words of the chief seriously.

In Bussa, the earth priest knew that a war ran towards Ibariba, he could feel the tremors
of the earth when he laid his hands on it. He sent word to his king that he couldn’t walk anymore,
the earth swayed like a drunken man under his feet.

One of the ruling clans in Nikki, the Lafiaru, had a forebearer Isiaka nicknamed the Red
Hausa by his people. He married a Alimatu Zaria daughter of a Hausa caravanner. The Lafiaru
were nominal muslims but they remembered their matrilineal roots. They were sympathetic to
the muslim Wangara in Ibariba, and they secretly supported rebellion being formed in the the
foreigner’s quarters. A Marabout who had studied in Timbuktu offered prayers and magic
talismans to the Lafiaru. A Lafiaru King at Nikki would help his cause of spreading Islam in
Ibariba. This Marabout, Audu, decided not to set his eyes on the sun until such a prince sat on the
panther skin covered throne of Nikki. He sent a roving spirit into the palace at Nikki to disturb
the peace of its inhabitants. But he didn’t know that the princes of Ibariba greet themselves with
the words, “even my shadows I do not trust.”
The Traveller and The Exiled

Akudaya die before their allotted time and those unused days ties them to the world. They can’t cross into the next realm until they use up the days then they can return to the creator. Ajani left Opeyeka where his family buried his body and travelled to Odeda. He stayed there for two days and then journeyed to Saki. On his way there, he took stock of his past life and thought about his new life and pondered on the number of days he had left.

Ajani tapped palmwine tapper for years, but his climbing rope had cut when he tapped the tall palmtree on edge of the border between his father’s farm and a neighbor’s. Both families contested this boundary and the chief of Opeyaka decided that nobody go near the land until he resolved the issue. But the palmtree yielded a lot of sweet palmwine and Ajani snuck to the tree before dawn to bring down his full gourd dripping palmwine. With hindsight he should have not gone near it, he suspected that his neighbour had ringed the land with amulets that harmed trespassers.

His rope though not new had no reason to unravel the way it did. It had disintergrated into like a worn-out cloth. Ajani fell from the palm tree and as he fell, he heard his neighbour’s laugh. A bad laugh one filled with malice and glee. When Ajani’s body landed on the ground, he broke his neck and back. His spirit stood by his body and watched him die, and he drew his last breath without pain. The first thing he did after his death was to go see his mother at her stall in the market.

His mother happy to see him offered him her lunch, a bowl of his favourite food, yam pottage cooked with palm oil. He took the food and ate. He kept looking at her and touched her as he ate. His mother laughed at him, but she became worried when he didn’t stop.

“What is wrong with you?” she said.

“Nothing mother.”
“I came to tell you that I’m leaving on a long journey.”

“To deliver palm wine?”

“No mother, a journey.”

“Go well my son.”

“Good bye mother, take care of my wife and child.”

He visted his childhood friend, Dele, a hunter and paid the debt he owed. Dele tried to get him to stay but he left quickly. He told him to take care of his wife and child. He stopped at his his uncle and him the money he owed. He knew his uncle would do anything to get his money back. He could use his child and wife as collateral. Ajani couldn’t bear to say goodbye to his wife and daughter, he didn’t go home. After he had settled his affairs in this life, he changed his clothes and he left on the journey only with the clothes he had on him.

His wife came to look for him at his mother’s in the afternoon. His mother told her he came by the market and told her of a journey. His wife told her she knew of know such journey. Both women ran home, and they got home as two cousins who knew where he taped his palmwine came back with his body wrapped in a mat. The woen threw their bodies on the ground and wailed. By this time, Ajani had crossed the border town of Iponle and was on his way to Odeda.

At Odeda that he met Ajaka’s sex exiled Basorun, “sixteen coconuts that cannot be used for ifa. “How is Oyo?” The Basorun said.

“Oyo fares in the hands of Alaafin Sango,” Ajani said.

“What brings you to Odeda?”

“I seek a new life where nobody knows me.”

“The seek a new life too. Oyo hasn’t forgiven me for Alaafin Ajaka.”
“Yes, Oyo remembers, and some people want him back from his exile.”

“Do you know of my family?”

“No, they left soon after you did and never returned to Oyo.”

The two exiles became friends and stayed in Odeda for two days. Now, Odede was a small village, a vassal Otun very close to the much bigger town of Igbeti near the Ibariba border with Oyo. Both men decided to go to Saki on the very border with Ibariba. They decided the farther away from Oyo the settled the better for them both. They left Odeda in the evening at the time hunters went into the forests to hunt with their dogs. One of the dogs sniffed the men and began to howl, and the other dogs ran to towards the men. The dogs formed a moving circle around them, and both men held on to each other. The hunters called their dogs away from the men but they didn't stop barking and howling.

“They must smell the forest in them”

“Hmm…or they smell death on them.”

“Or they smell a curse on them.”

* In Saki, Akanji married a Saki woman, who wouldn’t question him about his homeland, she couldn’t talk. He got land from a compound that had some to spare. They gave him a tired piece of land resting between the planting seasons. Ajani didn’t know this, and they thought they had swindled him. He paid ishakole for three years while the farmer farmed on another parcel of land. Ajani chose this land because of the palm trees on it. He knew it would make good wine. His wife sold the palm wine, but she never sold all he tapped. At first, he was dismayed but he stopped complaining. He didn’t know the number of days he had left. He might as well enjoy them as they came.
The chief also married a Saki woman, a widower with six romping children who helped him lessen the pain of him deserting him family in Oyo. The women didn’t know he commanded the army of Oyo during Alaafin Ajaka’s reign, her husband was a hunter. The woman travelled to Kenu on Ibariba border to trade the aso-oke se wove, and she brought news of a war with Oyo to her husband. The Basorun called Ajani and told his wife to repeat her story. “The Ibariba traders don’t want to do business with me anymore,” she said.

“Not that part of your story.”

“War is coming from Oyo.”

Ajani held his head worried about his family in Opeyeka, “what will happen to my family.” Basorun’s wife thought he refered to his Saki wife and son said, “Do no worry I traded with the Kenu they remember that their source is in Oyo.”

The Balogun knew Oyo warriors would cross into Ibaribaland from Saki into Kenu then Ibariba proper. He had to move again, obviously he needed to put more distance between himself and Alaafin Sango.
Kenu
Its totem is the leopard
It runs through grasslands and forests
Kenu of Nikki and Saki of Oyo
Are related by blood

Saki sat on the very edge of the border between of the Oyo province of Saki and Ibariba.

In Saki, the chief received word from his Ibariba brother in Kenu. The chief in Kenu said, “How does our matrilineal cord hold in the tussle that we are caught in, strong or weak?”

The Okere of Saki replied, “It remains strong.”

Kenu lay in a remote part of Ibariba, on the southern edge bordering Dahomey and the Oduduwa kingdoms. Its land ran along the border of Nikki to the north and the Oduduwa borders of the south. Much of its territory passed to the chief at Kenu when the Oduduwa rulers, couldn’t enforce their authority, their attention occupied elsewhere. Nikki princes didn’t start Kenu’s ruling house unlike the many towns and villages in southwestern Ibariba. The elephant hunters of Takwagwaru founded the ruling house. Ali Woja son of Shina Tsoro and his Kenu wife whose maternal grandfather came from Saki became the first chief of Kenu. The King at Nikki gave him the title and made him a ruler. Others said the Kenu ancestor had been a warlord and vassal to a King at Nikki, a very loyal slave. The chiefs at Kenu were quick to tell people that a princess from one of the six ruling houses at Nikki married the first chief at Kenu; they had royal blood. As its territories increased the chief at Kenu sought to be more relevant in Ibariba, and of course throw off the shame associated with the beginning of its ruling house, but it didn’t succeed.

The people accepted both histories at Kenu but not in Nikki which hid its contentious, very similar origin. Both peoples knew their standing in the other’s eyes, Nikki saw itself as superior. They were not surprised when the King at Nikki sent word to Kenu, “To the sons of
slaves at Kenu we increase your tributary.” The kings at Nikki questioned the loyalty of the Kenu chiefs and trusted them when they deemed it. But it wasn’t the king at Nikki that sent the smelly message, Suni his revenge seeking brother did. When the the ruling council heard of Suni’s actions it decided that such a serious matter couldn’t wait for the king to become conscious or speak logical Batonnu. Kenu was their first line of defense if the Oyo came. When the king at Nikki became lucid, the council didn’t update the king, for he lost his mind a lot of times. The council sent two Gando’s to Kenu, “our king is nearing the end of the circle of life, he has become a babe again.” When messangers from Nikki explained this to the chief at Kenu he laughed and said, “I knew my lord would not abuse our common history.” Nonetheless, the offended Kenu at chief kept the smelly message in his left hand, so he could catch a whiff of the smell and not forget the insult.

* 

Oyo sent word to the Okere at Saki, tell your brother in Kenu that the Alaafin called you to pull on the matrilenal relationship but remind him of the cord.” Okere in Saki replied his brother in Oyo, “a river that doesn’t remember its source will dry up. I will send word to my brother in Kenu.”

The King of Kenu put his nose in his left hand and replied the Alaafin, “we remember our source.” Kenu cannot forgot our mother.” The king at Nikki became lucid for awhile and his council told him of the dealings between Kenu and Saki, he sent a message to Oyo, “Keep your roving eyes in your domains, and your thieving fingers away from my territory or else I will burn your towns to the ground.”

The chief at Kenu sent word to the quarters of his subjects that lived in Nikki, a sizable group in Nikki, “stock up on arms, a war is coming.” A servant of the chief of Mohwa one of
Kenu’s vassals heard the message and ran with it to his chief, who reported it to the king at Nikki. The dying king rose up and sat on his throne for the first time in months. He sent a Gando to Kenu, “You ungrateful slave whom my father decided to upgrade. You will pay for this betrayal.”

The chief at Kenu sent word to Nikki, after keeping this new message in his left hand again. He replied to the King “Whatever I wish for you, may Lahisi do unto me and my children seven folds if I do not do it.” The chief of Mohwa didn’t go to Kenu to beg when he heard Kenu’s message to Nikki. He killed himself before the cavalry of Kenu came to enforce the commands of the chief at Kenu, “kill that one with the loose mouth.”

* 

The threat of wars from the Nupe in the north and northeast and Oduduwa kingdoms in the south bound the three Ibariba kingdoms together, a united Ibariba repulsed invaders, but the king at Nikiki was sick and old. The king at Bussa still reveled in his victory against the Songhay. The chiefs at Kenu who previously contained their politicking to maintaining the balance of power between Nikki and its vassals, now overstretched itself distablizing the region. He built up his military strength and improved its relationship with its relatives across River Mossi.

The chiefs at Kenu acted as an intermidary between the chiefs of the smaller vassal chiefdoms under the King at Nikki. The chief at Kenu knew the namy moods of the King at Nikki and told him which courtiers were loyal to him. They could only see the king with his approval. To Okuta, its own vassal, a town known by the great rock outside its town, the king at Kenu spoke the truth about the coming war, to the others he spoke with the other side of the mouth, “the king at Nikki has lost his mind.”
Ogbomoso, Kishi and Mohwa in Saki stood on the Ibariba/Oyo border as Oyo gathered warriors and enough hate to fuel a war, but the King at Nikki searched for glory from his bed.

*
Sabe and Parakou

Three Oduduwa princes that went farthest to the west of Ife founded the kingdom of Sabe, the other kingdoms they founded were Ketu and Popo. During a battle between Sabe and Nikki the princes of Nikki captured one of the wives of the Sabe king, and took her back to Nikki, even though she carried child. The king at Nikki had objected to the kidnapping at first. He despised her and said to her face that she wasn’t beautiful. When he told his princes, “she will bring us more trouble than you can imagine.” He didn’t know how true this would be. The King at Nikki asked that the girl be brought before him. He looked at her and shook his head, “I am not the kind of a man that would climb on a woman who carried another man’s child.” But sending her back to her people showed that Nikki feared Sabe. The king at Nikki waited for Ranti’s child to be born before the Sabe queen became one of his wives.

He raised Ranti’s son as one of his sons, but Nikki didn’t forget his origins weren’t forgotten. Taunted by the young princes and ridiculed by palace servants he grew up being called the son of a war prisoner. Even the king at Nikki called him that on occasion. The Sabe prince learned to keep to himself, and in his mind, he often returned to the Sabe his mother told him about. His lean face he couldn’t keep passive, and it settled into a frightful mask he hid behind as he grew. His Sabe blood boiled and waited for the time he would avenge his mother, but he didn’t fight this battle in Nikki. The Sabe prince knew he wasn’t eligible for the Nikki throne, so he left for Nikki as soon he could ride a Nikki horse and fight with a Nikki sword. When he got to Sabe his father was dead and one of his uncles ruled. The uncle welcomed him back and gave his daughter to the Sabe prince to marry. The prince walked about Sabe without shoes. His soles tingled as they were held up by Sabe earth the first time. He smelled and felt Sabe for three months then left for Parakou in the north of Ibariba. But before he left, Sabe renamed him
Koburou, he is not evil. They knew Koburou as blunt and kindhearted young man, even though his strong face drew people away from him.

Kobourou, the Sabe prince who grew up in the Nikki court observing the intrigues of the palace married another wife, a daughter of the priest of the earth at Parakou. Through his wife he became the chief at Parakou, but because his mother remained in Nikki, Koburou submitted himself and Parakou to Nikki rule. He fed his children of that hate, and it became a part of their soul. He never forgot his mother’s family and paid homage to his uncle every year with a horse. Kobourou bided time in Parakou till when he would repay, the now grown princes of Nikki.

Sabe never forgot the slight either, that Nikki princes had knowingly captured a Sabe queen and even though she became a queen at Nikki, her status no better than a palace slave. Sabe knew that if a war came to this side of the Greater River it knew where its allegiance would be, with Oyo and Parakou. Nikki knew this too, Sabe wasn’t an ally, or an enemy to be trifled with and did all it could to avoid Sabe. A trading caravan brought a Nikki man to Kobourou’s court at Parakou, “I am a prince of Nikki,” the man boasted in the Parakou market. Kobourou walked round the man, he could smell the Nikki courts on him. He spoke through an interpreter even though he could speak Baatoonun. “What is your name?” he asked the man. “Sabi of Som Kora,” he said. Third born son of a Nikki nobleman, Kobourou thought. And he walked out of the room.

*

The members of the Nana-Boukou cult in Parakou went on a bi-annual pilgrimage led by the priests of Sabe to Adele in the mountains west of Atakpame to rid the land of evil sorcerers. One of the sorcerers tied a Sabi, son of Som Kora to his horse. Koburu, the Parakou chief handed the man to sorcerer, “his lineage wronged Parakou.” At Adele the suspects went
through a ritual ordeal there those found guilty died and those that escaped lived the rest of their
days with mangled spirits. They lived with words of the sorcerer in their heads, “If you do not
die you will not escape evil.”
**Oya-Iyansan**

Oya, The Mother of Nine
Do not touch her children, though
They came out of her, and
They flow back into her nine ways
Oba’s one propped up his mother
And lit her from the inside

Oyá gave birth to twins every other year, and by the seventh year of Alaafin Sango rule she had nine children. Four twins and a single birth, eight sons and one daughter made up Osun’s nine. Her first set of boy twins were as different as an ackee fruit and shea butter. Kehinde the fair skinned stayed away from Taiwo, but the dark skinned one went out of his way to annoy his brother. The boys hated each other with a passion she could only understand when she remembered their tussle in her womb. She wanted to know the reason for this and went to see a wise one. A Babalawo threw his opele on his divining tray and told Oya, “Your twins are no different from any other in Oyo. You know what you ought to do. Cook the food of twins and give to whoever will receive.” The Babalawo couldn’t tell her that her dark-skinned twin was a changling, because his spirit friends sat around the Babalawo’s tray and moved the palmfruits of the opele around changing the message of ifa.

* *

The next morning, the nine woke up and rolled over their mother who slept on a mat to straighten her spasming back muscles. She told them to go and turned her back on them as they scampered out. In the Aafin grounds, Osun’s servants made huge fires and cooked large pots of beans with lots of palm oil. They served bowls of beans to anyone that came to the Aafin gates. They also carried it outside the Aafin gates to Akesan market. The people accepted the bowls of
beans, but some threw them into bushes on their way home. The children romped about in the inner compound, in the Alaafin’s children’s quarters near the shrines. Òyá’s nine screamed and laughed. They didn’t notice when Oba’s One, sneaked into the ball of limbs and heads, unseen, until he farted. The human ball unraveled. They knew that stench. They looked at the child. One of them gave him a slap and his cry aroused his mother from inside her hut.

“They have killed him o,” Oba screamed.

“But he farted,” Ikudaisi said.

“Ah…have you seen the house built for farting?” Oba said.

“No, but…”

“Do not talk back at me.”

Oya came out of her room and gathered her nine inside, “tell your son to stop playing with mine.”

“Tell your nine to stay away from my one.”

Osun popped her head out of her door, “I am sleeping you thoughtless women. Those that have children and don’t know four eyes make a child, 1000 raise it.” Osun said. Oya and Oba ignored her.

“Tell your nine to respect their elder brother.”

“The sickly elder brother of seven only not nine, that is ill in the morning and faints in the evening.”

“He is not sick. He is the Arole.”

“He is not the crown prince, even you cannot change it. My twins are first.”
Oba carried him into her chambers, “he may be small for his age, but illness doesn’t reside in his body.” She laid him on her akete and called for the servants to bring in the pots. Seven girls came in with seven pots filled with hot brews. They placed them in front of Oba on rolls of leaves to steady the round bottom pots. “Open the pots,” Oba said, and the smell of leaves and barks and roots filled her room. The boy turned away from the liquids that coloured his teeth a deep brown but failed to make him grow tall.

His mother held him inbetween her legs and gave him measured amounts from the seven pots. A green liquid tasted like bile, a light yellow one smelt like damp loamy soil, and a red one had the colour of watery blood. The second green one had a lot of pepper of the earth in it, and it burned the roof of his mouth. Another deep red one had no taste, and he drank it fast. The last two were dark and slimy and had no taste. He gagged, but his mother rubbed down his chest, and he swallowed. The liquids mixed up in his stomach and made him drowsy. Oba pulled her wrapper over him and watched him drift off to sleep. They kept him alive, these brews. They protected him from eyes that seek to harm him. They gave the Alaafin’s son life, the real first male child of Oyo, who had been born four times to Oba.

*
The Changling

When will death not kill the one he set aside
Oya tells her son
The hoe for your grave is lost
The boy sneers at his mother
When the time to go comes
I will cut your heart
And not shed a tear

Taiwo, Oya’s dark skinned twin sat by the river and watched the bodies of silvery fish flash in clear water, they were fat and sluggish. He stuck his left feet into the water and watched the curious fish swarm around his wriggling big toe. The fish knew they were protected and swum with confidence, nobody ate fishes from the waters of Abadina. He dropped his calabash into the water and he watched it float away from him. He walked after it and stones at the bottom of the river cut his feet. A waterlily stopped the calabash from going further. He grabbed the calabash and scooped up startled fish. He walked back to the river bank and dumped the fish in his pot.

He ran back to the Aafin and got into the back of the women’s quarters by crawling through a hole in the wall. He sidled to a corner of his mother’s court and set the pot the ground. The fishes trashed about in the pot and he smiled at them as he tipped the water in the pot out. Taiwo picked up a fish and began to clean it, but the knife couldn’t cut the flesh of the fish. He got up for another knife, but it wasn’t sharp enough too. He soon had six knives on the floor beside him. He knew they were sharp, because he had six bleeding cuts on his legs to verify this. He looked into the pot the fishes were not dead. Their eyes stared back at on him, and he heard
them talk, “take us back,” they said. Taiwo shook his head, and said, “you are truly strange fishes.”

He poured them into another pot and filled it water. He watched the fishes twitch in the shallow water. He built a fire under the fish and covered the pot. The fish rocked the pot from side to side and a keening wail filled the courtyard, but nobody came near this child. Taiwo got up to pee in the outhouse in his mother’s courtyard. He looked into her room and saw she wasn’t there. His siblings slept in her room. He saw his twin sleep with his open mouth, but he resisted the urge to stuff it with pebbles. He needed to get back to the fish. When he got back, he found the fire smoking and about to die. He added more wood to the fire and fanned it alive again.

When he opened the pot cover the fishes’ mouths opened and closed, they were not dead. He smiled into the pot, their eyes seemed darker than when he’d caught them. He dropped the lid on his foot and his cry of pain brought nobody to his aid. They said Taiwo stole snatched their shadows when it fell on his face. These shadows snuck into dreams of the people who slept with smiles on their faces. Their shadows took away smiles and tormented them by leaving behind splotches of evil in their minds. Taiwo smiled into the pot and poked out their eyes with a stick. Their agony filled his head, and he stomped his feet until he got rid of their wail. He covered the pot and sat by the pot feeding the fire and adding water to the uncooked fishes. His mother found him sitted by the pot; his eyes were red from the smoke from his fire. “What are you cooking child?” She said. “Fishes from the Abadina river mother,” he said. She held her head and didn’t know what do to the child. She called on two Teetu and they dragged him away from the abomination he tended.

His distressed mother compelled his father to find a solution to the boy’s rebelliousness, “he takes after his father,” Sango said. “This isn’t normal,” Oya said. Oba who had been
eavesdropping came into their husband room said, “you better take your child to Kobomoje. Don’t mind our husband.” Sango dismissed her advice and didn’t do anything. “Why am I not surprised you won’t listen to me,” Oba said. Sango turned to Oya, “he reminds of me of myself at his age.” Oba laughed and shook her head at their husband, “you committed abominations too?”

Taiwo’s stomach swelled the next day and didn’t go down with the stinking farts that eased his pain. Oya ran to Oba and not their husband, “come to my aid senior Ayaba.” Oba said one word, “Kobomoje.” Oya ran to their husband, “my child’s belly swells.” Sango called on a Babalawo. The Babalawo took one look at Taiwo said, “a child born to die. The ones who jumps into a mother’s womb and they come and go as they like. A child born to die.”

“What do I do wise one,” Oya said. The Babalawo without casting his opele said, “take him to Kobomoje.”

Sango sent Taiwo to the healers at Kobomoje a village renowned for healing the post-delivery and childhood diseases. They dealt with abiku, the born to die, and emere, headstrong spirit children that tormented any being that crossed their paths, even the mother birds gave them the emere their space. The healers also removed madness and epilepsy from children whose lineages had a history of these diseases.

* 

In Kobomoje, a mother placed her hand on Taiwo’s stomach. She closed her eyes and saw the River Abadina six years ago. The Abadina burst its banks during a rainy season and overflowed. It rushed by the patch of the earth where a tree grew and eroded the thin soil that covered its roots. The spirit in the trr could not swim, so he stayed inside the damp trunk of the tree, gnashing his teeth. At night the fishes swam up to the roots of the tree and nibbled its bark.
The naked tree shivered and kept the spirit awake all through the rains. The people of Abadina laughed at the helpless waterlogged tree. The spirit in the tree by the crossroads whispered, “I will deal with these fishes.”

* 

The herbalists in Kobomoje cut Taiwo’s skin sixteen times with a sharp blade and dipped his whole body into a vat full of herbs seven times in seven days, but his spirits sisters and brothers didn’t let him be. His joints swelled, and he cried out his pain, his spirit siblings told him, “not long now brother you will be back with us soon.” His slim body shook as he tried to force air into chest, “he heard them say, “good show brother your mother will lose some weight.” The herbalists discharged him on the eighth day, and Oya took him home. They came to the Abadina and Taiwo returned the fishes to the river. Oya offered a goat to the spirit of the river and her son’s distended belly went down.

When the mother and child returned to the Aafin, the head of the Alaro, a clan of Arokin, who beat aro when they chanted histories told Oya they would make medicine to stop the Akibu from dying.

Abiku
The born to die
Die and die again
And are born and born
Again and again

The Alaro went to a blacksmith and mixed charms into molten iron for the medicine. The blacksmith made two metals shaped like a thin new moon slashed with hollow slits, but unlike the moon the ends of these metal rings overlapped. The blacksmith made an aro different from the one they beat in the Aaafin. The head of the Alaro clan struck one metal against the other
metal and a metallic screech floated from the Alaro quarters in the Aafin and entered ears. Oyo heard it and grimaced, but no one said anything. They feared the abiku spirits being driven away from the Aafin would come to theirs instead. The Alaro also made metal anklets and bracelets with aro shaped rattles for Taiwo. They clanged from the slightest of movements and frightened the spirits away.

But Taiwo loved his beautiful buffalo mother, and on the rare nights when his spirit siblings were far from him. He stared at his mother’s face because he wanted to remember the worry lines he gave her.
Parakou and Oyo

Parakou are descendants of Koburu

They are not evil; they are not wicked

They are wise

They know how to walk between many enemies

In the rainforest corner of Ibariba, mighty trees hid Parakou of Nikki a major stop on the Salaga to Kano route for caravans on their way to the kings’ ferries on the greater river. Parakou’s chiefs were descendants of earth priests from the Yari ruling house of the Ibariba, and Kobourou a prince of Sabe, an Oduduwa kingdom south of Parakou. The chiefs nurtured their historical ties with their relatives in Mokole Towns who migrated from Oyo and lived in the north of Ibariba, and southeastern Ibariba towns of Ilesha, Okuta, and Kenu who also had ties with the Oduduwa kingdoms. Parakou chiefs submitted to the King at Nikki but saw it wise to keep all diplomatic channels open with neighbours. Parakou, a commercial and military centre provided a strong military contingent to the wars of the kings at Nikki. They paid back the Nikki kings for their help in time of need from the onslaught from King Gao of Songhay.

The travelling Wangara merchants of Parakou brought news to the ears that controlled Parakou and could speak into the ears of the king at Nikki. These Dendi men came together under the roof of a room in his compound eating a meal of millet and vegetable soups as they complained. “the brothers and the cousins of the king at Nikki raided my caravan,” said one. “The camel tax has been increased,” said another. “Same with the cattle tax,” another sighed. They sat around Baa Kparakpe, a Traore, the chief muslim in Parakou, whose white robe covered his sweating torso. He feared the possible consequences if the king at Nikki found out about this meeting, but he hid it under his clothes. His ears tingled with the news he had received from other Traore ears and eyes
in the Wangara quarters allover Ibariba. He would send word to the Traore in Nikki and Ilo. The Gesereba in Nikki said that the spirit in the Nikki king rattles about in his body and his breath is faint as the whisper of gentle winds. Baa Kparakpe called on one of his students and told him to write to the Gesereba at Nikki, “the Dendi must stick together.”

Sina Ganongi, a commoner in charge of the Parakou royal household and tributes collected from the Ibariba of Parakou sat with Bataru, a warder of the house and eunuch in charge of the chief’s wives in a room in the corner of the palace. Both men thought of what to do with the message they received. A group of men were holding a meeting in market town, the other town that made up Parakou the chiefdom of Parakou. A group of foreigners met in the house of Baa Kparakpe.

* 

Five men sat in a hut that had its back to the market. Its walls muffled the noise from the bustling square. The fading rays of the sun moved across the courtyard outside the room and its insides darkened. The men didn’t call for a light, it seemed fitting that the darkness helped them to talk freely. The men knew the voices of who spoke they didn’t need a lamp. They also respected each other and were here because they wanted the wellbeing of Parakou.

“The king at Nikki is not one with many of convictions.”

“His brother Suni contends with his king’s power. He prepares to build a wall like the kings of Illo, Bussa, and Nikki.”

“I hear Suni’s wall stands higher than the king at Nikki’s.”

“And to say the King at Nikki trusted him enough to allow him tend his horses and cut grass for them.”

“The at Nikki has gone astray with his tongue.”
“He sent word to Kenu reminding them of their humble beginnings.”

“We need to tell our Mankole brothers what we decide today.”

“Become semi-independent like Gbegazin.”

“Possess a kakakki that announces our greatness.”

“The termites of the little king Bayanni tell us that a war is coming.”

“We have to choose a side like our ancestors have.”

“Oyo or Ibariba?”

“A group of Oyo dressed as Ibariba traders attacked caravans at the king’s ferry’s crossing.”

“I have heard murmurs that the ruling houses of Nikki, Bussa, and Illo think that the men received help from us.”

“Yes, news of the raid is all over Ibariba.”

“The termites await the response of this meeting.”

“What say we?”

“What face should we show to the king at Nikki?”

“The house that was built with spit will be brought down by dew.”

The men nodded, and the room became silent as each man acknowledged the unspoken decision.

“We tell Okuta, Kenu, and Bouay.

The light of the moon cast a line of silver grey along the ground of the hut, as if to light up the words of each man, the room echoed the five yeses from the men, for Oyo.

*
The Iwofa of Igbeti
At the Borders of Oyo
Lived an ofi weaver
Who wove her life into the strands of clothes
Traders took her stories to many lands
And people warmed them with their lives

Abegbo wove raw silk from the coccon of the Anaphe moth into Sanyon, a costly beige cloth worn by the wealthy. Her distinct patterns were known, and they sold well in major Oyo markets. Her rooms swelled with the voices of girls seating at looms gossiping as they wove long strips of Sanyon. The also wove scarlet dyed and dark blue dyed cotton threads into Alaari and Etu strips respectively. In her backyard, large pots of dyes held cotton soaked in dye by her girls, cutting off the money spinners and dyers would have made off her. Abegbo controlled all the proceses of making ofi, and her girls carded, spun, dyed, and wove under her care and direction.

Abegbo was also known as the Iwofa of Igbeti. Her father had given her away for a time as an Iwofa to one of the Ijesa money lenders of Igbajo, when he couldn’t pay back the money he borrowed from Ajisafe. Everyone knew Ajisafe didn’t joke with money, but the father wanted to give his mother a befitting burial. It was a shame, if he couldn’t. He wanted to be applauded for ushering his mother into the next life with a lavish funeral. He chose to forget that he didn’t take care of his mother before she died. She repeated his name as she died but not before she cursed him for his neglect.

Ajisafe’s wife wove ofi, and her husband put his knew Iwofa, Abegbo, under her care. Abegbo lived in Ajisafe’s house and learned to spin and weave. She fetched water and swept the house to pay her father’s debt. But Ajisafe’s roving eyes watched her as she became a young
woman. When Abegbo started her monthly periods, she exchanged her tobi for a wrapper that
covered her slim body. Ajisafe waylaid her on the way to the stream and raped her. Now an
Iwofa is not a slave, only lent to repay the debt owed a lender. Abegbo’s father reported Ajisafe
to the king of the town. He told the king that Ajisafe not only raped his daughter, he maltreated
her. She ate once a day, and washed heaps of clothes at the stream. The king ordered Ajisafe to
pay the girl ten bags of cowries, the father’s the equivalent of a bride price, and the community
twenty head of cowries. The king also commanded the Ogboni chiefs to cleanse the land. The
Ogboni made Ajisafe to carry a sacrifice naked to the crossroads, so the earth would look away
from the blood of the virgin he had spilled without her or father’s consent.

Abegbo returned with her father to his compound in Igbeti and gave birth to a son she
called Remilekun. When Ajisafe died five years later, Remilekun got an inheritance from the
wealth of his father as one of the sons. When he was seven his mother sent him to Efon Alaye to
learn from the compound of the Aafin’s own medicine men. Abegbo’s father married her off to
Ojo in Igbajo, “you have nothing to occupy you,” he said. She returned two years later with
another son, the one who couldn’t sneeze seven times like Ojo his father. Abegbo’s father sighed
and said, “You are a bad market.” She brushed her father’s words from her ears and set up her
vertical loom and wove her sorrows and disappointments into aso ofi. She took her ofi to Koso,
Ogbomosho and Oyo, and wealth followed her home.

When her father came again to give her off to fill his pockets. Abegbo said she will be
the wife of an old man from Igboho called Ajagbe, but she didn’t give him any children. He died
soon after she married him. After the three months mourning period passed her husband’s
brothers sent their chewing sticks to her, asking her to marry them. She gently turned them away
bidding her time, waiting for son Remilekun to return. She continued to weave aso ofi in her
husband’s house. The bridge at Jeba connected Tapa and northern Oyo and could be seen from Ighoho. Its thick walls were intersected with gate houses at regular intervals. These gates were always manned by Tapa warriors who set their arrows in the slits made in the gatehouses. At this boundary many people came through Igbeti on their way to Oyo or Ibariba or Ife. They also travelled to Jeba and Tapa. One night, a man with no facial marks came into Ighoho one night. He said he wanted to buy strips of ofi. “which one?” Abegbo said. “Alari,” the man said.

“Where are you from?”

“Ah, a land far away from here.”

“Even far away places have names.” The man answered her not and gave her a bag of cowries to shut her up.

She gave him a room in her house and told her girls to watch him. She had lived for years in Ajisafe’s compound in Igbajo and had learned many languages in bits. This man spoke like an Ibariba but pretended to be Tapa. Why should lie of his whereabouts? She locked the man in a room and rummaged about in his sack and in it she found sheets of scroll. On it were the letterings she had seen the Imams of the Ibariba write. Abegbo sent word to her son in Efon Alaye, “go to your teacher’s uncle in Aafin Oyo. An eye which is not ours investigates Oyo.”

The man turned out to be a Ibariba spy from Nikki, because of what she did, the Alaafin made her an Ajele in the hinterlands of Oyo, and her son became an herbalist in the Aafin Oyo. She returned to her father’s house at Igbeti and continued to make aso ofi. She opened her house to the termites of Bayanni, and she became a keeper of secrets on the border. Alaafin Sango sent the Ilari, Oba ni ko gbo, the king says you should hear, to the kings of Oyo outposts, Igbeti and Ighoho. “Death, the father and mother says the Iwofa of Igbeti is in his care. If she sneezes Oyo must know why.”
The Sorcerer
If you have a problem, go to the spirit source

The Dobo of Nikki
Told himself he was a Dobo Dabogii
But all knew he was both
A poisoner and a diviner

The fire throwing new year feast held on the ninth day of ninth lunar month, a two-day public holiday celebrated by the common Ibariba. The village head, heads of families, and the earths priest journeyed to the western edge of their lands. On the last eve of the old year, all fires in Ibariba were put out except those in smithies. The leaders begged Gusunu to bless them all and at the sound of drums they lit their torches and threw them against the orange sun setting in western sky.

The men raised their voices and they cast the evil of the old year into the disappearing sun, never to return. Their fervent prayers drown the drums, some men have a longer list of woes then others and they prayed longer, but they all remained. An uneasy quiet fell on the group, and their prayers stopped abruptly. They felt a wind blow on them, and they gathered their clothes around their bodies. Still they shivered, the same thought came into their hearts, but not one man spoke it out. They knew that the evils the cast away were being blown back on them. The men walked backwards to the drums, and they looked away from the sun even though they faced it. Then they walked towards the chief’s house, silently. They washed their hands in a pot of water. The chief carried the pot to the western edge also and hurled it into the still setting sun.

After the end of the new year feast, on the very first day of the new year, the kings at Nikki, Bussa and Illo decided to pay attention to the itch on the backs that they couldn’t reach. This rumour of war that refused to go away. They sent to the Dobu at Nikki three white Fulani
bulls whose humps stood taller than its horns. Their thick moos lolled at the back if thick necks, as the messangers repeated the words of the three kings. “Manipulate the spirits and their dam that the sons of Oduduwa do not wash us away. We hear the sound of their footsteps from across the Greater River and Moshi.” The Dobo knew of the chaos that he saw in his nightmares. Its depth prevented him from peering into the swirling fear, he couldn’t pry out normalcy or scrape toghter order from it. The two opposing forces he saw would land on the land, and its entry would be felt in the three Bariba kingdoms. The Dobu tried to increase their dam, that the kings may get glory and honour from the coming war. He knew he had to reach into the far away realm of Gusuno, who had removed himself from the visible and tangible realm of the spirits and man, because the kings offended his space and person. The Dobu called on Gunusu to intervene.

The Dobo made a sika-twin doll after the reported likeness of Sango the twin king of Oyo, for his dead twin. The wooden doll’s torso rippled with muscles. Its eyes looked forward, angry. Legs were wide open, and a hand raised above the dolls weaved hair. It held a double-edged axe just like Sango’s. The Dobu placed the sika doll by the door and started the ceremony that would bring the essence of the dead twin into the sika-doll.

The Dobo sat on a tanned hide of a ram and inscribed on its skin were the holy scripts of the Prophet from the east, the surate Yasin. His hands were faced palm down on the earth in between his open legs. A group of dancers stomped up red dust as they danced to the pulsating beats of drums. The Dobo looked up and signaled to the drummers to stop. The dancers fell to the ground in a trance and red earth rubbed on their sweaty backs. Around him rings of men, women, and children stood around him, and this subdued crowd looked on as the Dobo spoke secret words into the ears of the sika-doll.
Dobu read the mind of Gusunu in the dregs of his beer gourd, and he threw it away in disgust. He forgot about the sika-doll he had cradled in his hands, he had carved it by himself. He held on to it so tightly that he broke off its head. The people gasped, he forgot that he had an audience. The message that it had sucked him into its power, “what is the name of the royal baby born with a full set of teeth baby that grew with the Fulani? Only he can save the Ibariba.” Gusunu hid the name from him, if only he could discover it, and use its dam to affect the buu-spirit of its owner.” Later that night as he slept, the Dobu saw Woru, the firstborn son of a grave digging clan the Sikobu, walk to his compound and talked with his first son about his grave. The news of his death threw the Dobu out of the dream. “This is the hand of Gusuno!” he cried as he threw what was left of the sika-doll in the fire in his room, “the spirits have chosen sides.” He wasn’t ready to die. He would return the Fulani bulls to the kings at Nikki, Bussa and Illo with the message, “He who truly knows is greater than the fortune teller.”

*
The Ibariba War

A man digs a hole in fat soil
Is it a hole to drain blood?
Or is it a hole for a seed?
Asks an Orisa
If you want an answer
Go to the spirit source

Olu Ode and Gbonka heard the ifa divination as an assurance for victory against the Ibariba. Blood in the hole means many fallen Ibariba warriors. The Alaafin gave his approval of this war, it would take both men out of Oyo, and maybe the Ibariba would take care of his problems on the battlefield. On the next market day, the warlords carried the staff of war, a bamboo stick adorned with charms and amulets and cowries into the middle of the square. The market watched them and waited to hear their declaration. The war-boys laughed and danced around the staff. The market quietened down, and they didn’t join them with the usual shout of approval that greeted the presence of the staff of war. “We have the Ibariba at our mercy,” Olu Ode and Gbonka said after the other.

“Madness,” a man shouted from the crowd

“Strong madness,” a woman shouted out of the crowd.

Soon cries of madness filled the square and the warlords had to be sequestered away by the Teetu. War had been declared and the people could do nothing about it. The warlords seethed with shame and in anger they put together the Oyo warriors. They called on the six Oyo provinces to commit their men and women to the war. Despite the complaints of the people, they all prepared for war. Olu Ode and Gbonka collected contributions towards the war from all of
Oyo. Oba planned every detail and her ete slaves made records of the donations. She planned not to fight in this war, the planning she did for her son. Ekun Osi and Ekun Otun provided warriors; they would make up the left and right flanks of the army. Oyo women made large supplies of ekuru available for the long journey. Around big fires, mothers and wives and sisters wrapped a thick bean and corn mixture in leaves and steamed it. They talked about their fears and the fires couldn’t warm them or keep their premonitions away.

On the second month of the year, Oyo warriors pulled out of Oyo. Long columns of foot soldiers and cavalry turned northwesterly towards the Ibariba Plateau, beyond the River Mosi a tributary of the greater river. Olu Ode and Gbonka’s war vest were heavier they had sent their lieutenants to babaloawo in Sabe and Ketu for strong charms and war aprons. Olu Ode spread out a buffalo hide under an araba and told warriors to walk on it as they joined their groups. He knew had enough warriors when they wore it out. The skin had disappeared into the dust by the time the last person walked by the tree. Warriors carried the steamed ekuru in leather bags, with their machetes and knives and charms, and their beddings and mats. A unit of head porters made up of men and women led the army carrying bags and provisions. Olu Ode’s war stool took the rear, and trailed the army dressed in baggy shorts and loose tops with cowries, animal teeth, and charms sewn on.

The towns loyal to Oyo on the route to boundary of Oyo and Ibariba provided supplies. At deserted junctions that led to these towns the swelling Oyo troops met food and water and mats. The Ilari ran ahead of the warriors into the towns and roused stragglers to join their cause. They the cry of the warriors at the command of the Alaafin shook their hearts, “whosoever doesn’t not join the war would be deprived of his heart.” Many joined the army, others remained hidden in forests and on their farms.
After three weeks walking through tall grass terrain, the Oyo scouts brought news that River Moshi the tributary of greater river lay several days from where they were. The Greater River was closer. A war council convened to discuss how to deploy their troops in Ibariba territory. The Ibariba towns of Okuta, Parakou, Kenu and Bouay would supply food and water if needed but they would not join this war; Ketu decided to remain neutral, Sabe promised to join if she needed to defend her territory.

On the morning of the next day, the greater river stood in the way of the Oyo, though diminished in strength, the isolated bank of the river chosen as the place of crossing foamed from the force of many rapids. The river was too deep for horses to cross or warriors to wade. Òyá walked into the frothing waters and contracted her river, the part that passed through Ibariba land that fed lush plains on the southern bank and provided fodder for herds of Fulani cattle. She also stopped the flow of water into the Bozo ponds, and by noon of the second day the riverbed stank of fish that died flapping about in drying mud. The wind carried the stench and the smell wafted into Ibariba, the smell of death preceded the Oyo into the land.

The Oyo warriors were dressed in baggy trousers and stripped war tops. Around their arms and necks hung ado filled with charms, and leather bags swung across their shoulders or were tied around their waists. Double edged daggers and knives were strapped on their arms and thighs. They carried the doubled edged three-foot-long ida or the heavy curved one faced agedegbe. Some carried bows, spears, and arrows. Others had clubs or slings, and many carried the doubled headed axe favoured by the Alaafin. The warriors of metropolitan Oyo were the in the fore now, the head porters at the rear. Ekun Osi and Ekun Otun’s war-boys followed the vanguard, they walked ahead of the mounted archers and and cavalry.
The Oyo troops passed through grasslands of the savannah and went around hills and outcrops of rocks. Soon stragglers began to move away from the rest of the troop, mostly porters who were tired of the many burdens they carried. Mounted horses from the Sarunmi’s cavalry rounded them up. But a few who whose hearts had melted by the talk of the Ibariba’s ferociousness on the battle field melted into tall grasses. One of them, an Oyo from the Ebolo province was caught and an arrow deprived him of his heart, but this example didn’t stop others from deserting.

The priests of the fire and earth, the blacksmiths in Ibariba: Bousakou, Kamre, Kandi and Segbana, fired up their iron cinders and made heaps of arrows and spears according to the reports they recieved from the Ibariba sentries who sighted Oyo scouts days ago from the outcrops of rocks that hid parts of vilaages and towns. Kenu, a Ibariba town stood on the southwestern boundary with Oyo, a vasaal of Nikki, had sent word of its neutral stance to Oyo. It marshaled warriors in nearby villages into a loosely moving front and, but they left food and water for the Oyo warriors that passed through its territory.

Oyo crossed the River Moshi sundown of the fourth week and the sixth day. The natural border between Ibariba and western Oyo. From the eastern bank of the river, the Oyo warriors could see the town of Nikki nestled in hills. The Oyo built two watchtowers made of bamboo cut from the many grooves that lined the curving length of the River. Sentries manned these towers on the look out for Ibariba spies who may try to infiltrate the Oyo camp. Ibariba could see these towers, and they could smell the stench of the Oyo outhouse too. Oyo warriors slept on mats their weapons beside them incase the Ibariba launched a surprise night attack.

Olu Ode and Gbonka sat under booths made of palm fronds, standing corn around the camp had been cut down make room for their tents and the Alaafin’s war council. The council
met daily to bring reports the Alaafin and Oyo. Oyo knew it was going to be a long siege, they put men on rosters to piye/forage for food in the surrounding plains. The finished the crops of farms and they planted theirs. They planted fields of corn and beans to feed themselves. Daily Oyo sent a contingent of warriors led by a gangan drummer to provoke the Ibariba stronghold of Gbegazin but they didn’t budge. “Smelly goat eaters,” the Oyo warriors taunted because they loved goat meat.

The Ibariba responded by stealing into the camp and plucking the goats meant for Oyo chiefs out of their pens without the Oyo night watch seeing them come or go. That night the Ibariba started a fire around the camp and fought the Oyo under the haze of the smoke. The next morning Oyo rained arrows with lit shafts into the sentry walls of Gbegazin setting ablaze its thatch roofs. The Ibariba troops were forced to defend, and they poured out of their gates.

The Ibariba were a pack of wolves that rampaged with the ferocity of the same animal. They were highly organized bandits who were expert archers. But their bows and arrows couldn’t rival the that Oyo which stood as tall as an average man. Sarunmi chief of the Oyo cavalry rode into the battle his men carried spears and machetes. Behind them were archers who could hit targets twenty huts away. Sarumi’s eyes scoured the area looking for an opening in the line of the Ibariba foot soldiers. When he found one he rode his horse hard into it and plucked a Ibariba warrior from behind the wall of safety. Sarunmi dragged the man behind his horse until he got to the Oyo end of the field. He cut off his head of the Ibariba and tossed back to his people.

On the south the tower, the Oyo archers shot volleys of arrows on fire into the Ibariba camp. They cut through the air whistling and disturbing still hot winds. As they came down without noise they tore into Ibariba flesh, barbed arrow heads and a new sound of pain filled the
air. The last boy belonged to this group, and the bodies of his brother-hunters fell on him and shielded him from the arrows. He last thoughts were of last girl as he passed out.

A group of Ibariba cavalry thwarted the advance of Oyo warriors, and they cut into Oyo ranks mowing them down with their horses. An Oyo man had worn two faces and told the Ibariba that a contingent of Oyo would be there. The Oyo warriors retreated before the onslaught of Ibariba rage and they left behind dead comrades who lined their escape route. The Oyo jumped to a stream wading across the lean swirling water of the River Moshi at the Gandu pass. The Ibariba troops pursued them, they crossed at the ford, and burst out at the front of the fleeing Oyo. The Oyo turned back and both armies swirled around each other, and they clashed again.

The Oyo took over the major crossing on the Moshi River and posted warriors there. The sentries asked anyone that passed, “how much is the cost to be ferried across?” Oyo had paid 2000 cowries for their troops to be ferried across by the Kyedye canoemen. Further astream, the Ibariba had destroyed the bridge that connected Ibariba land to Oyo and inadvertently they cut off the retreat for their warriors. The retreating Ibariba warriors fearing the Oyo troops that pursed them jumped into the swollen waters. As more Ibariba drowned in the waters, their bodies formed stepping stones and the later part of the troops used the bodies of their countrymen to get to safety.

On the southwestern part of the Ibariba wall, one side of a rocky hill left enough space a small pass adequate for a horse to wriggle by. The Eso drove their horses into the narrow pass, blocking the hordes of swarming Ibariba, allowing for the retreat of the Alaafin. The Ibariba stopped causing a bak to slam into the stationary front. The sudden stop threw an Ibariba army off his horse and he fell into the range of Oyo arrows. Barbed arrows that rained on him and he fell to the ground. An Ibariba threw a spear at an Eso and it went through him. A barrage of
arrows followed the spear. The Eso stumbled to his feet and faced the Ibariba with a grin on his face. The Ibariba stopped shooting and marveled at the man who grinned at death staring him in the face. The Eso laughed despite the arrows stuck in his body. His bravery caused the Ibariba to turn back they feared that such a man might be able to wipe them out.

The king of Erin’s land Erinnla, one of the tributaries of Oyo was a great warrior. His warriors numbering a thousand were known all over Oyo. His Balogun, a short man whose fame made him as tall as a giant led the Erin unit. He was dark as the tough shell of oil palm nut and rode on a white horse. His troops made moved in to sure up the gaping hole left by Oyo troups that were supposed to guarding the ford on River Msohi so that no Ibariba escaped. Erinnla fell from a poisoned Ibariba arrow, it struck him at his thigh. The arrow pierced his hide shield, and its barbed head stuck in his flesh. He died before he could be treated dead, his tongue swollen and black.

The king of Osi, another tributary however didn’t send troups. Sango knew he had to level the town in order to keep his other tributaries in line. He would wipe the town off the face of the earth, he vowed. The spy that sold Oyo came from the town, but during the battle news reached Samgo that everything alive had deserted the town, and its people found refuge in Owu.

Tabusunon/Sunon Boni – chief of armed forces at Nikki, rode his unit to the steep rocky side of the Ibariba plateau, and his horsemen cut down Oyo warriors that scrambled for a cover that didn’t exist on this side of the plateau. Their cries of anguish echoed around the plateau as they fell. The tumbled down into the ravine at the bottom of the plateau, and it filled with the blood of men. In another battle of the war a different kind of battle ensued. A contingent of Ibariba warriors garrisoned hills that surrounded a sizable amount of Oyo warriors; they cut them off from the main body. The Oyo knew they were in terrain chosen by their enemies. The Ibariba
toyed with them killing them as they pleased. They turned them into target practice and shot arrows into their backs. The Oyo tried to escape, running from one side of the hill to the other until the Ibariba noose tightened around them. Sunon Konde – Vulture of Nikki swooped on the straggled Oyo warriors and slaughtered them, and his warriors picked out their eyes. But both men left Gbegazin undefended and Oyo over ran it and set it ablaze. The smoke from the town of Gbegazin made them rally their troops and head back to Nikki through a road known only by the Ibariba.

Gbegazin fell, and the routed Ibariba troops regrouped at Nikki, two days away from Gbegazin. The Oyo trekked out to meet them. They left behind the green of the greater river and walked into the arid rocky Ibariba hinterland. The kings at Nikki, Ilo and Bussa rode their horses to the top of a hill and watched the battles spread out below them. The once reluctant King at Bussa who thought this war would not reach his northern territory led the Ibariba troops. The Magajiya of Bussa assumed the responsibility of the king at Bussa in his absence, her job was to calm the anger and distrust that threatened to splinter Ibariba, “I would send word to the kings when my work is done.” She and the Gnon Kogui of Nikki met with the other bori women who gathered the names of the leaders of the rebellions in Ibariba towns and villages. Both women knew they had to placate them, so they may send their warriors to the war. They had to turn their minds and win over the many sides in Bariba by pulling healing their hurts.

The regrouped Ibariba troops made up of Bussa, and Ilo warriors, and Nikki reserves took to the battlefield. The Bussa contingent led by Sarkin Bindinga and Duada Bindinga led their warriors to the battle line drawn in the dried-up flood flats of the greater River. The troops ran towards each other breaking up into pockets of battles disjointed from the main battle fought by the chiefs. Bataru the chief Wawa of Bussa led in his warriors armed with swarms of bees.
The released bees blocked the midday sun as they hovered over the battlefield. Then they
descended on the Oyo covering their faces and arms with stings. Oya heard their cries and she
controlled gusts of winds. She channeled them towards the howling Oyo warriors blowing the
bees away. The Oyo warriors ran for the waters collected in clefts of rock.

Kurukuru, keeper of the horses at Ilo drove his cavalry into the hind parts of the Oyo
troops, being held together Oya. Her weak left flank annoyed her, she tried all she did to keep it
together, but it gaped open and the Ibariba made inroads into her warriors. Oya snarled at Oba’s
space in the battles. The left flank of Oyo lacked Oba’s intelligence to keep it together. Mayaki
Sarki, son of king at Bussa, and war chief saw the opening and closed in on it. Oya escaped on Afefe’s
horse winds drove the horse to run faster.

The main body of Ibariba troops retreated once more into their wall after eight attacks
that day. They abandoned their horses and wounded and shut the Nikki gates after them. Some
Oyo caught on their side of the field were carried in with them. The Ibariba threw their heads
over the wall. In the morning the king at Bussa sent his son, Mayaki Sarki, to the Oyo. By noon,
both sides reached an agreement, the Ibariba would not cross the Greater River or Moshi River
into Oyo while both kings ruled. The kings at Bussa and Ilo accepted the treaty on behalf of the
sick king at Nikki.

That night the Oyo talking drum taunted Sunon Konde also called the Vulture of Nikki,
his staked head stood in the middle of the Oyo camp.

When death sees me
May death not kill me
When this vulture swoops
I will break its wings and beaks
The sacred metal kettle kingship drums were silent as the Ibariba slinked away from the victorious Oyo because in Ibariba shame is heavier to lift than a massive rock.

*
The Alaafin visits his Mothers

The night market had cleared and under the Iroko tree in the middle of the market sat the council mothers. They were on a mission, this knew what they wanted, and they knew will get it. The mother-bird and her sister-birds studied an empty pot and called things into existence. They also took the lives of those that crossed their paths. They settled into the shadows, cackling as they looked at the works of their hands. Out of the same pot, Mother-bird called a name into the confines of the bottomless pot, three times. Then she said, “your mothers command that you see them immediately, now.” The essence of the Alaafin hovered over the pot.”

“My mothers you shouldn’t have troubled yourself I could have come to see you in person.”

“No, we do this kind of thing under the cover of darkness.”

“What do you want mothers?”

“We want your ears.”

“You have it.”

“Do we look stupid?”

“My ears belong to Oyo.”

“And who owns Oyo?”

He didn’t reply, his spirit dissipated over the rim of the pot without their permission.

“Ah, has he left mother?”

“He has sister-birds. It is time to discipline a child who doesn’t know his or our place.”

Mother-bird summoned Osun and gave her request, a girl. “A child is a child,” She said and rolled on the floor, thanking them. They allowed her to settle down before Mother-bird spoke again.

“But we want something from the Alaafin.”
“Anything mothers.”

“Anything?” they said.

“Sacrifice a calabash filed with threads at the crossroad nearest to the Aafin.”

“threads?”

“Long livers, umbilical cords and intestines,” the birds whispered.

“Done.”

“Stop eating grasscutters, they feed on guinea corn which wars with your inner head.”

“I will do all you ask.”

“And you will give us anything.”

“Anything mothers.”

“Leave us”.

Osun was only a hook that will bring in the Alaafin close enough for their lesson. The mothers wanted the Alaafin’s ear back.
Arokin’s Song
The one who disrespects their mother has offended Olodumare
Mothers suffer for their children
Mothers are confidants
She carries her child and dances at midnight
She won’t sleep until the child sleeps
The child who beats their mother
Offends Olodumare

   The mother-birds came to the world beneath the world above to balance the powers that existed in the hollowed-out gourd. “Treat them gently.” Olodumare, Lord of the skies said.
   “We will, we will be kind.” They said.
   “Use your powers kindly”
   “We will.”

   But when the mothers got to earth, they were not treated kindly. One day, mother-bird asked her neighbours to take care of her one bird. She had taken care of her neighbours nine children when she went to the market. Today, she went to the market to buy the insides of animals she loved, livers, intestines, hearts, and gallbladders she especially loved. In the market, mother-bird fantasized about the soups she would make. Her neighbour’s children took mother-bird’s bird and played with it. Don’t go near mother-bird’s bird their parents had warned them as they went to the farm. The children waited for them to go around the bend of the path, and they went after the bird. They threw it into the air and laughed as its small wings flapped but couldn’t carry it. They climbed up a tree and dropped it and bird broke one of its legs. It tried to hobble away from them, but they caught it and fought for their turn to hold it. They pulled it into nine pieces, and they laughed at the parts they got.
Mother bird got back from the market happy with her purchases. She heard the children of neighbours laughing and playing, she smiled because she believed that her bird was having fun too. The children were having fun, they danced round the mangled parts of bird. Mother walked to them and saw her bird. She threw her basket away and sobbed as she gathered her torn bird. The parents of the children came back and tried to console her with all they had.

“We will give you all our beads, coral and segi.”

“We will give you all our clothes.”

“We give you all our cowries.”

“We will give you our house.”

She didn’t answer them, her beady eyes were on their children, and each time she blinked, a child fell to the ground dead.

The children of the world cried to Olodumare, “help us mother-bird’s anger is too hot.”

“I can’t,” Olodumare said, you brought this upon yourselves.”

“But it was our children, not us.”

“Your children are you.”

“She has killed more of us than we killed.”

“You have to bear her anger and pray it doesn’t last for ever.”

Mother bird’s anger lasts for eternity, and only Esu can hold her at bay. King and queens and chiefs acknowledge her powers. They rule but know she’s one of the powers that control their reign. On royal staffs and beaded crowns, on the ogboni’s edan staffs, and the pendants of Babalawo and Iyanifa, the proud mother-bird sits with her beaks open proclaiming her influence.
Osun and the mother birds

Osun seeks the face of the day
It is covered by the mother birds
Calling for blood
But she dreams

Osun sat waiting for her Iwefa in her the verandah of her kobi. She had to convince the Alaafin to give the mothers whatever they wanted. Her son, Osi Efa, came into her presence and prostrated before her. She smiled at him absently at the Eunuch.

“How’s the face of the day mother?”
“I do not see its face.”
“It is a sunny morning?”
“It is? I see angry birds swooping on the Aafin.”
“What troubles you mother?”
“The face of the Alaafin, I do not know where his gaze is.”
“Where is your gaze mother?”

She didn’t answer him because she didn’t hear his question. Osun decided not to tell him of her dream. In it, she became a bird and agreed to take a request for rains on earth to Olodumare. The children of men had asked all types of birds to carry it, but they failed. They couldn’t get by the heat of the sun. Osun’s blue black etu wrapper turned into blue-black feathers and she flew into the sky. The sun singed her feathers and her feathers became black. Her head is bald. She looked like a vulture. But she got to the creator and gave him the request for rain. Olodumare nursed her back to health and sends her back to the earth with rains and the earth flourishes again.
Osi Efa slipped into the innermost chamber of the Aafin, the most charmed and its most secure room in Aafin Oyo. Any charm lost its efficacy in the iyewu and every curse uttered against the person of the Alaafin became a blessing, but the curse stuck on the evil doer and his descendants. The Aafin guards let him into this space twice daily, his face was the first and last one the Alaafin saw before he retired for the night. He prostrated on the floor and waited for Alaafin Sango to acknowledge his presence.

“Rise,” Sango said.

“The One who can’t be questioned,” he said.

“How’s your mother?”

“She sleeps well.”

“Good.”

“But she said that I tell you that there are vengeful birds swooping about your kingdom.”

“Are these your words or your mother’s?”

“My mother’s.”

“And yours?”

“I agree with my mother Kabiyesi, these mother birds are about.”

The Alaafin said nothing. Osi Efe waited that he be dismissed and when he wasn’t after awhile he crawled out of the room on his face. His father and mother both forgot he existed today, there must be something his mother didn’t tell him. He walked back to his quarters on the other side of the Aafin grounds, and Osi Efa decided he would talk with his eunuch brothers about birds his mother saw. After that he would find another way to talk about the birds to the Alaafin without incurring his anger.
In the iroko tree in the middle of the night market, the mother birds cried, “the road is hungry and alive today. The feet of travelers scratching its face made it angry and blood must be spilled.” The eyes on the face of the roads that led to the Aafin of Oyo rolled about in its head.
Egbalugbo
The Egba forests
A battle is not fought along a raging river
In the Egba forests
Matters are settled
In Ake, their mother
Ends quarrels

The Ogun River slid through the savannah, thrashed through the rain forest and threw itself into the freshwater lagoon. It seeped through stilted roots of freshwater mangrove into the salty river that rolled but couldn’t escape its boundaries. The warriors of Oyo and Owu met on opposite banks of the river at Mokoloki, a market town in the Egba forest. The armies camped on opposite sides of the rapids watching the water froth and heave through a bed of black granite. The River Ogun cut into the very heart of Oyo from its source at Saki and both armies had walked along its banks until they met at Mokoloki. The crowd of the market cleared away at the approach of the warriors leaving behind overturned baskets and scattered goods.

The drummers of both armies sat on outcrops of granite and beat their dundun drums. The drums taunted and dared brave warriors to plunge into the rock filled river and fight.

Welcome, we’ve been waiting for you
We welcome you too, company of the fearful
Someone should warn the-one-we-kept-with-God not to climb a palm tree with a rope made from banana fronds
The mud we are spraying all about in our backyard is flying all about. if it splashes on you we don’t care. if you like forgive us if you like don’t forgive us
Oyo will be our field; we will cultivate it with our hoes

Owu will be our latrine it will gorge on our piss and shit

The field Oyo thought it cut down has grown, it boasts of a bountiful harvest

We will cut it again, this time we will uproot it

Your words are light, full of bluster and nothing

Our ears are heavy with our words, you know the words we speak are hard

* In the deep tangle of green forest south of Ogun river, the forests of the Egba followed the lower path of the river, and the Egba lived along its banks. From their capital city Ake, the deep voices of Oyo and Owu mother drums could be heard as people went about their day. They talked about the skills of dundun drummers, some even danced and laughed to the taunts. They were a day’s trek away from Mokoloki and were sure Egba earth would not see this battle. The shuttles of Ake cloth weavers flew in rhythm to the war drums and lulled the town to sleep in the evenings. The cloth weavers named patterns after the thumping drums, Agidigbo, after a deep throated that shook the earth, and Elejowewe after the drum that had a thin voice but talked a lot.

* Omonide, the first wife of Oduduwa travelled from Ife to see her youngest son Alake who had left Ife years before with his elder brother Alaketu. Both princes settled in Ketu, there Alake learned to weave strips of aso oke and his patterns became famous in Ketu. One day, Alake followed a Ketu hunter, Ako-Agbo, into the eastern forests and they journeyed three days away from Ketu. Alake liked the forests and decided to settle there. He named his new home Egba forest. The other rulers he met in the forests conceded leadership to him, as a son of Oduduwa. Alake sent the clothes he wove to his mother, soft silky white sanyan that had on it the
smell of new lands and the familiar scent of her son. Omonide sent word to Alake, “I will like to come to Egba forest.” Her son said, “Come down, follow the Ogun river it passes through my domains.” Omonide made the one-week travel from Ife and settled with the Alake in the Egba forests, her favourite son. She died and her son buried her in Ake within the walls of the Aafin Ake. The other princes sent offerings to their mother’s grave and and honoured her. They agreed that in any quarrel the Alake arbitrated his judgements stands, because their mother sleeps at Ake, so all disputes between the princes end at Ake.

*  

Look at these lazy warriors  
Not fit to be called a warrior  
Who met me in a war  
I gave him dust to eat  
This lazy one not fit to be called a warrior  
The hen warrior  
Who says he puts an end to the arrogance of the cockroach  
Should be careful of the hawk  
That will deal with your arrogance  
It is my pot and stew that will cook you  

Omonide heard angry drums disturb the earth that she covered herself with in her grave. The hatred tearing through her sons and descendants shocked and saddened her. She roused herself from sleep and wept at the words thrown about. They dropped into the River between them and it sank to the bottom and stayed there a memory kept in water. Omonide called on the mothers of the world below and those in the world above to come help her, her children warred
and spilled blood their blood. Both armies didn’t come together in the Egba forest the river kept them apart and alive. A mother sleeps at Ake, so all disputes between the princes end at Ake.

*
Abebi and Osun
Abebi sits on a mortar
And refuses to stand
As Osun travails
Between the boundary of life and death
To birth her promised child

Abebi sat on the upturned mortar and waited. She would avenge her baby’s death even if her pursuit took her own life. When Osun’s delivery time drew nearer, Abebi carried a mortar without its pestle into the Aafin forest. She buried it under a pile of leaves and vines and marked the spot with a piece of red cloth she tied to a tree branch. The Aafin woke up to Osun’s labour pains and Abebi ran into the forest. She lied to a Teetu that one of the delivery women sent her on an errand, and he allowed her out of the Aafin. She knew nobody would notice her absence the Aafin would be caught up in the happenings in Osun’s rooms. She dug the mortar out of the pile of leaves and its wooden body dripped with dew. She set it on a level ground in the forest ground under an Ayan tree. She sat on it and the dew seeped through her wrapper soaking it. She shivered. Nobody can make her get up from this mortar, not even the Alaafin or Orisa.

On the night of the fourth day, she repeated to herself through chattering teeth that it wouldn’t be long now Ajani would bring her the message she wanted as soon as it happened. Osun would not have a child and she wasn’t going to get up from this mortar. The mothers’ council under Iroko tree knew about Abebi’s mission the moment she placed her mortar in front of an Ayan tree. One the seven trees which belonged to the mothers, but they didn’t do anything against Abebi. She fought a just war, and they accepted that. Osun’s maltreatment of Abebi during her pregnancy had terminated her prenancy.
For four nights and five days Osun laboured to bring forth her child but she couldn’t. Abebi sat on her mortar in the deep forest and didn’t budge. At night the forest filled up with shadows and sounds, and she didn’t move. She heard small animals rustle through the underbush or fly through the canopy. The noises scared her, but she remembered her child and she sat up straighter on the mortar. Mosquitoes and sand flies bit her, but she didn’t get up. She let her bowels go while on the mortar, and many times a day hot urine passed through her legs and poured over the mortar.

One night it rained heavily in the forest, at first the canopy of the tree kept most of the rain away from her but soon the waters collected on the leaves tumbled down on her drenching her soul and clothes. Through out the night Abebi shivered from cold and fright. In the mornings, the cold settled in her bones because the heat of the sun didn’t get through the dense forest canopy. Her stomach began to complain of the lack of food, as Ajani couldn’t get out of the Aafin to bring her food. She should have put the mortar against the Ayan’s trunk she would have been able to rest her back. She resisted the temptation to get up and put the mortar close to it. She wouldn’t allow Osun to deliver her baby in the moment.

By the the second night, Osun told the delivery women to save her child and let her go, “my inner head doesn’t want me to have a child in this world.” The women told her to stop filling the atmosphere with bad words that she prays to her inner head help her. Her child, they said lived in her but didn’t move. He sat in her womb like a rock at the bottom of a placid stagnant pond, unmoving.

During the third night, the shadows around Abebi grew mouths and spoke to her of her wickedness. They crept over her and her kept her awake on the mortar most. She could hear them hiss like an angry nest of hornets, their disapproval terrified her, and she thought she should
get up and flee. She heard Osun’s words over her as she bled, “no living thing can be born in my courts.” She used her hands to cover her ears and sat back on the mortar, “what applied to the free must apply to slaves too, what is acceptable to an Ayaba applies to an Iwofa,” she whispered.

Ajani brought her the news she wanted five nights and six mornings after she first sat on the mortar. She slid off the mortar and fell to the forest floor, tired, but happy. She ate the food he brought, and they returned to the Aafin. The Aafin mourned the beautiful child that Osun pushed into world, grey and barely alive. Osun’s child died in her arms and she didn’t let go of the corpse. She stuffed her breast in the slack mouth and compelled her dead baby to suckle, “drink. I have plenty.” She didn’t know when the afterbirth slipped out of her. Her womb contracted, and blood and placenta gushed out of her. The delivery women took her away, Osun slumped to the floor, and begged that death take her too.

*

In the empty market, the mother-birds tied Abebi’s womb on the highest branch of the Iroko tree. They decreed, “both women will be barren in this life.” Osun’s inner head chose only one child. Abebi had taken matters into her own hands and crossed into the threshing floor of the mothers to dispense justice.

*
Esu goes to Owo

Esu is here

Esu is there

Go there

Come here

The old trickster

He enjoys confusing at the crossroads

There he removes confusion

Esu stopped on the road that let to Oja Ife, he studied the market, and picked out a beautiful woman. Ife slowly recovering from the Black Death opened the five-day market two weeks ago. Esu smiled, there were lots of beautiful women at Oja Ife, and he could pick easy, his eyelids twitched when he saw any. They twitched rapidly now. He pulled a small goat out his leather bag, slung it across his shoulder, and walked to three women laughing by a stall.

“I greet you daughers.”

“We greet you old one.”

“This goat, I want to sell for twenty cowries.”

The woman closest to the goat patted its fat rump and said, “it looks a bit thin.”

“You are right friend it looks guant,” said the second.

The third one opened the mouth of the goat and declared, “it is sick.”

The women turned their backs to the old man and his goat, Esu smiled.

“Sell this goat for me and keep ten cowries. I’m on my way to out of Ife but I will be back before the sun sets. Divide ten among ourselves. I’ll be back for my ten.”

“Oh do not worry father, we will sell it for you, and give you all.”
“No, my daughters, I insist.”

“Okay, father we will do as you want.”

The women watched him totter away his left side propped up by his staff. Not long after Esu left, they sold the goat for twenty cowries and then settled down to share their ten. Awele, the eldest shared the ten cowries into three piles. She had one cowrie in her hand and didn’t know what to do with it. She placed it by the side, “I’m the oldest I get the extra one.” Bunmi, the youngest, looked at her friend and hissed, “It is in times like this that you remember you are older than us by five months. “But cannot buy five months in the market, as big as this market is nobody sells days here,” Awele said. Gbemi rolled her eyes at Awele, “don’t bring your age into this matter, and Bunmi I’m older than you by three days.”

Esu already out of the walls of Ife listened to them as he walked on to one of the paths that went away from Oja Ife. He veered off it on to the Ooni’s highway that went to Owo. He laughed hard, when he heard the women hiss at each other. He couldn’t wait to be back at Oja Ife, but he had to make it to Owo soon.

The three women asked a man that walked by their stall for what to do with the one cowrie. “The extra should go to to the youngest, in cases like this, the elders must be elders and allow the youngest to enjoy,” he said.

“Thank you, stupid man, come and go,” Awele said before beckoning to a woman, “we need your wisdom in settling a matter.” The woman listened to them and said, “as you can not decide to give to the youngest or oldest, give to the one in the middle, after all…”

“Ah, iya it’s your grey hair that keeps me from abusing you, please come and go,” Awele said.
Esu got to the walls of Owo, in an instant, Owo was two days away from Ife. He didn’t
go into the city. He touched the gates with his cudgel and turned back to greet a man he had
passed at the beginning of the highway to Owo. The man wore an elaborately embroidered
agbada and seemed to be deep in thought.

“Is all well in Owo baba, you seem to be hurrying away from that direction?” he said.

“All is well, young man,” Esu said.

Some time later, the man saw Esu again going to Owo and stopped to greet him, “old
man did we not meet back there, he pointed to the road behind him, yet I meet you closer to the
end of the road.”

“Not me, must be someone else. An old man walks gently on the road, so that the road
doesn’t beat him.”

“Go well father.” The man said, watching Esu hobble away. He noted the colour of
Esu’s kembe and buba, and the angle to which he bent his fila. The young man saw that it
bobbed behind the old man hitting the middle of his back. A few moments, he saw Esu coming
towards him on his way to Ife, this time he opened his mouth to greet him and couldn’t say
anything. Esu looked at him and said, “the days must be bad when the younger ones meet their
adults on the way and do not greet them.”

“Red and black,” the younger man muttered, “it’s the same old man,” and walked
quickly away from him. He saw Esu again a few stops to the Owo gates, “I’m going mad.” he
said. Esu stopped near him and said, “you are going mad?”

“Ehn?”

“Are you far from home? You just told me you are mad.”

“Ehn?”
“If you are going mad, I advise you to turn back. Yonder is a market and you know that it harder to cure the madness of a person that has walked through a market.”

“Ehn?”

“Are you now deaf and mad? This is not a good. Turn back.”

But the man walked away from Esu muttering to himself, “red and black at the crossroads by the ose tree. I did see him.” The fifth time the man saw Esu at the Owo gates, he didn’t talk to him, he turned around and ran down the road towards Ife. His feet kicked up so much dust that Esu couldn’t see the back of his head. Esu snorted and shorted. He threw his bag and club aside and sat by the way. He scratched his thin legs until they bled, and he laughed. The young man ran as if two hundred forest spirits pursued him. “I saw him” the man shouted as he stumbled, fell, got up, steadied himself, and ran more. The forest carried his shouts of terror back to Esu.

The youngman’s encounter with Esu made him rethink his circumstances in Owo. He had thought he had only one option, but he had five, the number of times he sighted the old man. Esu turned away from the gates of Owo and walked back to Ile-Ife. His crooked body shook with mirth each time he remembered his encounter with young man. He’d stop by the way and laugh, rubbing his hurting belly.

He got back to the market before sundown. The bright afternoon sun moved towards the lower end of the sky. He saw a crowd of people milling around the stall of Awele. The three women screamed at each other and ignored the three piles of cowries, and the extra cowrie. “I’m back,” Esu said, but they didn’t hear him.

“Your eyes look like the fish caught in the Mokuru River.”

“Your squashed nose looks like like rotten mangoes.”
“I wonder how your thin legs carry your body”

“I wonder how your scrawny neck carries your big head.”

Esu squeezed in between the women and shouted at the top of his voice, “my ten cowries?” At the mention of cowries, the three women stopped talking and they saw at Esu. Awele handed him his ten cowries, “we don’t know what to do with the one.” The others disagreed, “oh, we know what to do with the one cowrie. Give it to the younger one.” “Which younger one?” Awele said.

Esu stretched his hand, took the extra cowrie and dropped it into his bag. He walked away from them and said, “There-is-something and there-is-nothing, to walk together you must be willing to give out the one.” The women stared after him as he disappeared into the crowd at Ife market.
Ibeji
Red Monkeys on trees
They scamper from treetops
Into homes with wealth
And laughter and smiles

Alake set a single carved wooden figure in the corner of her room and looked at the Ere Ibeji that stood for Kehinde, her dead twin daughter. The breasted Ere Ibeji had a large head and bulbous eyes and a tall coiffure and stood on a circular stand carved beaneath its feet. Alake stringed tiny blue green glass bead bracelets and necklace and placed it around the neck, waist and the wrists of the Ere Ibeji. Kehinde died two years ago when she was three from a strange fever that wasted her chubby body in a week. Her twin, Taiwo had cried out of a nightmare the moment her twin breathed her last in their father’s arms. Alake didn’t accept that the death of her daughter, and her husband couldn’t console her. When Taiwo asked about Kehinde, Alake told her other daughter that her twin travelled to Apomu market and would soon be back with lots of treats for her.

“You still have tears daughter? Tears cause blind eyes you know,” her mother-in-law said trying to jar her out of her grief, but Alake stared at her through tearfilled eyes. Her mother-in-law called her son aside and whispered something into his ears. Five days later, he came home from his farm with the Ere Ibeji. Alake snatched it out of his hand without saying a word and straped it to her back with her wrapper. Her husband couldn’t believe it when he heard her sing to the Ere Ibeji as she made supper. The first time she had done this in months, his family ate from his mother’s pots. Alake knew her twin had returned to the creator and a mother in that realm cared for her and the Ere Ibeji connected her with Kehinde.
Alake washed the Ere Ibeji. She patted the round wooden body with camwood dust. She would feed it soon with sugarcane, ekuru, and akara. Alake’s other twin Taiwo slept in her arms. She rubbed coconut oil all over her body naked body. She shivered, and Alake covered her with one of her wrappers. Taiwo would soon wake and would cry for food. Her mother had cooked beans pottage, she added a generous measure of palm oil and rodo pepper to a pot until the beans made a thick yellow mushy paste. Her children loved it, Taiwo did. She would feed the beans to Kehinde too.

*S*

Sango had a twin that didn’t survive childhood, and their birth gave Sango access to the unique power of twins. These sacred children brought gladness into improverished homes and turned their parents to wealth owners. They looked like other children, but grey-haired elders would bow to a sleeping day-old twin or twin toddlers who scampered across their way. The strong inner heads of twins saved them from spirits and demons that lived in trees and dreams. Sango became a patron of twins and it was common to see twins come visit him in the Aafin Oyo. He set before them feasts and gave them clothes, and on his happy days he sent his junior Ayaba to wait on them.

*S*

Alake fed her child the beans. Taiwo smacked her lips and gurgled. Her mother wiped her mouth and wore stringed Segi beads on the ankles and wrists of her child. The Babalawo who gave her husband the Ere Ibeji said she choose a day and beg for alms in a market. Her dance would prolong the life of her daughter. Alake chose a new wrapper and straped Taiwo to her back with an oja. Her mother-in-law waited for her by the door of the compound, “go well daughter.” “I’ll back soon mother,” she said. Alake stepped infront of her drummer, she’d paid
for his services for the whole day. She danced to the beats of the bata drums with Taiwo heavy on her hips. The child laughed at the world from her mother’s back and moved to the drums too.

Alake stepped into the Akesan market with her drummer and looked around. She walked away from another mother of twins dancing with her twin sons. She stopped at another part of the Akesan and market women called out to her and her twin; they gave her cowries and foodstuff. They laughed at Taiwo antics from her mother’s back. She had found a way to free her arms from her mother’s wrapper and she raised them as she repeated her mother’s song as best as she could. The women laughed and recalled the twin visits to the market today, this young one, they would not forget soon.

Alake danced and sang:

The mother of twins greets you all
May Olodumare give you joy
May Sango’s gaze not look on you in anger
May Oba’s affinity with wealth be yours
May Osun’s beauty not harm you
May Oya’s winds blow favour your way

The drummer moved closer to Alake, his drum repeated the words of her song. Alake swung her hips, and when Taiwo began to scream she untied her wrapper and the baby slid to the ground. “Dance, Ejire,” Alake told Taiwo. The little girl began to copy her mother’s steps, and her mother sang on.

Great are the sufferings of a grieving mother
Greater than the siege of Ipokia
I heard rumbling little stomachs
That kept their mothers awake
And many gave themselves that their children may breathe longer

Olodumare gave me twins
One went back
But I still have Taiwo
The one who tasted the world
And I will tend her till she grows
Into a woman who would swing voluptuous hips

I know the name of my other twin
Kehinde, the elder who came out last
My child lives
She didn’t die
She went only to the market
To buy clothes for her twin
She will return

My first husband saw me in Igboho
And he said he loved me
I brought him to my mother
I took him to my father
I gave him twins, edun origi
Children are the beauty of life

Beat your drums my drummer
Let your gangan speak for me
My legs dance to your beats
My buttocks shake to your beats
The beads around my waist dance under my wrapper

There was a maiden in Oyo
Who wore stringed beads on her hips
Who loved to do that thing
And on her wedding night
He husband didn’t meet her at home
Her white cloth remained white
Not a spot of blood did it catch
And her husband drove her out
Into the night, and the night couldn’t cover her shame

May the King above
Save us from the one here
May hunger not hold us captive
The one that doesn’t respect grey hair
The one brought upon us by the king here
My twins don’t bear malice

The bride of three days
Says of her father-in-law
That he has a long nose
Says of her mother-in-law
That her mouth is a refuse dump
Will surely feel the back of a hand
Across her mouth

My twins thank you
I am grateful
My mothers
May war not come to Oyo’s walls again

A group of Ilari walked by the dancing woman and couldn’t lay their hands on her. They didn’t want to incur the wrath of twins. The Ilari ground their teeth at her true words that seared their hearts, so they walked away quickly. They hid behind the crowd and listened to the people chattering or laughing, those they would deal with later.

I am afraid of gossip
It spreads on wagging tongues
May those that envy me
Not no peace
But I heard of wife snatcher at Ijero
Whose eyes sees and takes
He should take heed
Or he will somersault thrice
Because a husband will use strong magun on him
Or he will crow like a cock in heat thrice
The mother of twins greets the mighty warrior king at Ikoyi
His exploits we hear of in Oyo
I greet the warriors of Oyo
The many stong men that
Stomp about retelling past glories
We may pretend not to know
But we know who the real warriors are

The twins have come for the ones who called them
May Taiwo bless you with children
May Kehinde bless you with children
They will bless you with riches too
And save you from Sango’s many wars
And the hunger that creeps on you

Beat your drums my drummeer
The stork will not take the egret
To where it bathes Because,

The stork knows that the egret

Will muddy the pool

The rival co-wife says my twins are frail

They are giants in the eyes of their mother

Taiwo turns a wretched woman into own with a hundred clothes

Kehinde enters a poor hut

And turns it into a marvelous compound

My twins came to me

Because they wanted to come

Olodumare be with me

My fame has spread

Children are the wealth of life

My husband loathed my efo riro soup

My lover also said it tasted sour

When I gave birth to my twins

I sent both men to Apomu market

For that which would make me love them again

They have not returned

Affluent red monkeys
I honour my twins
Red monkeys that strap trees
My twins bear no evil to anyone
My twins bear no malice to anyone
My twins greet
Those that have blessed them
May the king above bless them in return

I run away from from wagging tongues
My rival wife gossips
I know, you can ask Bola’s mother
I hear her hiss when I walk by
I shake my round hips in her face
And eye her openly
Her thin body cannot hide her hate

The king above
Clothes the vagina with hair
Not to hide it
But to add honour to it, men
What you find easily
Holds no value
My twins greet you mothers
In Oyo markets the mothers of twins danced to talking drums and made up songs that critiqued Alaafin Sango’s rule and he couldn’t do a thing against them because the inner of head of twins are strong.
Òyá in Ibariba

A man walks before his wife; he walks behind his mother

Oya, buffalo woman stronger than her husband

If a man sees a snake, and a woman kills it,

it doesn’t matter who did

As long as the snake doesn’t get away

Sango sent Òyá to Sero Bagri, the wily king of the Ibariba at Nikki. Sina Gorrigui had just presented the king’s fifteenth hoe to Sero Bagri. The king at Nikki had defeated death and rose from his bed aft the Oyo war. He sent word to Alaafin Sango that he had thunder-stones better than the ones Sango learned from his mother’s people the Tapa. Sango laughed at the message from Ibariba in the Kaa Idi Obi, but that very night Òyá slipped out of Oyo as it prepared to sleep with her servant Afefe carrying a bundle of clothes behind her. The Ayaba dressed like a commoner without her royal beads or Teetu mixed easily with market women closing shop infront of the Aafin. Sango could not leave Oyo, the rival factions within the capital needed to be dealt with. His absence from Oyo could be the fire that will light up Oyo, so he sent the person he trusted most.

It took them nearly three days to pass through Oyo. On the afternoon of the third, Oya stopped before the banks of the greater river and inhaled deep of its smell. She waded into the waters and crocodiles and hippopotamus moved out of her way. She stopped when the waters held her neck. She stood still and smiled. She looked down the length of the river and imagined that she continued to walk on the river bank until she got to Tapa lands. She dipped her head under water and stayed there for a while. She cried, and her tears mixed with the Greater River. Oya walked out of the river with a smooth pebble she’d picked from its bottom. She put the
stone in her waist purse and she walked to the bobbing canoes on the river. They were ferried across the Greater river at the caravan stop at Illo. They watched Bororo herdsmen and their Zebu cattle graze on the grass that grew on the banks of the slowly moving river. Oya and Afefe walked by the town of Gbegazin and didn’t stop. Two days later they walked by the older Ibariba town of Bussa on the banks of the greater river. Both women walked in through its southern most gate, and they didn’t arouse the curiosity of the warriors manning the gate., or the male and female slaves repairing sections of the short wall. They sang and danced to drums and flutes mixing water and clay. The Oyo did business in Ibariba, especially now that there was peace between both sides. They decided to spend the night in the town and continue in the morning their journey to Nikki.

Bannawara sent a servant to Oya, “I know the footsteps of royalty when I hear them, you can not hide from your own. I have my ears in many kingdoms. I know you.” She was a sister to the Bussa princes, and they banished her to Segbama a town outside Bussa. Afraid of her powers, her brothers and cousins accused her of poisoning one of the Bussa kingmakers. They gave her two choices, death or exile. She moved to Segbama and prospered. She owned several thousand heads of cattle, and her male kin couldn’t ignore her wealth. In retaliation, she stuck her hand into the affairs of Bussa from Segbama and stirred up the polity as she wished.

Bannawara wanted a measure of Oya and Alaafin Sango. Oya went to the outskirts of Bussa to meet with Bannawara, who they called the witch-child. Oya expected to meet with an old woman but there were no wrinkles of the face of the woman who received her. Both women spoke through interpreters. “Where are you headed?”

“There is no need to lie. I’m on way to Nikki.”

“Can you tell me why?”
“That I cannot tell you.”

“You cannot blame me for trying.”

“If you have ears in Nikki you will know soon.”

“When our friend’s come visiting disguised one can only imagine.”

Oya and Afefe passed through Mokole, a group of Oyo émigrés that settled outside the town of Kani. The Mokole told any Ibariba who cared to listen that they had rejected their hometown in Oyo and were Ibariba. The owners of the land looked at them and reminded the Mokole of the Oyo accent peeped out of their Ibariba Baatonum. She knew she would gather information about the Ibariba in Mokole compounds. In the night, they would talk in Oyo and she knew the Makole knew where their true loyalties lay.

The got to the outskirts late one night and decided to sleep in the house another group of kinsmen. Oya and Afefe spent a night in a blacksmith’s compound, the Gbede were Ibariba whose ancestors were from Ife. They welcomed the women into their compounds. The women made the food, and they talked to Oya about Sero Bagri, king at Nikki and his courtiers. The younger women listened to the visitors and the older ones as they added firewood to fires or stirred pots of bubbling soups. Toddlers scampered around the fire ignoring the sharp cries of their mothers. The older girls cleaned after their mothers or ran after their younger siblings. The chief wife called Oya to a side and told her, “becareful of Batafa, one of the former land owners of Ibariba. He seeks the downfall of all strangers.”

“I will.”

“Becareful of him and some of our men. He saved one of us once. We are indebted to him.”

*
Nikki, the political head and the second richest Bariba town lay farther north, away from the waters of the greater river. Osun and Oya got to Nikki in time for the two-day Gaani festival. They watched the festivities as part of a raucous Ibariba crowd. Sero Bagri, Ibariba king of Nikki, reclined on a chair draped with skins of leopards and basked in the attention of his subjects, whether good and bad. The Gaani held yearly during the dry season, on the twelfth day of the tenth month. The white dry dusty seasonal harmattan winds visited Nikki earlier than usual and the crowd wrapped clothes over their noses. The king’s procession stopped at the shrines of the earth priests pouring libations and offering to the spirits and ancestors. The ancestors gave their approval to the Gaani festival and granted Sero Bagri, the king at Nikki, the authority to hold the Gaani. Oya and Afefe decided not to present themselves to the Sina Boko on that day.

A crowd of the peoples of the Ibariba moved with the procession, they laughed and danced with the drums pounding. Fulani girls sold cold milk in calabashes, and pots of millet beer slaked thirsty throats hoarse from shouting. Groups of children ran in and out of the crowd, dancing and laughing. Their bellies filled with food and meat the women of compounds offered to them when they stopped at their doors.

After the return of the royal procession to the palace, heralded by the twelve Nikki kakaki, the king rode towards the tafuro—two sacred kingship drums that rested on crutchlike supports. He saluted the metal kettledrums that physically embodied the powers of past, present, and future Sina Boko, from afar. The Tafarukpe, the kingship drummer pounded the drums and the kingship drums saluted the king back. The drums praised the present Sina Boko and the king had honoured the drums with sacrifices. As the kingship drums spoke, Sina Boko communied with his ancestors. He partook of their fears, they told him that kings could never fully trust anyone, of the loneliness that kings breathed daily even though they were surrounded by doting
men and women. He breathed of their courage and bravery in battles, and wisdom, the assurance that Nikki would always be. He in turn gave to the kingship drums his fear, of the mad Oyo king whose eyes looked to Ibariba.

Sero Bagri, the Sina Boko, became overcome by waves of ancient envy and jealousy from the kingship and he stumbled. A circle of Gando Royal guards closed around him and shielded him from his people’s view. The king retired to the Seko, a round thatched hut built on a platform so his people could get a rare view of him. He settled on cushions and members of his court surrounded the platform. He readied himself for the procession that took place in front of the palace. Title-holders and potentates rode up to show their horsemanship skills to the admiration of the people. The Kingship drums greeted them for the drums knew these were potential Sina Boko and Tufarukpe the kingship drummer pounded the drums harder. The noblemen wore turbans and embroidered robes that billowed in the wind as their horses threw up red dust in the air, rearing and charging. They carried spears and staffs entwined with their colours. Their horses wore yellows and blues and greens and reds; their prancing heads covered with cowries, tassels, and bells. The Sina Boko nodded at the princes and showered gifts on the drummers and kakaki trumpeters that lent their voices to the cacophony of sounds. The king’s official messenger Sonkoro sat on the ground of the square with his back to the gathering as he delivered the gifts.

The lords of the earth came to the square after the noblemen left. They walked in front of the Seko, the deeds of the previous dynasty, theirs, puffed up their chests, but they too genuflected before the war drums and the living king at Nikki. The Gaani ceremony was a living contract, between the Wassangari sons of Kisra and the former owners of the land. During this annual renewal of the contract, the lords of the earth reminded all their place in the history of Ibariba plateau. The treaty that stopped the mother of all Ibariba wars.
Before, the Gaani the Wassangari noblemen pillaged surrounding villages that bordered Ibariba to accumulate wealth that they showed off to the people in the capital. They gave them to the people and sent a share of it to the King at Nikki. They would only remember generous princes in the next round of kingship tussle. If not them, then princes from the houses they represented. The eldest son of each ruling house, the one with the most respected spurs led his clan’s senior princes before the king and delivered their gifts to the palace.

After the horse display, the king’s first son, the Kirisi Yerima led the princes and they walked by the tafaro drums. The eldest prince of each house in descending order followed him until all the princes had walked by the drums. Suni as the older brother of the Sina Boko walked at the head of their house. He could feel his brother anger and when their eyes met he didn’t look away. He didn’t walk with his head bowed. He knew he suffered no shame from his people. He had promoted his own good the same way any Ibariba would have. The chief at Kenu then motioned to the subordinate chiefs he approved to salute the king. They walked by Sero Bagri and pledged their allegiances. Some of these kingdoms supported Oyo and the cheering stopped. The present king’s sisters led by the Gnon Kogui also walked by the Seko, after them the women of the ruling houses. The women saluted the kingship drums and the kings greeted their sisters.

On morning of the second of the Gaani, thanksgivingday, the Kaayessi celebrations held in front of the palace, more noblemen rode up to the gated Secu to show their allegiance to the Sina Boko, so did commoners on their knees or on their bellies, prostrate. The salutes were directed towards the kingship drums, and the Tufarukpe answered for the king, he beat the the kingship drums and the unbroken line of Nikki kings showed their subjects their unified approval. The twelve kakaki of Nikki would not be silenced all through the day as praise singers spoke of the Nikki and its many Sina Boko.
A wide expanse of the square separated Sero Bagri, the king at Nikki from his subjects. The Sina Boko used only one of the two doors of the Seku, the one that opened into outer wall of the palace. The Kaayessi wasn’t an event for him to cross into the public domain through the second door, infact the outer door was never used during the celebrations. The king’s official messanger Sonkoro sat on the ground of the square with his back to the gathering as he did the day before; he got up to collect gifts from the Sina Boko in a metal and give the people who greeted the king.

Four title-holders, the Yarari Sina Kararugi, the Suno Sinrari, the Suno Tooto and the Sina Sako stepped on the platform and feigned menacing attacks on the Sina Boko’s person. They rushed at him but stopped far from where he sat behind the closed door that opened to the public square. After the enactment, the square filled with the underlying tensions that will always exist among the princes. The Sina Boko watched them walk away, he knew there plotted his demise. He had done the same to the previous king at Nikki.

The Woru Tokura Bukari, the head Gesereba/Ba-Gesere sat beside the Tufarukpe, the kingship drummer and the kakaaki trumpeters. The crowd quietened to listen Bukari, the head griot’s, recitation even though they didn’t understand the words. Bukari chanted songs in praise of the kingship and the king in Wakpaarem, a remainder of his Sonnaike roots. He spoke of the great Ibariba and the power of their kings, the Sina Boko. Bukari being became one with his chant, and Yaakpe one of the royal drummers, also a jester, but an interpreter during Gaani inserted between the Gesere’s verses, his opinions in a very forceful manner. He punctuated his commentary with the Sakpa drum, both men’s performances were accompanied by the high-pitched whinning of the kakaki.
Here in the space of the square, the two men brought the king at Nikki closer to the people; they became not only a bridge between the present king and his ancestors but also his forebearers. Yaakpe inserted interpretations of the songs in Baatonum and let common people into the rarefied praise of the kings at Nikki.

Oya and Afefe were only able to pick up a few words but the performance reminded them of the Oyo Isugbin. Oya studied the display of Nikki royalty, and she gained access to the living king and the very essence of the Ibariba kinship past and present. She listened to this one-sided conversation that explained Ibariba power to her. The king doesn’t cross into the public square to meet with his people. To get what she wanted she had to open the outside door, walk through the Seku and into the Ibariba palace through the other door that opened into it. That door would be opened by one of the many princes prancing about announcing his cowed acceptance of the king, strong contenders to the throne. She had seen their furtive glances and read their body language, they were rivals waiting to wrest power from the present Sina Boko, all was not well in Nikki.

The festivities went on for seven more days, and on the eighth day, Gnon Kogui shaved off the hair of young princes between four and seven. A crowd stood outside her doors waiting for her to come out. Infront of her house, she and her servants prepared the shaving instruments—gourds, razors, and copper containers. She sat infront of her house and the young princes walked to her She shaved off all their hair. She blessed each with a name, for some the name given announced a curse over a life. The would limit their kingship aspirations in the future. Balls of hair coated with the red earth of Ibariba gathered at her feet, and bald heads of boys some streaked with blood stood around her. The name of a glorious past king would be of
more value than that of a king that died early or didn’t win many conquests. She gave the princes, Mora, Gunus, Sero, Saka, Gera, Lafia, Tamu

Before the Gaani ended in the evening and the king retired into his rooms, bori women trooped out of the crowd and danced around the square. The strings of beads on their waists moved to the rhythm of the drums, and thick brass bracelets lined their wrists to elbows reflecting the evening sun. The women, possessed by their own spirits received requests from the Ibariba people and prayed for them. Under trances, the spirits made them see for the people into the past and future. Bannawara, the witch-child, didn’t watch the bori dancers. Her eyes rested on Oya and Afefe. She knew why they were here, but it was too late to get to the king and warn him. She prayed he did the right thing.

Osun led Afefe into the Ibariba palace and demanded to see the Sina Boko. The guards told her that the king would see her tomorrow. Yaakpe, who stood closest to the king, began to sing of Oya’s beauty and carriage. The hot air carried the voice of Yaakpe the jester griot into the king’s rooms. Sero Bagri smiled in his room and told one of the slaves to tell Yaakpe to bring in his guest.

The undulating voice of king’s personal Gesere, Yaakpe, led Oya to his king. The jester sang his king’s praises, but he hid in the praise songs a warning to the king not to heed to the quavering flesh in between his legs, “there is a matter of secrecy between us. Remember that flesh has no shoulder, it has no mind of its own as it slips into tight passages.” His Mokoru, a high pitched stringed instrument whined and begged too, but man and instrument appealed to deaf ears.
Sero Bagri eyes gleamed when he saw her, here stood before him a spirit of a woman he had to posses. He bid her to come in and sit by his side. Gando had taken Afefe to the servant’s quarters but she returned as a gentle wind and she stood by her mistress, unseen.

The king chuckled, “I send word to your husband to come for the stones he sends you. Why?” the king said.

“He alone knows.”

“Maybe he expects me to pour water in your pot?”

Óyá smiled at him and shook her head, “My lord will not spoil the new friendship between the Alaafin and himself because of moments of pleasure.”

He invited her into his inner rooms, they were lit brightly with lamps, and filled with incense. He pulled him into her arms, and she slipped out of them. The king laughed, “you can not escape woman.”

“One cannot grasp the wind.”

“I will give you the celt stones, if you give me what I want.”

“I am a daughter of Oduduwa. You cannot have me. Remember the curse”

“I have heard different, you are Tapa.”

“You heard wrong. I am both.”

“Would you get something from me for nothing?”

“Would you risk your eyes or potency to sleep with me.”

Óyá loosened her wrapper, and her waist beads caught the flickering lights of the oil lamp in the room. The light revealed her lithe body as she walked towards the king’s bed. The king smiled and reached for her but his hands didn’t move. The king stared at his hands in horror and slumped on the bed. Panting, he pointed to a pot near the door, “The stones are in there, get out
of my room.” he gasped. Oya and Afefe ran out of the Nikki palace and Nikki. They took a longer route to Oyo and didn’t go through the road they’d come. They didn’t stop until they put some distance between Nikki and themselves.

*

In a dry valley, Oya and Afefe sat inside the cleft of a hill. Òyá unwrapped the king’s gift, a calabash wrapped in red cloth. The rocks were piled on top of each other. They didn’t look special rather ordinary. They looked like common stones found in Oyo or Tapa but etched on the side of the calabash were the ends of jagged streaks that didn’t touch each other. Negative and positive forces held apart by the container, evil and good forces, it imposed calm in the world of the calabash, the sky, and the earth. Afefe watched as her mistress put a stone in her mouth and rolled it under her tongue.

The skies above them darkened and winds tugged at the tops of trees. The winds howled and threw up sand. Branches of lightning appeared in the sky, and they lit up the surroundings with shadows and light. Òyá laughed and darts of fire shot out of her mouth. She wrapped some in her tobi purse and tied it around her waist, a stash that may come in handy. Water poured out of heavens, unrelenting. They pounded on the hills, and trees and bowed to Oya.

*
The Dreams

On the banks of the Greater River
Sero Bagri and Sango fell into one dream
Nikki and Oyo struggled
In a dream

Sero Bagri, the Sina Boko at Nikki, slept one night and found himself in one of Nikki’s kingship kettledrums. He tumbled down into its deepness, and the kings at Nikki screamed into his head of events not yet born. Each Sina Boko said his name then proceeded to tell Sero Bagri of his acquired wisdom. They spoke of how they died, many from poison, others at the hands of mercenary shadows or Donsano Concubines whose allegiances were to their sons and their awry plans to make their bastards a Sina Boko. Sero Bagri’s cramped body ached but he couldn’t stretch out his limbs. Trapped in the depths of the kettle drum, his spirit roamed all over the Nikki palace listening to plots to harm him, but he couldn’t do anything, he saw his unmoving body lay in his bed.

*

Sango nodded off to sleep on a chair and he became two. Sango stood over himself dozing on a chair. The standing Sango nudged the sitted Sango and, but his hands went through the smoke like body. He decided to sing his praise to the sleeping Sango.

Sango the king that rules 6600 towns and villages
Husband of Oya
Lover of Osun
King of Oba
My eyeballs are red
I breathe fire made from my innards
I love the bata drum
And dance to its magic
I love in war
I war in love
I rule Oyo
Let the lands tremble at the mention of my name

And the Alaafin fell into the same kingship kettledrum with the Sina Boko, and the drum’s insides expanded to contain both men. They looked at each other. Sango knew Sero Bagri and Sero Bagri knew Sango. They tried to grapple each other but the drum kept them apart. The kingship thundered, and the noise of war drums echoed in the sung space. The two kings gasped for air, and pounded the drums’s leatherhead from the inside, and warm blood seeped into the bottom of the drum. The men tried to clear their minds as the cries of their people banged about in their heads.

*
Osun’s grief
The one who rode life as she pleased
Stood still in grief
And watched life go by
Until she truly saw life
And she stood still again

Deep wrinkles grew deeper in her once smooth and glistening skin. Her eyes lost their mischievous penetrating gaze and became lifeless holes in her face. Osun wasted away despite the attention of the Alaafin and her servants. They forced her to eat and drink and sleep, but they couldn’t help her. Osun existed in a hole and the beautiful one ceased to see the beauty around her she took to wandering all over Oyo metropolis. Osi Efa, her Eunuch son, assigned two Teetu to walk behind her and her back after she’d exhausted herself in the evenings. She didn’t succeed in dropping her pain at the many crossroads she walked through. Oyo mothers snatched their babies out her way only the cries of babies caught her attention. Osun ran after the babies, snatched them from their mothers, and refused to let go of them. The Aafin waited for her to cry out her grief but two weeks after her baby had been buried, Osun refused to cry. She told anyone that cared to listen, that she felt that life of her baby was sucked by someone within the Aafin walls.

Oya knew Osun played with her nine and didn’t do anything to stop the woman. The children brought her back, but the lines didn’t disappear from her face. Their foundations ran deep into her soul and only a tiny bit of her grief found its way on to the surface of her skin. She saw more now and understood the suffering of others. Her slaves and servants gave the grieving woman plenty space and watched for the moment she’d snap into her old self.

*
Oba and her one had gone to Igbon and Tapa to buy kolanuts. Oya and Afefe were away on a journey known only by Sango and her eunuch son, Osi Efa. Osun gathered Oya’s nine into her arms and joy gurgled out of her shriveled heart. She bathed the children in the morning and evenings and fed them with delicacies from her sighing pots. In the evenings, they sat around Osun, and she lulled them to sleep with her stories. She told them a story of Ijapa, the tortoise, and his wife Yanibo, the dung beetle. Osun sat the children on a mat and placed before them a big bowl of akara.

One morning in the town of Mariwo, Yanibo was about to go to the market to sell her goods when she heard her husband snore under his covercloth. Yanibo kicked the shell of her husband and said him, “There is a new thing in town.” Ijapa yawned and stuck his head out of his shell, “There is no new thing under the sky,” and went back to sleep. Nevertheless, a new thing had happened that morning, Leopard opened a barber shop under the araba tree at the edge of the town. He decreed that Dog would be his first customer, and then the other the hairy animals.

Elephant trumpeted the news around town and called for a meeting that evening. They had to discuss this new thing. The meeting held by the Eran stream, because they wanted the fishes to be a part of this too. When all the animals arrived, Ijapa said, “I don’t have hair,” and went back into his shell to sleep beside his wife, a big bowl of palrnuts waited for him in his dreams. Yanibo sighed and knocked on her husband’s shell, “Have you forgotten that you have three strands of hair on your head?” Tortoise grumbled and stuck his head out of his shell again.

The fishes stuck their head out of water and the surface of the Eran stream rippled with bubbles. Goat sat far away from fox who licked his paws. A cat as black as the soot on Yanibo pot sat near elephant, its tail curled around it body Grasshoppers hung to the blades of grass in
the clump beside the cat. Buffalo and warthog snorted their scorn at Grasscutter whose shaggy coat crawled with lice. Pigeon envious of Pink flamingo’s plumage dropped poop on her head.

“Do we give Dog to Leopard?” Elephant said.

Dog said, “He’s looking for trouble.”

Red money laughed, “Trouble indeed, only the guilty should be scared.”

Dog said, “Have you forgotten you have hair too?”

Red Monkey said, “maybe he looks for your trouble because you bring man’s trouble to him.” Dog ran after Red Monkey, and it scampered up a tree. It laughed at dog who ran round the trunk of the tree and barked at Red Monkey.

The meeting continued without both animals. Those left in the meeting didn’t know what to do, but it was obvious that the hairy animals took this more seriously than the hairless ones. Even though Elephant called the meeting, he hoped that Leopard would have closed shop before he got to the hairless animals. “Wait” Elephant said, “where do I fall with hair or without hair? I have hair on the tip of my tail and head.” The orange headed Lizard who had been listening to all of this in a tree jumped down from its tree crown and landed on the forest floor. It looked back up at the height from which it jumped and nodded three times praising itself even if the other animals didn’t.

“Should the hairless ones leave then?” Lizard said.

“Don’t worry, after us Leopard will not come for the ones with feathers and scales, and the hairless ones do not care for what happens to you.” Tortoise said.

“Selfish animal,” Fresh Water Crab said, “we the hairless ones will stay.”
Now, Tortoise was a very vain animal who cared more for the three strands of hair on his head than he cared to tell anyone. He knew that without them he would be bald. He told Dog to come to his house in the morning he would have a plan.

Dog wore a wrapper of palm fronds around his body and danced in front of Leopard’s shop.

Janjanjanlo, dog sang
I am covered in fronds
Janjanjanlo
I do not have hair
Janjanjanlo
Who told you I have hair
Janjanjanlo

The Grey Parrot, Aye-koto, had been on a journey to his in-laws. When he came back his wife told him about Leopard’s barber shop. Aye-koto could speak man and animal languages went to man. He flew to man’s house and told him, “your friend dog wears a wrapper of palm fronds now and dances for Leopard.” Man got up to see his friend. He saw Leopard’s coat and coveted it. Man started a ring of fire around the leopard’s barber shop. When Leopard saw the fire, he knew he had been tricked by Dog. Only man, Dog’s friend knew how to start a fire. Leopard tried to save his shop, but the flames singed his coat and ran into the forest.

Tortoise laughed hard inside his shell when dog came to his house to tell him of his escape. Dog angry he had been tortoise’s bait snarled at Tortoise. He used his paws to turn Ijapa on his shell. With his feet dangling in the air, tortoise stopped laughing, and not one animal helped to set him on right. By the end of the story, the children had fallen asleep in Osun’s arms and her chest heaved as tears for her dead baby came.
Osun of the sixteen cowries
Osun of the coral combs
And brass bangles
Her seeing eyes see
Inside inner heads
And the insides of people
And the chaos of the world

Osun pulled out her ifa tray and covered its face with a piece of white cloth like Orunmila her first husband had taught her. She gathered her sixteen cowries into her palms and whispered her questions into them. Her fear filled her heart and tears fell from her face and soaked the white cloth. She warmed them with her fears and doubt and shame and threw the seeds into the Ifa tray. The face of Esu carved into the side of the tray smirked and the seeds rearranged themselves to say what the messenger of Olodmare intended.

Osun peered into the scattered cowries and recited one of the verses in a chapter of the 14th book of Ifa.

Orunmila looks at a crossroad
He leads down a good path
He brings back from harm
Only the king of the skies knows all

Osun called on Abebi softly. The slave stumbled into her mistress’s room afraid she heard wrong. The Ayaba never called on her softly. She knelt by Osun with her face to the ground.

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“I need to send you on a woman’s journey. Go secretly as a woman when she searches for a rival’s weakness.” Osun said.

“Send me mother.”

“Go to Orunmila at Oke Igeti and tell him my Ifa tray unclearly sees.”

“I’m listening mother.”

“Tell him that I ask him to look into his tray maybe Esu his friend would speak plainly to him.”

Osun put something in her hands, “give him this. He would know I sent you.” Abebi got up and said, “I’m back already mother,” and she stepped out of the room tying one of Osun’s combs into the corner of her wrapper.

*

One of Orunmila’s sixteen students ushered Abebi into the compound. Iwa, one of the wives of Orunmila took Abebi to their husband in his iyewu. She knew anything that came from Osun came with problems. She remembered vain Osun reveled in the disorder she caused in Orunmila’s house and their husband couldn’t do anything but side with the sultry Osun. Iwa knew Osun still held a corner of their husband’s heart. She took Abebi to Orunmila and sat outside his door, listening to the conversation.

“My mother sends me to you father, she says I give you this.” Orunmilla looked at the bangle and smiled, “Osun Sengeese, the owner of coral combs.”

He picked up the opele string and threw them into the face of Esu, and a verse of the Oyeku Meji chapter of ifa appeared on the ifa tray. He recited the verse: Rise it up, pull it down. Twist it as you may but the essence does not change. What matters in virtue. A life without moral rectitude
is nothing but vanity. “Tell your mistress that virtue is everything. Tell she sees only what Esu allows her to see. Only Olodumare knows who would be saved in the end.”

“I hear father.”

“But tell her this also, I saw her with a crowd of children. She cooked beans for them, and they ran after her, but when she got to Arangbasa, the midway between heaven and earth. They ran back. She gave them more beans and they flocked round her again. When she got to the earth, they had disappeared.”

“You know you did her evil?”

“Father?”

“It is sad she sends an enemy to do the task of a friend. Hmmm…have you thought about your situation. Maybe she knows you used your teeth to share her meat?”

“Father?”

“My daughter Esu sees all.”

“I took retribution, justly”

“And she behaved badly to you.”

“She did, and I did rightly.”

“Even if it is said that an animal with horns will attack one, it’s not the likes of a snail. It is not your duty to pay her back.”

“But I did.”

“And do you think you will not drink of the cup you gave here?”

“I did no wrong.”

“May my words thump loud in your chest until you see your wrong doing.”

*
As Abebi neared Oyo’s Ajaka hill she fell to the ground and shook with the force of her tears. Orunmila’s words to her tumbled around her insides, cutting her. She remembered that she sat on a motar for five days and her actions caused Osun to lose her child.

*  

The Aafin woke up to a new song. Osun sat by her door and washed a brass doll she placed delicately on her thighs. Under her legs, she placed a wide gourd and it caught black suds from the black soap Osun put on a new sponge.  

A brass Omolangidi  

Orunmilla said I should bathe a brass omolangidi  

If bathe it  

I will bathe a child  

May the King above grant me my desires

She rinsed the suds of the brass and threw it up in the air. She dried the body of the omolangidi in a wrapper and dipped her hand into a pot of camwood and shea butter. Osun wrapped her doll in one of her sanya wrappers. She laughed as she remembered the words of Orunmila Abebi brought back “Mother of many rejoice, they are coming. Your children are coming.”

*
Sabe and Ketu

West of Oyo lay the two Oduduwa kingdoms of Ketu and Sabe. These vast and varied lands were ruled by the Alaketu and Onisabe respectively, two of the Ife princes dispersed at Itajero. These two kingdoms were far from the wars and rumours of wars going on to their east in Oyo, but they could feel the rumblings of the wars weeks after they had been fought through the soles their feet. The priests of Alaketu and Onisabe did all they could to soothe the restless earth, but it continued to heave and writhe. Little did the Alaketu and Onisabe know that the tiny enclave of Itile would bring Oyo closer to their domains.

Ilara sat quietly midway between Ketu and Sabe, and the Alara ruled it as a coronet king. A reluctant tributary of Ketu, and a hunter’s camp that swarmed with many peoples. The Alara, a wily man wanted to throw off the hold of the king of Ketu. He allowed sedators to live in his domain, but he could keep them in check. His subjects know that if any person prepared evil charms anywhere in Ilara, the Alara would know and send his town crier out. The town crier walked round Ilara hitting his gong, “hear me well, your king says you should desist from evil doing. He knows you name but will cover you for now. Desist or lightning will strike you and everything that you own.” His people knew that the Alaara placed charms on the roofs of his enemies, which attracted lightning and it fell on compounds. Ketu dealt carefully with the Alara, his power to call lightning was known and feared. The Alaafin’s sovereignty didn’t reach these lands, but his fear the people had heard of and kept in their insides.

*

A wanderer, a well-known man called Ara left behind wives in the Sabe and ketu towns he passed through. Years later, he retraced his way by stopping at each of their houses, and most of his women greeted him with children they had weaned in his absence. A certain year, Ara
travelled south to the great rolling salty river, and on his way back he stopped at Iwere and Idoko and Itile.

In Itile, he found his compound in disarray, his wife was nowhere to be found, and she had run off with his child to Ilara. He cursed the people of Ilara with hot-earth. The disease ravaged the land and sores filled with pus appeared on the skin of people. Alara called for the wanderer, and a warrior dragged him into the presence of the king.

“Take away the hot earth,” Alara said.

Ara laughed and made a demand too, “the head of the Alara’s Aremo shall be retribution for my wife and son that I left in your care.” The Alara’s mouth opened and no word came out of it, and the silence in his throne room strangled words in many throats. “My first son? Take him away. Take him to his compound.” Ara wasn’t thrown in the dungeons and Ilara buzzed with disbelief. That night the Ilara hills became a backdrop for an angry display of flashes and thundering crashes. The rocky outcrop at the top of the hills were lit up by branches of lightning. Rain didn’t fall, but the many claps of furious thunder sent people scurrying for shelter. Lightning struck the big tree on the Ilara hill splitting it into two equal parts and scorched its insides. The fearful couldn’t sleep that night, they could feel Alara’s anger.

*  

Itile the westernmost outlier of Oyo that tried its best to hide from Oyo. Itile was founded by Ilemola who ran from Oyo’s anger, or more accurately Sango’s burning anger. Itile became an overflow for troublemakers from Oyo. Ilemola and his followers walked southwesterly from Oyo until they got to the source of the Oyan River. It flowed northward through thick rainforest and they followed it into the forest. Ilemole became the Onitile and ruled the seven Itile settlements that grew along the length of Oyan. These settlements were north and
west of Itile and they prospered but the Onitile couldn’t stop Oyo’s eyes that were turned
towards him. Itile position was strategic in the defence of Oyo from the Ibariba and the other two
Oduduwa kingdoms of Sabe and Ketu.

Iganna and Kewu were chief towns of Itile, and they were between the banks of River
Ofiki and Opara the main tributaries of Oyan River. Iganna a loyal Oyo tributary shared a border
with Itile and its market served the western hindparts of Oyo. Ilemole’s title “the one who owns
the land” knew he domains weren’t out of Oyo’s reach and chose this title, Onitile, to scratch the
Alaafin’s craw. Onitile’s antics reached the palm tree fenced Aafin of the Little king and she sent
her warriors to Iganna and Itile. Bayanni’s termites hid among the Itile collecting news of
murmurings, and rebellion. They identified three compounds filled with disenters and rabble-
rousers. The people rejoiced Onitile asserted his “supremacy” over Oyo. The termites reported
on the Alara’s lightning and Ara’s threat to kill everything in Ilara with hot-earth. They even said
Alara lightnings nearly, nearly they stressed rivaled her brother’s.

* *

Osun put her brass fan and machete under her basket and left the Aafin. She told Sango
she traveled to Iganna but headed to Ilara. She kept in her chest, her real destination. She wanted
some of Alara’s lightning stones for herself. If Oya could throw Ibariba ones, she could get
herself some from Alara too. After all the skies were big enough for many kinds of lightning.
The variety of woven clothes in Iganna distracted Osun from her plans, and Ara, the wanderer,
snatched Osun from the Iganna market. He kept her whereabouts hidden in Itile for a week. The
Onitile found out about the visit of Osun and thought well of this new development. He knew
Oyo would crush Itile if given the chance, and this may be the bargaining power he needed. He
didn’t tell Oyo of Osun.
Sango’s heart beat in short breaths and he gasped when he thought about the many things that could have happened to Osun. He sent Ilari to Oyo and beyond, “Osun’s head is missing, bring me head of the man who took it.” Ara captivated by Osun’s beauty and wiles was content to gaze at her. He tried to impress her and sang to her, “Brass and parrot feathers on a velvety skin. Pure white cowries dangle from firm dark buttocks.” Osun laughed and did her best to hide her contempt for the rough man that thought he could win her heart with songs. Osun soon tired of his attention and thought of ways to escape. She threw her sixteen cowries, and sought the face of Esu, “what would befall her?” The cowries said she’ll be safe, but she had a lesson to learn.

Ara couldn’t hide her for long because paths don’t close to water. She took evening strolls and when she had seen enough of Itile, she walked back to Ara’s house. She wove the hair of women and she examined their lives and destinies. She taught them her sixteen cowries. She sat in front of Ara’s house and wove the hair of Itile women. In her hands she held the balance of their lives—past, present, and future. The children of the women flocked around Osun and begged her for treats. She made three treats made from beans—akara, ekuru, and olele. They fought for her bananas and oranges. They called her the mother with the coral combs and Osun’s heart sang.

Babalale and Babalele, the Oniltile’s in-laws, saved the Itile. They travelled to Seele and told the little king that hot earth had made their brother in-law to misbehave. “Osun lived happy in his domains.” Alaafin Sango didn’t retaliate by sending his warriors to the tiny kingdom of Itile. It was blood that stayed Sango’s hands. Sango and Ilemole were relatives. The sons and daughters of Onitile had the Abaja mefa of the Oyo, six marks of on each cheek. Ilemole was a son of the deposed Alaafin of Oyo, Ajaka, Sango’s half brother. This incident became a saying in
Oyo, “the cock of the Onitile crowed as far as Oyo. We heard it in our farms and towns and we did nothing.”
Osun’s war
During the war of Ido
Osun grew a beard
And she fought men with
Her brass fan and machete

The famous traveling ifa priest, Ojiyaomegun, had two students Ifon came from Ido, and Duuru from Liki. The three travelled together sleeping in strange towns and villages divining the destinies of people from the arrangements of stringed palrnuts. Ojiyaomegun threw his stringed opele on the face of his ifa tray and taught the words of Orunmila and the books of ifa. He explained the power of leaves, and barks, and roots. He made medicines from toadstools, mushrooms, and the fruits of trees.

At the main crossroad to Oyo, Ojiyaomegun gave Esu his dues and threw his opele to know if his sojourn in Oyo would be good. He read his opele and led his students down the road to the Akesan market. The market broke into jubilation when they heard the wise man would reside in Oyo for a couple of days. Osun heard of his arrival before anyone in the Aafin. She sent her son Osi Efa to bring him to her. The three travelers prostrated on the floor and greeted Osun.

“Our mother we greet you,” Ojiyaomegun said.

“My mother greets you,” Osi Efa said.

“Welcome,” she said, I made light amala and a pot of vegetable soup for you with my own hands.”

“Ah that is too much mother.” The ifa priest said.

“Eat, then you will inquire from my inner head why it troubles me.”
Ojiyamegun threw his stringed opele on the ifa tray and after the faint poof of yellow power cleared from the face of the tray, he saw that Osun would have many children. He could see her many happy and healthy babies.

“Many have told me the same,” Osun said.

“Have many told you not to be jealous of your other wives’ children?”

“But a woman who isn’t jealous can’t cook good soup.”

“For your husband maybe, not against children.”

“I hear you wise one.”

“The children are here. Only be obedient.”

Osun loaded the men with presents and sent them away. She slept happy that day and dreamed. She saw her many children. They crowded around her and danced for her. Osun fed them with akara until they fell alseep with fat bellies and smiles. Abebi drew quietly upon Osun’s akete. The Ayaba even in sleep had many lines of worry on her face. Abebi sat on the inside of the door and waited for her to wake. Osun opened her eyes and saw Abebi. The slave knelt and said, “I heard news of the people of Ido. They were attacked by rogue warriors who carried away, women and children. The town is no longer itself.” Osun sat up in anger, “who dares to do my benefactors harm. Tell my son to see now.” Abebi fled from her mother, the old Osun she knew well. Osi Efa rushed into Osun’s presence afraid. Abebi didn’t tell him anything. Osun told him her plan, “promise me you will not tell my husband until I am far from Oyo.”

Osun led a contingent of Eso to Ido. The royal guards took a few of their war-boys and rode behind her. She knew the raiders would not be expecting a reprisal. She knew the town of Ido well and waylaid them at Agilinti junction. She fought with her bass fan and machete cutting down the heads of the warriors that dared to come at her. Many fled before her screaming, they
said she resembled a demon of the forest who had a beard. She and her Eso led the captured people back to Ido and they returned to Oyo.

When Alaafin Sango heard of what Osun did. He laughed, “only a warrior wife can marry a warrior husband.”
Osi Efa in Ketu

Whoever can straighten a hunchback’s hump

Can breakdown this town

Ketu sits on a hunchback and the spells of an old mother

And its foundations are set

Sango sent Osi Efa to Ketu, so his tortured mind would let him sleep at night. “Go ask about the time Osun spent in Ketu. I want to know what she did but don’t tell her you go to Ketu.” Osi Efa took with him the blue-green segi beads of Ife, the aso-oke of Oyo, and salt of Apomu as gifts to the Alaketu, the king at Ketu. Ketu sat between Ibariba and Sabe kingdoms, a major stop on the highway to Ajase. “Go talk about trade Osi Efa but use all of your body to bring back what actually happened.”

Osu efa’s green and red emroidered fan dangled from his left wrist. He travelled with five other junior Ilari. They followed behind his horse in a singe file, and paths wound around lush green forests. Kafilegboin—Stand-Fast—led the junior four halfheads. They didn’t talk, and they walked before servants who carried bundles and baskets of gifts. The Alaafin told the Ilari spies to tred the land of Ketu gently and find out if Ketu would defend their neigbours to north. Oyo knew a Ketu prince recently married an Ibariba princess, such ties Oyo knew were fickle, but knowledge of where Ketu leaned would be useful. The Ilari posed as traders and departed from Osi Efa to five major markets west Oyo, there they would gather more information on Ketu and Ibariba ties.

Osi Efa crossed into Bariba territory, and he rode for a full day before he got to Nikki. He watched pairs of horses race against each other in a village square. They sprinted down a path lined by a cheering crowd and they threw red dust on the rowdy crowd. The King at Nikki sat
under a tent at the end of the track and two standing servants fanned him. The winning horses were from Bornu or Barbary and they galloped to the finish leaving behind the smaller local breeds. When a local breed bested an of the exotic one the people shouted louder, this was one of theirs. Osi Efa’s horse snorted excitedly at the race. The Eunuch pulled its head away from the crowd and nudged his horse out of Nikki towards the great market at Ketu.

* 

Osi Efa walked through Oja nla that held every five days outside Ketu’s gates. Gun, Fon, Ahori, and Egba peoples traded in the market. The Ketu had familiar marks on their cheeks, three of four horizontal marks on each cheek. Hungry, he bought a roasted corn from a woman and sat under a tree to eat. In a corner, a man worked on a piece of work, chipping away slivers of wood with a chisel and hammer. He tried to guess what he was making but he couldn’t, it was too early.

“Are you an Ilari from Oyo?” the corn seller said.

“Yes, how did you guess?” Osi Efa said.

“Your green and red fan.” she said.

“Ah,” he said.

“We heard of the sorjourn of an Oyo Ayaba in our area.”

“You did?”

“A beautiful one.”

“Ah.”

“Men vied for her hand, but she kept to herself.”

“She did?”

“Regal but accomodated the women and children.”
Ketu sat behind the massive double earthen walls closed in by the Idena Gate, a huge enclosure within a break in the walls. The doors of Idena Gate pivoted on blocks of stone, and a moat filled with water and stakes circled the walls. Two giant pillars held up the defense breastwork wall infront of the Idena Gate. Osi Efa approached the gates and a big tree divided his path into two. He walked to the other side of the tree and stepped on one of five planks placed across the moat. He waved his green and red fan at the Ketu sentries, and one of them walked with him through another set of gates, smaller than the first one. Osi Efa stopped again at the inner porch of Idena Gate’s massive gatehouse. He looked at the rafters of the huge overhanging thatched roof that stood on thick tree trunks. The roof hid more the sentries watching the movement of people in and out of Ketu. Osi Efa’s neck kinked as he stared at the three level-thatched roof that the Ketu said could be removed quickly incase of fire. He couldn’t decide if the Idena Gate was bigger than Ife’s Enu Geeru Gate.

A sentry told him to wait in the shade of a verandah one of the courtyards that received dignitaries. He waited for visit to be announced to the Aleketu. Around him, people moved in and out of the gate, women and men carried baskets of goods on their heads. The sentries collected a toll of five cowries from visitors. Ketu served as an important halt to the many peoples in the hinterland travelling east towards the fortified town of Tado, and Nuatja, as such many tongues were spoken within its walls. The gatehouse was airy, and the smell of unwashed bodies of travellers didn’t linger within it. Osi Efa wrapped his sleeveless top around his body to keep out the cool evening winds, and his hand touched the aroko from the Alaafin—speak your mind, it said. Ketu’s progenitor Sopasan was older than Oyo’s Oranyan, so Osi Efa knew Oyo
sent him to its elder. He would walk and talk as a younger one does to an elder. Then sentry came back and led him through a gate by the side of the gatehouse, which finally opened into the town of Ketu.

Ketu sat on a badly watered laterite plateau. The sources of its drinking water were long walks away, unlike the kingdoms to the east where towns and villages had several sources of water. Ketu had no springs or streams within its walls only dry wells that were fickle as the seasons. Far off the major trade routes, only little trade trickled in into Ketu’s big and small markets. But the Ketu were peaceful, and many traders preferred the slow trade with little gain to the crowded and tense markets of Apomu, Ominrinmirin and Ikorodu.

Osi Efa prostrated before the Alaketu, the builder of the walls, as his people called him. Sa Epo plugged the gaping hole in the southern end of Ketu and gained more land by taking in the land of the indigenous people. He also built barbicans to protect his archers on the walls; and made the ditches around the walls deeper. A sentry at the gate had told him the walls were completed by two giants, Ajibodu and Oluwudu. Osi Efa couldn’t help himself, he had scoffed. The sentry dragged him to a side of wall and showed him huge fingerprints on the insides of the wall left by the giants. He didn’t have anything to say after that.

Epo, the eighteenth Alaketu looked at the Ilari, his face passive. He sat on leather cushions under the verandah that overlooked a courtyard and surrounded by ten noblemen. Esaba sat to the Alaketu’s left, Esiki to his right, the others formed a half circle round the Alaketu, and they sat on mats.

A messenger from the courts of a younger brother,” said Esaba.

“Speak,” said Esiki.
“The Alaafin sends his greetings and a message,” Osi Efe said. He handed the aroko to the Esiki who passed it around the room, “the Alaafin sent me to you because of the Ibariba root about in our backyard.”

“Ibariba?” Esiki said.

“North of you,” Osi Efa said.

“We know what lays to our north,” Esaba said.

“Was there not a peace treaty during the last Oyo/Ibariba war?” Esiki said.

“Alaafin seeks the eyes and ears of a brother,” Osi Efa said.

“Why?” the Alaketu said.

“May you live long. He asks me to remind Ketu of our mother’s oja.”

“I need no reminding.” Alaketu said.

“Leave us for a while” Esaba said “to the Ilari, and a palace servant escorted Osi Efa out.

* 

“The hunchback and the charms of Ya Mapere the medicine woman keeps us safe. We war not.” Elegba said. The other two chiefs responsible for the spiritual health of Ketu, Esaba’s assistants Ajina and Era grunted their accent. Alaketu Sa spoke to the of the Ketu Ilari at his feet, “draw a line.” The Ilari drew a white line of the earth og the Ketu Aafin. Alaketu climbed off his chair, and the court bowed their faces to the ground, then he stood on the line. “To the north lies the Ibariba, to the East Oyo, in this matter Ketu stands on the line,” he said.

“We will broker peace.” Esiki said.

“Alaafin reminds us of our mother Omonide’s oja and peace is what we will do,” Esaba said.
The Alaketu pointed to the shrine that housed the piece of cloth Oduduwa wife used to secure her children on her back, “our mother left us the the piece of cloth to remind us we came from one woman and to take care of our siblings. But as we do so we must not also bring fire into our town.” “True. True,” the Ketu royal court murmured. Alalumon whose hunter ancestor led the second Alaketu Ede to the present site of Ketu said, “When Sopasan left Ife, he and his followers crossed Ogun River then walked along one of its tributaries River Oyan,” the court nodded, “then they stopped at Oke Oyan for awhile before my ancestor led Prince Owe to this plateau.”

“True, true.” The court said.
The Alaketu sat down, “Oyo didn’t exist then,” he said.

“Ketu recognizes Ile-Ife and our blood ties with the Alaafin, but we won’t fight for Oyo,” Esiki said.

“Bring back the Ilari,” Esaba said.

Osi Efa, the Oyo Ilari returned into the presence of the Aleketu, and tried to interpret the disposition of the court towards the Alaafin’s message. He prostrated before Sa and greeted the court. Alalumon the chief hunter said, “my hunters will hunt in Ibariba’s open lands and will see.”

“We will send word to Oyo if we hear or see,” Esaba said.

“We remember our ties,” Esiki said.

A Ketu Ilari took Osi Efa to the house he would sleep in. They walked by the main buildings of the Aafin which was well secured. A long verandah ran around the frontage of the Aafin, and the walls of the Aafin were pierced so a person inside could look outside to Ketu without being seen. The Ketu Ilari stopped outside a building and led Osi Efa to his room.
Outside his room, a small market opened, oil lamps flickered alive, and a gentle wind made them dance to the rhythm of light and shadows. The noise from small evening market lulled him to sleep, and the heavy food he ate earlier, pounded yam and egusi helped also. He wasn’t fooled by his welcome, he knew outside his room patrolled several Aafin guards. He could not leave Ketu until the Alaketu decrees it so.

It rained during the night, and in his sleeo Osu Efa heard water drip from the eaves into pots. When lightning flashed across Ketu’s skies and pushed into his room he smiled, and he felt the presence of Alaafin. In the morning, a Ketu Ilari brought him word from Sa the Alaketu, “May peace follow you home.” Osi Efa bathed and left before many awoke in the Ketu Aafin, but he felt many eyes on him. His feet were heavy and not because of the sticky mud that held on to them. The earth swelled with rain from yesternight. He slipped and nearly fell as he stepped out of the Aafin’s gates. At Idena Gates, he walked through the other side of the fallen tree in the middle of the path. A change in the lane of the road used by travelers. The position of the fallen tree changed every new month. Osi Efa noted he had spent a month outside Oyo.

The day after Osi Efa left Ketu, the wooden doors of Idena Gate closed on their own and Ketu locked in a confused kingdom. The arms of the gates had swung slowly pushing against the sentries that heaved against it, trying to stop its movement. It took its time; the gates allowed many witnesses to see that it closed on its own accord. Alaketu Epo called his council into session, “what is going on?” he said.

“The Idena gate sensed danger from the east,” Elegba said, “and it closed to protect us.”
The Land dispute

The earth uses a hoe to cut its hair
Its hair tangles in trees and grass
And only the farmer
Dares to cut its hair
Nobody owns the earth

Agbejaile, the one who defends the earth, settled land and boundary issues on behalf of the Alaafin Oyo. The Ilari’s judgments were inviolable, and everyone knew this. His didn’t need his green and red fan to announce his office. His walk and speech did here was a man filled with the authority of Oyo. In the village of Kuta, a man had given a piece of land to a friend from another village. The grandchildren of the original owner told the grandchildren of the friend to return the land to them. When they didn’t return it, the other grandchildren took the case to the village chief. He tried to settle the dispute but both parties rejected his decision. The village chief he took the matter to the the village’s baba kekere in Oyo, Samu. As the small father of Kuta, Samu a member of the Oyo Mesi sought a way to fill his pockets. He didn’t know how it would happen, but he put his mind to work. The land disputed spread over a fourth of Kuta farmland. A fat land that yielded in abundance big juicy oranges that were known all over Oyo. Samu took the case to Basorun, the Oyo prime minister, and told him of his interest, “My eyes are on that land, Basorun.” Basourn shook his head, you mean your heart.” He dispatched Agbejaile to Kuta on behalf of the Alaafin.

The meeting held in the verandah of the Kuta chief. The chief sat on on a chair beside him sat Agbejaile too, their seats were higher than eveyone’s in the meeting. The bustle of the Kuta market could be heard by the people of the room. The man who had gifted his friend the
land and the friend were not present, they died years ago. Their grandchildren, however were alive and everyone in the meeting could see that they didn’t subscribe to the friendship of their grandfathers. They sat on opposites sides of the room, glaring at each other.

“Olapetu and Babarinlo families,” Agbejaile said, how can the Alaafin help you.”

“Our grandfather, told my father, his first son that when his first grandchild was born the land should return to our family, said the head of the Olapetu family.

“Where is your father?” Agbejaile said.

“He is no longer with us,” the Kuta chief said.

“Did any of you know of this?” Agbejaile asked the Babarinlo head.

“No. Infact our grandfather told us that his friend extended the land gift after the birth of his first grandchild, from the Iroko tree to the outcrop of rocks near the Ode stream.

“Ah Ah, why don’t you cut off our necks then,” Olapetu head said.

“They have been harvesting the oranges our grandfather grew on the land,” Babarinola head said.

“The land that reverted back to us when I was born,” said the Olapetu head.

“But you both know the law, land lessor must look down, and never look up.” Agbejaile said, the fruit trees aren’t yours.”

“We do. It is our land.”

“But it our land.”

“And I have had enough of this shouting fight.” Agbejaile said, we meet again tomorrow.

In the evening, the Babarinlo family filled Agbejaile with palm wine from Samu and pan roasted goat meat. He slept with his stomach filled with Samu’s palm wine. In the morning,
because he could, he pronounced that the former landowners were now tenants on their ancestors’s land.

“From hence forth the Babarinlo would lease the land from the odan tree to the Iroko tree till perpetuity from the Olapetu, the ase of the Alaafin binds these words and makes them law.”

Esu shook his head from the crossroads at Kuta, and said, “When the child of man acts. They don’t think of the consequences of their action, but when the Orisa acts, they cry that the action of the Orisa isn’t fair. I have seen; therefore, I will do.”
The Siege of Ipokia

The end and the beginning

When one frog sold for 200 cowries

Ipokia was not taken.

In the fifth year of Sango’s reign, in the Epo provinces of Oyo, an attack on a small town became a siege that lasted for over a year. The Alaafin sent some of his troops to learn to war using one of the Epo villages, he chose Ipokia. “Toy with them, but do not wipe them off the dusty bowl they live in.” He sent foot warriors and archers to Ipokia to learn how to fight in forests. Ipokia forest existed within a dry plain, of scraggy trees who roots journeyed deep into the earth to sustained them. Only one water hole sustained the small town and the farming hamlets around it. Most of its one river hid underground, and the rest of it seeped out of the ground watering the tangle of tall forest trees in the dry bowl like valley. Ipokia provided many strong farmhands for the farms of Oyo. Its sons left home as soon as they could make a yam heap or cut down grass. The Ipokia valley happened at the very end of the sahel savannah and the beginning of the desert and its young men couldn’t resist the pull of fertile metropolitan Oyo.

They were one of the many indigenous peoples subsumed into the kingdoms founded by the conquering Oduduwa progeny, the people of Ipokia were hardy. Ipokia remembered its modest origins and did its best to keep itself alive. They learned to make the best of their lives. They never complained of the scarcity of water or the fickleness of their land. They cut cisterns in the rocks that surrounded the town, and they used the rain collected to irrigate their farms outside—one harvest a year was all their land could give.

Ipokia knew Oyo marched out against it long before they arrived at their gates. The Oyo army raised a dust storm that could be seen from far away. The few traders that came for
Ipokia’s yam harvest left for their homes, this wasn’t their fight. Oyo showed up at Ipokia’s walls, proud and noisy. Ipokia saw it as a weed trying to choke them, and like they did on their farms everyday. They didn’t complain but shut their gates and told them to go away. The gates of Ipokia didn’t open for a delegation wearing a garland of akoko leaves to show they surrendered, neither did they drape a white cloth over the walls.

Oyo hemmed the small town in on all sides until the very air it breathed passed through the walls of Oyo warriors before it got to the people of Ipokia. Four Oyo warlords camped under an Aka tree and discussed how to conquer this little town they could see. Osi sat over Eketa, Ekerin and Ekefa drew out a plan of attack. Outside, Oyo warriors chopped a wide path through the forest, making may room to get to Ipokia. Only two paths led to the Ipokia, only two could walk on it side by side. When the opened the forest, sand storms from the desert rushed into the Ipoka valley. Ipokia sent spies into the camp. They climbed out of the bowl and walked around the edge of the sprawling camp, “they are children pretending to be men,” the spies reported. Ipokia warriors concealed themselves in the thickets and attacked the Oyo from the rear at night. The town had tunnels that opened to the plains, to the site of the camp of the Oyo.

The forests that surrounded Ipokia clinged to it’s the town wall, and stout creepers trailed the wall. Its poisonous seeds caused itchy rashes that swelled up with pus. Oyo knew Ipokia’s best defence and stayed away from the seeds. Ipokia warriors only manned the parts of the wall without the covering of green, the gates. In those points, they had a high tower and from the vantage point they watched the Oyo spread before them.

Both sides taunted themselves. The drums of each side sang praise and abused the other side. If not for the siege and the skirmishes of the Ipokia into the Oyo camp, the assembly would
have passed for a festival, and Oyo warriors danced out of range of the Ipokia arrows. Ipokia
sentries were entertained by the Oyo that had travelled from afar just to dance at their gates.

“An elder that doesn’t respect himself shall be disgraced. He shall be dragged along the
ground, his mouth stiffed with dust,” said the drums of Ipokia.

“You won’t do that not to this elder, or your heads will be crushed,” said the Oyo drums.

*

Oyo launched its first attack on the Ipokia walls two weeks after they arrived, but they
were repelled. From the slits in the mud wall, Ipokia archers picked out the approaching Oyo
warriors trying to surmount the town walls. Some Oyo warriors ran back to the camp and they
were they killed in their camp. “Oyo does not retreat,” Ekafa shouted, as he looked down at the
dead bodies, we die brave.” The next unit of warriors knew they could not turn back. They
climbed over the wall, but the creepers got them before they could reach the other side and they
to the scratching the boils that formed on their skin.

*

Surprise attacks were launched by first light, and spears hurled by the Oyo at the Ipokia
walls followed whizzing arrows that glanced off the earthen ramparts. Some were caught within
the tangle of poisonous creepers. The Ipokia expected the attacks. They could hear the noise of
the Oyo warriors clambering through the forest, and the nosiy half they left behind in their camp
above, in the plains. Oyo Warriors made for the gate to wrestle it out of the possession of the
Ipokia. The plan failed. Ipokia archers picked them out from their high towers with arrows
before they could reach it. They fell back to a distance beyond the reach of the arrow and
watched the main gate of Ipokia. Oyo knew that Ipokia had another gate, in the hind parts of the
town. They launched a simultaneous attack sometimes, but the small contingent of Ipokia
sentries at the back rallied and found ways to repel the attack. The poisoned creepers helped them a lot and after each Oyo attack the stopped, the Ipokia warriors lined up on their walls and began to sing.

The dead

Have met those that will kill them

It is not by force

Or a lot of noise

The one you meet in the homestead is the father of the house

And the Oyo usually didn’t have a reply to this particular song.

*

Inside the walled town of Ipokia Ajayi knocked on his neighbour’s door. His neighbour, Gbenro peeled a yam tuber threw it under a basket and hurriedly placed folded clothes on it. Ajayi heard his neighbour rush about inside, he also heard lots of shoving. “Are you alright?” he called.

“I am,” Gbenro said.

The door opened slightly, and Gbenro held on to his door, “how can I help you?”

“Morning my neighbour I heard some kere kere sounds as I walked past your house.”

“My house? You must have heard wrong.”

“Ah I know what I heard. The sound of a sharp knife peeling a yam.”

“That was nothing I was sharpening my farm machet.”

“But you have a fire in your hearth and I heard you throw something on the floor.”

“Ah that fire, I lit it to warm my bones.”

“On this warm morning?”
“Yes. I woke up with a cold.”

“But I know what I heard.”

“Maybe it is the wax in your ear tumbling about?”

“Will you let go of your door and help me look into my ear.”

“Look into your ear?”

“Yes, both.”

“This is enough neighbor, walk on. You tire me.”

* 

The Ekerin, one of the warlords captured a young woman of Ipokia. He caught her foraging in one of the farms surrounding the village wall. The girl’s aged parents had begged over the wall that the girl be returned, and they would persuade their chief to surrender but the Ekerin didn’t listen. The woman told Ekerin about the tunnel that opened into the plain. It led back to the the walls and continued into the inner walls of the Aafin. Ekerin boldened by this story and hungry for glory gathered a group of warriors and snuck out of the camp.

In the southside of the wall, the Odan River, now a shallow pool circled a part of the wall before disappearing into the tangle of green underbrush. The girl pointed to a spot, Ekerin didn’t see anything. He motioned to a warrior, “check,” he mouthed. The war-boy got on his hands and feet and saw a hole in the wall. A small hole covered with shards of broken pottery. Ekerin removed the covering from mouth of the hole and told the girl to poke her head into it. She did. When nothing happened to her, they dragged her out and a couple of warriors went through the wall. Ekerin nudged the girl to do the same and he followed her. On the other side of the Ipokia walls, the warriors waited for Ekerin and the girl. It was quiet about the town, but they could
hear the Odan River, seeping through the walls. Ekerin pushed the girl, “lead the way to Aafin, he said. She led them into the cluster of compounds ahead. They could see no light within them.

The girl took a turn and disappeared. She screamed into the darkness, “there are strangers in our midst.” Ekerin and his men moved back into the darkness, they could hear warriors running their way. The warriors saw the glint of Oyo agedengbe and they headed for it. The Ipokia dove after the Oyo scappering about in the dark space. In the scuffle Ekerin escaped, retraced his way back to the hole in the wall, and stumbled back into the the forest leaving his men behind.

In the morning, the Oyo camp awoke with talk about the Odan River attack and the warriors lost. A dirge arose from the camp, and they mourned the brave warriors. The younger warriors looked at Ekerin who had abandoned his men. He became a stench to them and they chose which of his commands to obey, and Ekerin couldn’t do anything about the insolence of the war boys.

This supposed quick training exercise, teach some young boys how to fight in the forrest and come home, baecame the Ipokia siege. It dragged on for too long and famine broke out. The provisions the Oyo brought from home were exhausted. They had left not a single wrap of ekuru. The Oyo ate palnnuts, roots, and whatever else they could gather from the forests, and even that became scarce. And on the otherside, the smell from Ipokia pots stopped wafting up into the Oyo camp. Ipokia store houses were empty, and the year’s harvest couldn’t be brought in from their farms because Oyo camped outside their gates. Ipokia sold the little it had in the square infront of the chief’s compound. One smoked frog went for 200 cowries and even the chief couldn’t buy it. Women from villages loyal to Oyo, a day away from Ipokia heard of the famine, and started a three-day market at the back of the Oyo camp. The women sold to anyone that had cowries, even
the Ipokia that could sneak past the Oyo. The price of a measure of garri trippled, palm oil and salt were beyond what anybody could afford. As the siege progressed, the temporary Oyo camp took the semblance of a town and the palmfrond tents of the Oyo warlords became houses and some sent word for their wives come to Ipokia.

The hungry Oyo war-boys began to desert the camp, and scuffles broke out among the ones that didn’t leave. A fight for a lizard caused the death of four men. They fought over who first saw it scampering through grasses. Two men poked out the eyes of the other when he said he saw it first. Another cut off the hand of the other for making a grab at the dead lizard. The four men fought to death and nobody bothered to separate them; they were too hungry to try.

* 

Inside the inner walls of Ipokia, in the corner farthest from the camp of Oyo, a woman sat on the floor before her on a mat was her starving son. She watched him breathe his last. She laid her hands on his chest and when it didn’t rise against her hand. She turned her back to his still warm body and began sing to Esu. “The one that hears all I speak to you, arise and fight my case. Break their cheeks and their necks. Let their shit not stop. Let them scatter and flee before Ipokia.” She went to the Esu’s shrine outside her hut and overturned her gourd of adi over the mound of laterite. She waited for a drop of adi to trickle down the gourd’s long neck. It took a long time for it to roll out. “It is the Oyo warriors outside the walls of Ipokia that seek your trouble give it to them. The smell of adi clouded Esu’s senses, and he threw confusion into the camp of Oyo.”

* 

Ekerin, looked his senior, Osi. He moved closer to him and slapped him across his face. Ekefa rubbed his eyes, and asked Eketa if his ears had heard a slap or a thunder clap. Osi’s hand
held his cheek, and his eyes reddened with anger and shame. Ekerin could not bring himself to beg because his tongue lay dead in his mouth. Osi took an ado hanging from his neck and poured a pinch of the powder on his palm. He blew it into Ekerin’s face and walked out of the tent. The Oyo camp rose, as if a commander beckoned to it. Each unit wore their war clothes and charms and turned to fight with the unit beside it. Ekerin could hear the ground shake beneath him. He could smell the dust that their feet raised. He could hear the cry of warriors. He heard them sing death chants. He saw them die. Ekerin stood rooted to a spot. He saw darkness creep around him. He remembered two things before the tiny light before him disappeared—he craved for water and a spot on his right toe itched.

Ipokia watched the ragged Oyo troop leave, and for the first time in nearly a year they walked freely out of the main gates. Ekerin heard them come, many feet walking through the forest. He lay where they had left him, flies were all over him, ants crawled over him. He heard people hiss over his body. They had their hands over their noses. He shouted at them, but they couldn’t hear him. One of them grabbed his leg and dragged him out of the tent. The people followed his body, clapping and jeering at the thing of shame Oyo left behind. At the rock where Odan bubbled out of the earth, a man raised an agbedegbe and lopped off Ekerin’s head and the Odan stream flowed swiftly again.

*
Arokin’s Song: The House of Heads

It is with my hands that I chose my life
It is my inner head that I worship
I let the Orisa be

The master of the house of heads watched as humans came into his house to choose their heads, the inner ones. He saw them dip their hands into earthen pots. They chose eyes and mouth and legs and hands. They chose their destinies, great or small. They chose their parents, their lineage and compound. They chose to have children or not. They chose beauty. They chose fame and wealth. They chose poverty or a life of worries. He saw them dip their hands into beautiful pots thinking the held beautiful choices. A boy chose the ability to dance, and another chose the ability to laugh. A girl chose dimples and a gap tooth. Some women chose beauty and forgot about character, some chose good characters and were beautiful. Some choose strong inner heads. Others chose a sad life and took joy in doing bad and harming others. Some chose heads that will drive their persons away from wealth and thrive in poverty. Others chose inner heads that wealth clinged no matter what they did.

Sometimes, in the many lives that people lived on earth, they chose the same live and lived through their previous mistakes. Others chose another life and gave ancestors a chance to live again in the younger bodies of their descendants. At the gate to his house, the Olu-Bode the master of the house of heads sat and attested to the choices made. He saw them walk by inner beauty, they ignored it for the outside one—the gaudy one, the fickle, the time dependent one. And lost out on goodness and peace. He reported back to Olodumare and both witnessed the choices made.
But in the world below that of Olodumare, beyond the house of Olu-Bode, in the faces of ifa trays, a Babalawo or iynifa would through his opele or read his seeds or cowries of sixteen and remind the man and woman sitting before them of their choices in Olu-Bode’s house.

“Without the head, the body is useless. The person lives a useless life, until he chooses again in the house of the master of heads.” They never remember or understand what they chose. Mothers would shake their heads and cry, unably to understand the life chosen by the baby in her hands.

“But as you chose with your hands, the ifa priest would say, “this baby chose too.” Sometimes, some have their destinies shortchanged by the powers that be or the sixteen ajogun evils that roam the space below Olodudumare, but for only a while, until these destinies right themselves. Or sometimes Esu allows destinies to change, he makes inner heads come to crossroads and he brings options into their paths, that will change the course of their lives in this world, if Olodumare wishes it.

*
Osun the owner of coral combs
The owner of red parrot tail feathers
The owner of brass bangles and machetes
Creates a path in inner heads with her coral combs
And she sees far into chosen destinies

Osun walked to her kobi and sat on a stool and a seemingly unending line of girls and women appeared by her right. One by one, the women and girls sat before her on a lower stool. Osun used her coral comb to section their different hairs. She touched her finger to shea butter in a pot and the greased their scalps. She wove their hair and her rows of brass bangles clinked as she worked, soothing. One by one the mothers from the tree in the night market came to a queue by her left and she wove their hair into the suku hairstyle. She spoke words to their heads, and they laughed with her. With each row, she told them of her pains for a child and they cried with her. Osun put brass combs in their hair. She also stood bright red parrot feather in the coiffure. She altered the outward of each woman. The women left Osun’s kobi happy and beautiful.

The cries of children replaced the silence of the women’s departure. Osun jumped to her feet and ran around looking for the children. She stuck her coral comb in her suku and reached for her brass machete. She slashed vines and weeds and cut paths in tangled forests. She found them huddled together under a tree, cold and hungry. She scooped them all on the her back and strapped them on with a wide oja. They called her mother and held her tight. Osun sighed if only this happiness would follow her out of her dreams.

* 

Esu walked into the dreams of the women and watched them rearrange destiny by taking care of their outer heads. He stood by the crossroads and Osun’s coral comb realigned.
inner heads with the outer ones with the prophesies she read from her sixteen cowries.

The Shooting Star

His life is marked with blood

His feet walk deep in pools of blood.

This big star fell from the skies, and it flashed across Oyo’s night sky before it dipped into the Greater River. Despite countless twinkling stars that lit up the night sky, its path flashed clear for all to see. Many eyes watched it dip into the skyline, into the crown of trees, or the space between two roofs. Not one person saw it touch the ground, many children said said they saw it fly over their compounds. Oyo asked themselves, who would die soon. Only a person great indeed, for the star’s light shone so bright.

In Iwauwun, a town set on the summit a rock that rose sharply from a plain saw the star shoot across their sky. Its drums belched out the town’s fear and news of this didn’t get to Oyo. “A star brighter than lightning has fallen,” Iwawun drums said, “the star touched the earth in Iwawun.” But even if Sango heard of the message of Iwawun drums, he wouldn’t attack Iwawun. An impregnable wall hewn out of solid rock protected it. And Iwawun could survive a siege for more than a year, they’d done it twice.

Instead Sango sent out Bayanni termites to the areas the star might have touched the earth, but they came back empty, they heard nothing of the the landing of the stone. The stone had not landed on the earth with a thud, or on another stone with a crack. It landed in water with a plop. In the land of the Tapa, the twelve beni priest heard the plunge. It awakened them from their sleep, and the waters of the Greater River began to recede.
The war at Kishi

An unjustified rebellion stinks

A justified one smells like good soup

Adeyeye, the coronet king of Kishi openly riled against the Alaafin’s new tariffs. Oyo required that twenty and one pots of palm oil be sent to it every month. This small town could pay this without starving itself to death. Adeyeye knew the end had come for Kishi, but what would history say about Kishi. He wanted people to point to the road that leads to his town and say, “down that road was a town, but it is no more.” But his reply to the new tariff, a mere murmur, bounced into the ears of the Ilari, Eti-Oba nile, Eti Oba loko – the ears of the Alaafin at home and abroad, by way of greedy Kishi noblemen. Adeyeye words: “Has the Alaafin turned into an Orisa that he now drinks palm oil like one.” Nobody answered him, and Adeyeye knew he had said too much. He turned to the Ilari, “tell the Alaafin to think about Kishisi. It is but a small town.” His words did little to cancel out the ones that had gone before.

By the time Adeyeye’s words got to Oyo, it had changed. It had gone through ten highway toll gates, and carried in the hearts of seven Ilari, who handed his words to another and saw it fit to add more to it. They felt slighted that a tiny town like Kishi could talk back to the Alaafin. Eti Oba nile, Eti Oba loko had fallen sick in the town after Kishi. As he lay shivering under layers of clothes to keep him warm. He passed on Adeyeye’s reply to the most senior Ilari at the town’s toll gates. The Alaafin cannot wait for him to be well before he got the reply to his message. In the hands of the seven other Ilari the words of Adeyeye grew branches. When Adeyeye’s words, which were no longer his words were spoken to the Alaafin, they fell like huge stones rolling over a cliff, and they shook the walls of the Kaa Idi Obi at the audacity of the words. The Alaafin rose, smoke billiowed out of his nose. The Oyo Mesi postrated on the floor,
rolled on the mats, and they begged that the Alaafin try to contain his anger. Breathing hard, eyes blazing Alaafin sat down back on the throne. He grabbed his horse whisk and shook it at the Ilari that lay on the floor, “Tell the Adeyeye, that I said he should demolish his father’s compound and turn it into a refuse dump. Tell him that I said, he should kill all his family members, and then hang himself publicly in the village square.” Then the Alaafin stormed out of the throne room.

The Oyo Mesi rose from the floor worried. When noblemen were killed like common men they knew their lives were no longer safe. They looked at each and didn’t speak the words bouncing about in their insides. They swallowed them and kept their lips shut. This couldn’t talk here. They walked out of the kobi, slowly and said, “Home, we will talk at home.”

By the time the reply from the Alaafin got back to Kishi, Eti-Oba-loko-nile was better. When he heard the reply of the Alaafin, he knew that something must have happened to Adeyeye’s reply. An Ilari repeated the message delivered to the Alaafin to Eti-Oba-loko-nile, “I, Adeyeye, invite the stupid braggart that lives in that pisshole called Oyo to come to Kishi himself and drink the palmoil he craves.” Eti Oba Loko Nile knew the end for Kishi had come, but the people of Kishi stood behind their Oba. Why should this happen to man who stood up for them? Adeyeye will not commit suicide. They wanted him as their king.

Adeyeye gathered his people round him, “death has decided to live with us,” he said, “we run we die, we fight we die. What should we do?”

“We fight. We fight. We fight,” his people chanted round him.

“And we die,” Adeyeye said.

*
Oyo warriors camped in the home forest surrounding Kishi. Olu Ode and Gbonka didn’t go against tiny Kishi. They sent their lieutenants, Otun and Osi and Asipa to swat the flies that whinned around the Alaafin’s ears. Their lieutenants didn’t go too, they sent their own lieutenants, Ekarun and Ekefa.

Kishi knew the warriors were coming, so they sent their old and children away. The ones that remained knew if they all go to Oyo and beg, nothing would come of it. The Alaafin’s words do not return to him without his intent being fulfilled. Kishi stocked up food, made itself ready for the coming war.

Oyo launched its first wave of attack on the Kishi walls, “Oyo doesn’t take insults from pisshole tributaries,” Ekefa shouted as the war boys charged. They need not have bothered to come. The town was empty. Ekefa walked about the town and the empty town echoed his words. He saw a crippled man Kishi left behind, “where is your cowardly king?” The man pointed to a path in the home forest. Ekefa sent a group of his best after the fleeing party, they caught up with him in two days. Ekarun beheaded Adeyeye before his family and brought his head back to Oyo. His five sons were taken captive and brought to Oyo, they became slaves of the princes. Oyo warriors pulled down Kisihi. Its roofs were razed, and walls pulled down, and not one hut did they leave standing in. Kishi did become a by word in Oyo. When an Oyo heard another murmur against the Alaafin. They quickly walked away from the person. “Do not speak such words near me. Remember Kishi.”
Oba Aleti Kara Bi Ajere
The king who has ears
And eyes all over his body
listened in deadly silence
Watched in deep darkness

He walked to the Aafin walls, and his hands felt for the holes cut into the walls at intervals. He aligned his eyes to them and looked at his domains spread out before him. The six provinces of Oyo slept, as he could only see a few lamps in the distance. A darkness come in from the west and thick clouds covered the moon. He watched a large swathe of the metropolitan Oyo disappear from his view. Sango retired to his rooms, and he peered at the half moon outside. The half moon that exposed scandals and discontent and plots all over Oyo, but today he couldn’t hear anything. Blood rushed through his heart and he winced at the pain. His stomach heaved, and he sat up on his akete. He waited for his insides to settle and walked to the end of his room. The walls of the Aafin also have ears that hear and eyes that see. He pressed his ear to the wall of his room and heard whispers float about his room. He knew his people murmured songs of dissent before they beat the drums of open rebellion. The same thing happened to his brother Alaafin Ajaka. He could hear their songs.

During the reign of Ajaka, we used calabashes to measure cowries
During the reign of Sango, we used calabashes to pack our loads fleeing from war
During the reign of Ajaka, we ate meat and fish
During the reign of Sango, even the rich can’t afford meat or fish
During the reign of Ajaka, we wore sayan and etu
During the reign of Sango, we wear rags
A nameless man whispered into people’s ears that the Alaafin should be made to sleep. Sango scowled at the shadow. He asked Biri to throw light on the face of his enemy. The man’s identity shocked him. The Alaafin knew his noblemen stirred up dissent. He bypassed his Ilari and began his own investigations. He set traps for them. Word got out about his activities, and the plots died, but he could hear the whisper that he should sleep with his ancestors again, another faceless man revived it.

The Alaafin sent his Ilari, Oba ni ko fi gba gbe si, the-king-tells-you-to-forget to his chiefs and noblemen, but they sent the Ilari back with a question, “what should we forget?” He invited them to the Aafin, one by one, and asked them about the rumour. Like cowards they hid their words in their insides as sighs and grunts. They lied to him and denied they had anything to do with the rumours. But he knew them well, he could see them for what they truly were. The nobles knew the Alaafin couldn’t be overpowered suddenly. It will take the agreement and open confrontation of many

He heard whisps of voices in the Ogboni house at the Akesan’s market. They took a solemn oath of secrecy and mutual confidence in each other by breaking and eating kolanuts. But they were not all faithful to one another. Samu came to see him in the morning and divulged their secrets to the Alaafin. Sango listened to Samu’s lies and could barely control his fury. Samu told a different story from the whispers he heard. The other chiefs heard of Samu’s betrayal and came secretly to the Ona Efa, Oba’s Eunuch, and tried to talk their way out of the mess. Oba told Sango a version of what her Eunuch reported to him. He stopped talking to her and extended his disgust to her son. He knew that this wounded her deeply but he did this to protect the boy from
his anger. News of the wranglings in the Aafin got to the people and it signalled the start of the people’s insurrection. It burned like a bush fire in dry season throughout Oyo, and Esu fanned the fire because the people invoked the intervention of Olodumare.
Oba talks with her sons
A person carries the load of another on their head
And drags theirs along a dusty path
Only a mad one
    “Sit my son,” Oba said. Her son moved to her side and was about to sit on her akete. She stopped him, “no, infront of me so my eyes can see I have a son.” He sat before her, on a stool.
“We will have a strong talk like mother and son. You aren’t too young to know this.”
    “I’m listening mother.”
    “You need to know your place in your father’s house. You have two older brothers because you chose not to stay with me the three times you came earlier. You must find ways to be in the gaze of Oyo and court the approval of the Oyo Mesi and the king makers. You have to be cunning.”
    “What kind of a life is this mother?”
    “The worries of the rich are better than that of the poor.”
    “Call me my official son.”
*
Ona Efa, Oba’s eunuch had been expecting this summons from his mother. He prostrated before her, “why is your face hard mother?” he said.
    “I want to revisit Olu Ode and Gbonka’s disrespect of me.”
    “They must pay for their deeds in multiples.”
    “Ayaba Oya has the Alaafin’s ears.”
    “And we know what she wants most.”
“Tell Oya that I know where her skin is. Tell her I want her to whisper certain words in our husband’s ears.”

Sango sends gifts to Olu Ode and Gbonka

To catch a red monkey

One must behave like a red monkey

The two greedy warlords wanted more and more like the bottomless hole at in the Kotigbe caves, and their popularity rivaled the Alaafin. He sent them gifts not to beg, but to show he superiority. The magnanimous Alaafin forgave and would welcome back erring chiefs. Both men paraded themselves like kings in their part of town and their actions made Alaafin Sango seethe. The people knew they weren’t kings, but they feared them. Osun reported to Sango the case of the family at Ikoyi that deferred to Olu Ode for judgement in a case, “when you still breathe?”

Their mouths talked more now, in public gatherings they spewed their stupidity for all to hear. Gbonka even fed people once every ten days in his compound. Osun reported to the Alaafin that people ate so much that they staggered out of his compound clutching their full stomachs. Many vomited on his walls because they ate too much. The Alaafin Oyo hesitated to openly takes steps that will further strain his people’s opinion of him. He knew they grow tired of the many battles he commanded. It had been reported to him that a sizable number of them began to compare his brother Ajaka reign with his, some even openly said they wanted Ajaka on the throne.

Alaafin Sango didn’t fully trust the Oyo Mesi., Samu came by his backdoor to tell him that Olu Ode and Gbonka kept back the Alaafin’s share of the war plunder. “Infact,” he said
trying to get close to the person of the Alaafin only to be swatted away by an Ilari’s sword. He sat back on his haunches and shame fille his body. But because of greed he continued, ‘they raid towns outside Oyo now without your permission.” Alaafin dismiised him, Samu’s visit wasn’t out of his loyalty. His greed blinded him, but more importantly he knew there were cracks in the Oyo Mesi.

Sango called his wives to him to ask of their opinions, he knew they knew of this development already. Osun said, “You are death. Make them remember you are second to the Orisa, strip them of their titles.” Oya said, play on their rivalry, set them against each other like a knife and a whetting stone. Then sit far away from the chaos and watch sparks fly.” Oba said, “rumours, he should set rumours about them. It will tangle around their feet and cause them to fall. Be subtle, set the ones inside their own compounds against them.”

Gbonka and Olu Ode knew that gifts from the Alaafin could only mean two things. They were being rebuked or that they had provoked the anger the Fear that swallows fear. They knew the end of ths gift will result in something. These weren’t gifts, it wasn’t safe to be in the debt of those more powerful than you.
The one-eared robber

But the highway to Seele, the kingdom of the little king was taken over by two notable highway robbers, Kurakura, a freed slave, and Ogunfeyi. Kurakura, an accomplished thief, and Ogunfeyi, a condemned rapist, terrorized travellers. Mothers frightened their children with the robbers’ names and prayed that their sons don’t be like them. The Alaafin sent the Eso to clear the highway and bring back the vermin who had closed his road, dead or alive. They didn’t catch them but dislodged them from the road. The robbers moved to backroads travelled by caravaneers to circumvent battlefields and toll gates.

When Kurakura was a boy, his father had taken him and his other three boys to steal. He placed each son in four positions and told them to watch and shout if someone came by. They stole lots of chickens and eggs, and people blamed snakes and foxes. One night, one of the children cried out. Their father rushed out from the compound he had snuck into and they all ran home. When they got home, their mother had asked for the chicken for dinner. The father didn’t answer the mother and asked the boy what he had seen. He said an eye looked down at him from the sky. The father cut one of Kurkura’s ears to serve as a reminder to him that the he should never look up when he stole. Oyo punished thieves by cutting their ears off, it marked them for life, and their crimes were never forgotten. People steered clear of Kurakura because of his one ear, and his mates called him a thief to his face. He decided to be an armed robber after he could no longer deal with their ridicule.

At twelve, Kurakura ran away to Igbajo, the land of many peoples. There he learned many languages and became a pick-pocket. From Igbajo he moved to Igbeti and expert robber. An Igbeti chief became his patron and gave him information on rich people to waylay. Samu, one of the Oyo Mesi, collected a steady share of Kurakura’s loot and found a way to bury
complaints about him brought to the Aafin. Kurakura used loot to fund a group of riffraffs who went about town disturbing peace in the guise of being an opposition to the Alaafin Sango sent the Eso to finish the work they had started, but this time they should find and expose Kurakura’s powerful connections. Samu leaked to the Igbeti chief the Alaafin’s judgement, and the chief and his household escaped to one of the Mokole towns in Ibariba. Oyo had fought a war with Igbeti and lost. Igbeti knew the Eso came only for Kurakura but for them too and Oyo burned down the villages of dissenters. The people of Igbeti threw KuruaKura out of their twon before the Alaafin’s Eso got to their gates.

Kurakura met Ogunfeyi became friends and stole together at Apomu. Then they journeyed together to Omirinmirin, the other interstate market in the northern forest and stole from the traders. Ogunfeyi believed that people asked to be robbed, he could hear their unspoken requests to be robbed. Kurakura and Ogunfeyi lived in the forest off the Ede – Oyo – Ìlèsà – Benin road, and laid in wait for people they followed sometimes for days through the forest that lined the roads. Sometimes they separated the tail of a group of travelers from the main body and robbed the stragglers. Not long after their move to Omirinmirin, Apomu traders who came to the market to trade were told of the spirit robbers. The Apomu traders told them it must be the one-eared thief. Apomu gate guards set an ambush for the spirits. Two groups of market guards disguised as traders plied the road and talked about the expensive clothes they carried. The thieves attacked the group and where overpowered by the guards.

They stripped both men of their clothes and dragged them allover the grounds of Omirinmirin market, as people jostled to see the faces of the spirits. The hard-packed red earth peeled their skin off their bodies and they bled. They threw stones and logs at them that cut deep in their flesh. Their faces swelled, their eyes closed shut, and their nose and ears bled. The
crowds didn’t allow the Ilari to take the thieves off their hands, some even accused Ilari of being friends with the thieves. When asked why they stole, Kurakura said, “It wasn’t him, but his shadow that did as he pleased.” The crowd dragged them again round the market, this time they chanted, “one’s shadow can not steal on one’s behalf.” Ogunfeyi didn’t survive the second round of beating.

The Ilari managed to get Kurakura out of the crowd. They handed him over to a group of traders going to Oyo. He knew the Alaafin would behead him. He escaped the traders and sought refuge with the Mawe, a piratical group, in the eastern waters of Lagoon, far away from the savannah of Oyo. The Lagoon opened to the ports of the Ijebu Ode in Epe and Ikorodu. Kurakura thieving spirit melded with the Mawe and he became one of them. The Mawe in their small canoes easily escaped into the mangroves and had no difficulty in shouldering their canoes into places of safety in the dense forest. Unlike the unwieldy canoes of the Epe, whose fleet of large canoes could only slide in the still waters of the Lagoon. The Ijebu were allies of the Alaafin, and Epe and Ikorodu were tributaries of the Awujale, the King at Ijebu Ode.

The king’s market in Ikorodu held every six days. Canoes, hewn from tree trucks were floating stalls and women paddled, poled or rowed them from the back. They slowed down their canoes to greet the people in canoes that glidded by them. Canoes bobbed on the edge of the lagoon, and women bunched up their wrappers around their thighs, wadded into the shallow waters, and beckoned to people to come buy freshly caught fish. The threat of the raiding Mawe floated about the market like the water hyacinth on the Lagoon, but nobody spoke of the Mawe. Nobody wanted to summon them to appear on the lagoon.

The Mawe didn’t attack the fortified towns of the Lagoon. They knew they couldn’t win. Those towns had enbankments and trenches around them, and where they abutted into the
Lagoon, these openings in their defenses were closed with stockades and stakes that extended deep into the surrounding waters. The Mawe didn’t kill, they came to plunder, though they came armed with spears. They watched the market for hours and darted to straggling canoes that had moved away from the market hub. In their small canoes, a Mawe pirate sat at the stern to direct the canoe while another stood in the rear and paddled. They snatched goods and cowries and returned to the mangrove. Their rallying cry, ‘the lagoon is the boundry,” taunted anyone to venture into their territory.

*
Ọyá’s words

The Alaafin came to Ọyá’s room. The only one he came; the other women came to his. It was a sparse and airy room. Oya managed to always have space. He thought all of the Aafin could be contained in her room. Oya’s things were neatly tied in bundles and baskets by the door, as if in preparation for a flight. Ọyá didn’t keep baubles and trifles; she had only the things she needed. She held on to things she couldn’t do without, even memories that would become burdens she forgot immediately. Alaafin Sango knew that even with her nine, she wouldn’t hesitate to leave him if she found her buffalo skin. The memories she held tightly reminded her of life in the forests. The freedom to roam and shake the deep of forests and put fear in many a brave hunter.

The children were in their room. Oya’s sets of twins slept slept in different parts of the room, but in the morning, they were a ball of bodies breathing as one. He could hear Afefe croon to the last one and she settled to sleep again. The wind carried her song to Oya’s room, and he felt her body relax in his arms. Sango’s fingers traced her hair weaved into tiny rows and sighed. Here in these rooms he felt at peace, the only place in Oyo where his problems felt lighter. He knew he could unburden his soul to this woman and not be ashamed of his weaknesses. She covered his nakedness without telling him he was naked nor blatantly told him what she wanted in return. His other Ayaba and concubines didn’t understand his obsession with her. Her reticence to him liberated his soul. She didn’t cling to him or suck life out of him to be alive. She existed and thrived in her own space.

The lamp in the room flickered and its flame tried to be but its wick didn’t give it oil. Ọyá looked at face and watched the dying light hide the tension. The light died, and she closed her eyes. She knew those that troubled him. Ọyá said, “your face is strong Kabiyesi, what troubles you?”
Sango said, “Oyo.”

“May you live long!”

“Ase.”

“But something else troubles you.”

“You mean someone.”

“Two people?”

“Yes, two people.”

Óyá said, “Banish both to Ede, they are becoming too powerful.”

“Speak on.”

“The ruse will be that they should go quell the Ijesa uprising and any rogue Tapa not loyal to your grandfather.”

“Ede, the frontier town between the Ijesa and the other southern kingdoms.”

“It will work.”

In the morning, Sango sent an Ilari, Ma danubi Oba, do-not-anger-the king to two of his war leaders, Olu Ode and Gbonka. Their households woke to see the Ilari outside their compounds fanning himself with his green and red staff. Senior wives woke up their husbands to presence of the staff of the Alaafin.

“The Alaafin commands you go to Ede.”

“Why?” one man said.

“To keep the Tapa and Ijesa away from Oyo.” The other man didn’t listen to the rest of the message. He walked away from the messenger and went back to sleep.

Olu Ode packed his things and moved his family out of Oyo. By nightfall of the fourth day Olu Ode, his family, and his war-boys stopped to sleep at an outpost a few kilometers away.
to Ede. Gbonka didn’t leave. His wives spoke of their fear, he shouted at them, and they kept their peace. Gbonka stayed in Oyo and sent a message to Sango through the Osi Efa, Oya’s eunuch, after a week. He sent word to the Iwarefa to come see him. The eunuch came but didn’t seat.

“Tell the Alaafin that the air in Ede doesn’t suit me.”

“Those words are heavy.”

“Go speak them, eunuch.”

“I should tell the Alaafin of Oyo that you said this?”

“Yes.”

Osi Efa tried to dismiss the questions pouring into his head and stop the answers to the questions popping into his mind. He couldn’t do both. As he walked to his mother’s quarters to relay the Gbonka’s message, he thought about the brashness of the war lord and pondered the best way to tell the Alaafin of Gbonka’s disobedience. Should he fan the inevitable anger, or should he counsel that the Alaafin bid his time and deal with his war lord later? He saw Ona Efa and Otun efa walking to their mothers’ courts. He knew he had to tell them of Gbokna’s message but first his mother then the Alaafin.

Ọyá wasn’t surprised by the words Osi Efa. She looked away from him and she hissed,

“Can you hear it my son?”

“What mother?”

“Did drums of discord that beat louder over the matter deposed Alaafin Ajaka?”

“I don’t hear them.”

“The hands that beat them are not of our world.”

“Hmm.”
“You know what to do.”

“I do mother.”

“An okro tree doesn’t grow taller than the one that planted it.”

“If it does?”

“It should be content with shriveling up in the dust.”

“Go well my son.”

Osi Efa left his mother and walked toward the Alaafin for his nightly talk. The Teetu allowed him into the Alaafin’s kobi. Osi Efa prostrated on the floor and waited for the Alaafin to sit on a chair. Biri and an Ilari stood behind the chair, and when the Alaafin sat both assisted him to arrange his clothes around him.

“Death itself.” Osi Efa greeted.

“When you call me that. I know you do not bring me good news.”

“Second to the Orisa”

“Rise.”

“Ah no, I beg to stay on the floor.”

“Say it.”

“It is too big for my mouth, but I will say it.”

“You are not permitted to play with words or my time. I am listening.”

Osi Efa delivered Gbonka’s message and inched back towards the door waiting for the explosion that will come into the kobi. The Alaafin’s shout of anger didn’t come and and the room’s silence snuffed out all sound. The Alaafin jumped up and pranced around his room like a leopard. He snarled at his shadow. Osi Efa didn’t look up until he heard the Alaafin sit.

“What did your mother say?”
“My mother says you should bid your time and act like you didn’t send him away.”

“If I didn’t send him away. He didn’t send me message.

“May the morning wake well.”

The Alaafin didn’t answer.

*
The sighing pots

Only a jealous woman can cook soup

Osun’s pots bubbled

And the Aafin knew she stirred

Soups and as she stirred strife

Osun sat in front of soot-stained kitchen walls, under the shade a palm frond lean-to and stirred the contents of her pots. She and her servants were completely naked. This ensured that the Ayaba couldn’t poison the Alaafin with things hidden on them. A servant kindled fire in a mud hearth, by it another put an empty clay pot. A servant washed the skin of beans. One ground bright red rodo and onions on a grinding stone. Another washed pieces of cowtail, liver, tripe, and gave it to Osun. One washed pieces of smoked catfish. A servant placed the pot on the stones. Osun added the meat and seasoned it with onions and salt. The gentle fire until the pot cooked the meat tender. A servant took the pot of the fire. Another one added firewood to the fire and placed another pot on the fire. Osun added palm oil to the pot and added rings of onion. She let the oil heat and smoke rose from the pot. She smiled as a breeze carried it towards Oba’s rooms. Osun laughed with glee when she heard Oba cough, “I will see their end; I will smoke them all out.”

Osun added washed locust beans, rodo and stirred the sauce. The smell and the noise of frying sauce filled the kitchens. She poured in the meat stock and the stirred the meat into the pot, she tasted it and smiled. The contents of her pot started to simmer, Osun sand along with it.

My love is like dew of the morning.

In the night it is a raging fire.
The aroma from the soup soared from Osun’s hearth and floated around the Aafin and noses pointed towards Osun’s hearth and inhaled. Osun reveled in her cooking skills. Osun served the Alaafin in his rooms and awaited on him. He licked his plate of amala and gbegiri and asked for a second helping. Osun walked back to her Kaa to prepare for her visit to the Alaafin. Oba met her at her door and and stopped her, “How do you do it, make the ingredients sing for you?”

“I put the pot on the fire, add palm oil, add onion, lots of onions…”

Oba cut her off, “I know. I mean your secret. You must have one.”

Osun started another song.

They have come, to take my only gift.

Even I am gifted

Our husband values me, even the barren one.

Oba looked at her and turned away. Osun stopped singing and looked at the sad woman walking away from her and she smiled. This smile that didn’t come from her insides, a smile her close servants knew. They drew away from her when it appears on Osun’s face. A smile she wore over her face often, a mask to cover her shame and anger. “Oba,” she called out. Oba didn’t stop but continued towards her rooms.

“My senior,” Osun called.

Oba stopped, and Osun walked towards Oba.

“Please come nearer,” she said, Oba took a step backwards.

Osun moved closer to her, “The servants must not hear this or they may use it to warm our husband’s bed.” Oba moved nearer and bent her left ear to Osun’s lips. Osun whispered her secret into Oba’s ear. Oba covered her mouth with her hands and gasped but listened on. She
looked at Osun’s gele tied around her head and whispered the secret back into Osun’s ear. Osun nodded,

“That’s it, all of it. Don’t tell anyone our secret.”

Oba walked back to her hearth and told her servants to leave her. She wanted to cook something special for the Alaafin. She would do everything to reconcile with Alaafin for the sake of her son who missed his father. The other children mocked him because their father ignored him. Oba winced as she tied her best gele around her head and walked to the Alaafin’s courts. She set his food in his room and waited for him to come out of the meeting with Oyo Mesi. It was night when he joined her. “I have eaten woman,” he said when he saw her. Oba said nothing and removed the amala she had made from the wrappers that kept them warm. She served him his favourite food, amala and okro and mushroom soup. “Please eat.” Sango looked at his first Ayaba, he knew how much those two words cost her. Sango settled to eat, and Oba washed his hands. He smiled at her when he saw the soup. Sango dipped his forefinger into the soup to see the meats that had fallen to the bottom of the bowl. He smiled, cowtail, tripe, pomo. He scooped up some soup with his fingers and stopped. He pointed to something floating in the soup. He looked at her and she smiled at him.

“Mushrooms,” Oba said.

“It is a strange one, hard.” Sango said.

“Eat your food my husband.”

“I have suddenly lost my appetite.”

“Why my husband? I made this specially for you.”

Osun voice floated into Oba’s room and Sango stopped to listen to the words of the song Osun sang from her hearth.
He loves me
Even though he doesn’t say it
But I don’t give him
Mushrooms and an ear
Like some stupid woman
A secret and an ear
My secrets are within my thighs
My hips know how to please a man
The one who paid my bride price knows this
My pot sighs with delight as I cook
My soups are the ways to please a man
My mother taught me well
Mushrooms and ears, she didn’t say

Sango looked at Oba and opened his mouth but couldn’t speak. Oba snuck to a corner and cried quietly. More ashamed at her stupidity, not afraid of their husband’s wrath. He could not understand how his most intelligent Ayaba could fall for Osun’s plot. “Remove your gele,” he roared. Oba did as commanded, she untied her gele. Nothing remained of her left ear. Sango jumped up in rage and threw the bowl of warm soup at Oba. “But she told me she cuts part of her ears into your soups.” Oba said. He ran into Osun’s room, “untie your gele,” he said.

When she did, he touched her ears and saw they were whole. He slumped to the mat, tired. He could hear Oba’s keening. The Aafin women tried to calm her, but he knew nobody but him could make her stop. Osun served him a calabash of cold palmwine and watched him swallows it in gulps. She knew his thoughts, she would not allow him go back to Oba. When he
closed his eyes, she pulled him down to her breasts and began to caress the ends of the hair style
she destested. She watched him sleep. Her mouth twisted with anger, and her mask had slipped
off. She did love this man who hurt her so many times it hurt to remember. “You hurt me so
much. I love you so much.” She whispered into his ear. She wished him a memory of her talking
to him in his dreams of her love, but she knew he seldom remembered dreams.

*
Oba Goes to Igbon

Even with one ear
She heard their scorn
It hurt her

In the evening, Sango threw Oba out of the Aafin. “please let me go to the Kolara quaters. I’m content to live out my years within its walls, as long as I can hear my son’s voice from over the wall.” But Sango would not allow her to be with the other women he had put aside. “Go woman into the home forest,” he said, the darkness would cover your shame.” It did not cover her shame, she felf naked and her insides shivered. She stopped crying, she knew they wouldn’t help. She appealed to what he missed, the love of a mother for her son. “You can’t go with your son,” he said, “the son of an Alaafin doesn’t sleep outside the Aafin.” The Teetu escorted her out of the Aafin with nothing, and she didn’t get to see her son.

She walked through the crossroad, all three paths opened into the forbidden forests, and she greeted the old man of the roads. They led into a tangle of darkness that seemed to move, and she stopped looking back at the Aafin. She stepped into a thin path that swayed like a drunkard into the darkness. She turned into it. Oba touched the side of her head where her left ear should be, it bled, and she felt faint. She tied her gele tighter and felt blood seep through it. She walked deeper into the forest, blood dripped on her shoulder, and it flowed down her shoulder. Her head felt heavier and she began to cry quietly, so her cries won’t wake up the beings in the forest.

After several hours of wandering through the forest, she became confused and stumbled. She fell to the forest floor. She didn’t feel the moistness of the ground seep into her clothes and bones. She slept throught the night. In the morning, her joints were stiff, and her head throbbed
when she tried to lift her head. Her nose touched a pot, a cold one. She struggled to sit up. She
found food inside the pot and ate. She fell asleep again. At night when someone tapped her, she
shielded her eyes with her hand. A feeble old man carrying a lamp stared down at her, the flame
didn’t flicker. He had on only a loin cloth. Oba greeted him, he looked familiar, but she couldn’t
remember where she had met him. She slept by day, and at night she followed the old man and
his lamp through the forest. He didn’t say anything to her, he only pointed into the forest, and
she followed. He walked fast, and she didn’t try to catch up. She followed the glow of his light in
the distance. They never passed through a town or a village, only through the forest. She didn’t
see the sun for days, only felt its rays. One night, the man led her through a clearing where a
village of heads without bodies bounced about on the forest floor. She heard them discuss how
they would go into the world and borrow body parts and bring back beautiful maidens and men
to their home.

They walked by eyes that glowed in the dark and heard them talk of how bad humans
were for hunting them. They were humans being punished for treating animals poorly. One night
the old man led her to a river. They walked through the bottom of the river, and she saw fishes
swim around her. The walked by the house of the spirits that lived in the cave at the very bottom
of the river. She heard them singing and drumming. She saw land animals come by the river to
drink water, but they couldn’t see her—red monkey, duiker, and bushbaby.

The walked out of the river, water sloshed of her body, and its muddy banks sucked at
her feet. She slept through the day under the stilted roots of mangroves trees. That night the old
man walked slowly, and she kept up with him. She looked at his feet, and thin legs. She could
hear his feet fall on the soft cushion of dead leaves. She saw the legs stop, so she didn’t bump
into him. With his back to her he waved his lamp at a tree. Oba fell at the foot of the tree and
cried as she held on to the Ayan tree of her mothers, and it welcomed her home, “thank you for bringing me home.” The old man smiled and entered his tree.

Oba returned to her father’s compound with a deep sore in her heart. She had lost weight, and her collar bones stuck out. Her family didn’t recognise her, she who came to them with Ilari and servants. Her uncles told her she could have a room, her mother’s, the one she stayed in when she traded in Igboho. The women of the compound who had been jealous of her good fortune, ridiculed her. They sang of her downfall and refused to greet her. They had flocked around her when she was an Ayaba. Only one of them took care of her, the wife of a distant cousin who had been one of her mother’s friends. Oba chose not to hide her earless side of her head. Her wound healed cleanly, she couldn’t believe she cut off her left ear with a sharp knife. People walked by her murmuring at her misfortune. The Alowonle daughter who went out full but came back empty, without an ear.

During thunderstorms, she cried for their husband, and her insides wanted him. She longed for his warm body. She looked out of her room and breathed of the air charged with his essence. Lightning stretched across the sky and her insides clenched and unclenched. She waited for the deep throated rumble of thunder and she shouted her frustrations at it. She wandered out of the compound at night and returned in the morning. Only at the Ayan tree did she find peace, eating the food meant for the tree and its being. She placed her hand on the tree and slept. She could feel its peace. She dreamed of a market filled with people buying and selling. She found peace in the space too. She joined a group of women around a basket of snails. They haggled, jostling for the trader’s attention.

“How much?” Oba said to the woman standing over them. She didn’t answer. Oba tugged at the sleeve of the woman’s wrapper, but she ignored her. She turned to the woman
examining the snails by her left, “How much is the basket?” she said again. She ignored her too.

She woke up with a start, a man shook her roughly and dragged her out of her dream. She grunted and turned away from him. “Are you a spirit or woman?” he said, I’m a hunter.”

“I can see that,” she murmured.

“This forest is not safe for people at this hour woman, I will take you home.”

And she married Ajagun, the man who found her under the Ayan tree, but her thoughts were filled with her One.

*
Ede
When Esu is angry, he hits a stone till it bleeds
When he is angry, he sits on the skin of an ant
When he is angry, he weeps blood
He threw a stone tomorrow
And kills an elephant yesterday

Now Ede was a frontier town in the Oyo kingdom, its position made it a vantage point of defense. The perfect buffer between Ilesa and Tapa and Oyo. The Ijesa stayed clear of Oyo but marauded their trading caravans plying the routes that passed their boundary, relieving them of their goods and cowries. Alaafin Sango dispatched Olu Ode and Gbonka to Ede under the ruse that distance will make the people forget them, but only Olu Ode went. Alaafin Sango crowned him the Timi at Ede. The Owa of Ìlèsà who knew the Alaafin’s wiles did likewise. He made the Ataoja at Osogbo, a town opposite Ede, a coronet king.

Timi worked hard to teach the small Ede population to war. They formed groups that patrolled the town and its environs and with their help he managed to reduce the Ijesa raids. Then he diverted his well-trained army to other uses. Traders stopped at Ede on their way to Apomu from the west. Olu Ode collected a toll of five cowries from the traders for safe passage to Apomu and another ten for a basket or a sack of goods. At first, he sent the Alaafin a fair share, but after awhile he held back on Oyo and his warriors’ share of the toll. One of the disgruntled men went to Oyo and told Samu about the deeds of Olu Ode. Samu’s gourd stomach heaved when he heard of Olu Ode’s new wealth. He told the king at Oyo. Alaafin Sango pounced on this news, and rejoiced he had a reason to burn Olu Ode.

Meanwhile, Gbonka had become a stench in Alaafin’s nose. He went to war as he wanted and without permission from the Bashorun or the Alaafin. He claimed he looked out for
the interest of the people, but everyone knew his motives. He resisted the Alaafin openly at the annual festivals, and Oyo openly pushed the Alaafin to discipline the warlord. “His time hasn’t come yet,” Òyá said, and the Alaafin looked the other way, staying his hand of retribution.

The Alaafin sent an Ilari, Ma boba du – do not strive with the king – to Ede to demand his fair share of the tolls. The Timi’s reply to the message confirmed his madness. “This is what riches do to men.” The Alaafin laughed, “he says I’m a man. Am I a man?” The Alaafin sent some Eso and warrioirs to Ede, but Olu Ode sent their heads back to Oyo. The people of Oyo rioted and poured into the Aganju protesting the impertinence of Olu Ode. “The time is now,” Osi Efa said to the Alaafin, delivering his mother’s message.

The Alaafin pretended that he reconciled with Gbonka and restored his favour. He sent Gbonka to Ede, to deal with the mad Olu Ode. Gbonka knew something was amiss but the Alaafin’s forgiveness shocked him. The wealth and title the Alaafin promised him clouded his mind. He didn’t stop to think deep about the doubts in his head. He went to Ede to do the Alaafin’s bidding. Olu Ode had grown lazy he enjoyed his new-found wealth as a toll collector. Oyo’s wars were far from him, both he and his warriors lived in comfort. When an Ede sentry told the Olu Ode that an old warrior friend of his stood outside the gates of Ede. He told his wives to cook a feast and went to the gate to welcome him to his Aafin. Olu showed him around his village with pride.

“These are our gateposts. We do not have walls like Oyo.”

“Hmmm.”

“These are our store houses.”

“What about your cowries?”
“I will have to kill you if I show you that.” Both men laughed and walked back to he Aafin but Gbonka saw the number of traders passing through Ede. After a meal of pounded yam and game meat. They sat outside Gbonka’s kobi drinking palmwine. They whisked away the mosquitos that whined around their ears.

“What is the true reason you are here?” Olu Ode said.

“I come to visit you.”

“We drank from the same cup; we bled on uncountable battlefields. Tell me the truth?”

“That is the truth.”

They ate dinner that night, from the same bowls, and Gbonka slipped a pinch of powder into his friend’s palm wine. Olu Ode had told his guards and wives to leave them alone, they had much to discuss. As night grew older, Olu Ode’s words began to walk over each other, but his Juju kept him awake.

“Does the earth move underneath your feet friend?” Gbonka said.

“No, it doesn’t.” Olu Ode said.

“Do your eyes turn in your head.”

“No, they are looking at only one of you.”

“Sleep Timi, sleep. Your charms too Gbonka, sleep. Let go of your flaming arrows, when a child sleeps he lets go of all he holds.”

As soon as Gbonka stopped talking Timi’s head lowered and he slept. Gbonka tied him up, slipped out of Ede., and brought him bound to Oyo.

*
The Fight

Sango’s eyes are white like bitter kola nut
His cheeks round like bitter kola nut
Fire in the eye
Fire in the mouth
Fire in the skies
He rides fire like a horse
He is the death that drips
Lightning flashes
Wrapped in a cloth of death
War gleams in his eyes
He laughs in anticipation
And enters a town like a swarm of bees
He imparts his beauty
On women, he sleeps with

Alaafin Sango heard a whisper at night that both men died in a fight in Ede. He listened, but the talking drums in the Aafin said another thing.

Welcome, Gbonka a man of war
Victorious over a mosquito,
An annoying mosquito that thought he could disturb the Alaafin’s sleep.
A rat that was brought into Oyo tied like a common thief
Sango walked into the main kobi, the Oyomesi listened to Gbonka regaling Gbonka’s capture. Gbonka said, “Only pinch of powder felled him.” A gagged and tied Olu Ode struggled against his ropes and tried to mumble his side of the story. Alaafin Sango laughed and said, “There was no fight?”

Gbonka said, “No, Kabiyesi.”

Alaafin Sango said, “You both owe me a fight.”

Gbonka knew the Alaafin’s tricks. He remembered the dream he had and pushed it away from his mind. He would not step out of the Aafin if he feared death. He also knew that there were too many Teetu and Eso in the Aafin to cut through. He couldn’t use his disappearing charms in the Aafin, for everything bowed to the authority of the Alaafin, except the wishes of the Orisa.

The Kaa Idi Obi emptied into the biggest Aafin square, the Aganju. The emptiness of the Aganju scared Gbonka. He wanted the people to witness this fight. He may need their power to bend the will of the Alaafin. The sacredness of the Aganju also comforted Gbonka, the power of the place of gathering allowed charms to work, except when used against the person of the king at Oyo. The Alaafin and his two Ayaba reclined under beaded leather umbrella, and servants fanned them. The Oyo Mesi sat around the Alaafin. He became more confident when a few people walked into the Aganju. Women from the Akesan market draped wrappers over their goods and trooped into the Aganju. It filled up, and a restive crowd closed the entrance into the Aafin.

Eso led Olu Ode, Timi at Ede into the Aganju and cut the ropes that bound his hands. Olu Ode stretched his body and jumped up and down. Both men circled around each other then they lunged at each other. Olu Ode sparred with Gbonka in the square. Each man recited
incantations to make them invincible. They pranced to the drumbeats of the bata of the Alaafin musicians. They puffed out their chests and struck their war aprons. The men eyed themselves from across the Aganju, and Alaafin Sango sat on his throne, keenly watching the fight.

You can’t fight the spirit in the Iroko

However strong your curse is

It can’t harm me

Your words return to your belly

And rot in your insides

When the coucal calls for rain

It will get wet too

Even the red parrot puts the feathers it collects

In its own tail

May your curse stay on your inner head

The white Egret is always victorius

The river always finds a way

Paths do not close to water

I use the teeth of an elephant to clean earwax

I will be victorious here

Both men danced in the midday sun trading incantations and curses, and they cancelled the other’s charm with more powerful words. Their war clothes were completely covered with ado and horns filled with charms. The clothes darkened with the sweat of their owners. Amulets
of cowries pinching their skin, their muscles tightened with each move. They became possessed by powers unseen and they made their shadows one that of death that moved under their feet unseen. When the Alaafin didn’t call an end to the long fight, they the Alaafin expected neither of them to survive.

Olu Ode grabbed at the buffalo horn on Gbonka’s war cloth and the other cried out in alarm. This very thing made him invincible to death, “this is death,” Gbonka said. He knew would die if he didn’t kill his friend before he killed him. The bata drums hailed Olu Ode, the Timi of Ede and he pranced around the Aganju.

Huge man whose body fills an anthill
He stings his enemies to multiple deaths
You kill them gently
One who shook a tree shakes himself
You are the death
That plucks out a man’s eyes
You are heavily preganant with war
May today be well with you
Gbonka said an incantation that a sigidi of the forests gave him for releasing him from the trap of a hunter. It would only work once, today.

An ado in my left hand
Ase in my mouth, everything I say is done
A needle cannot but heed the call of a piece of cloth
Sleep
Olu Ode’s body hit the ground with a thud, and death’s shadow moved closer to him. Gbonka looked at his friend one last time and cut off Olu Ode’s head with his machet. Alaafin Sango screamed from under the umbrella, “burn him alive.” Happy that he made the Alaafin’s angry, Gbonka laughed, “Gbonka makes the death itself angry.” As the Teetu led him away, Sango stopped them. “Burn him in my presence.” Alaafin Sango said. Samu and Akiniku jumped up and congratulated the Alaafin, “you have conquered your enemies.” The Teetu tied Gbonka to a stake and built a fire around him. They threw palm oil and shea butter on the wood and it ate his clothes as it roared. The Aafin watched Gbonka writhe and scream in the flames, but it was only a ruse. He jumped out of the fire laughing at Alaafin’s folly and challenged him to fight.

“Fire heeds my call too, you are not the only one that can control fire.”

The king turned his back on the Aganju and left the presence of the man raving about his weakness, but he heard the challenge. “Fight me or go to sleep,” Gbonka challenged Alaafin Sango as he rose from his throne. Before the Alaafin disappeared Gbonka said, “it is time you go and join your fathers.” Oyo and the Oyo Mesi heard it too. In his inner room he fumed, his eyes reddened with the fury he struggled to contain inside himself. He could not ask the Teetu to fall on him, this was a battle he had to fight. Sango knew, the fire of sedition in Oyo had been fanned hot and by nightfall it would be raging taking down everything in its way, himself inclusive.

*
War on the Lagoon
Fresh water rushes out
And becomes salty
In the ports of Ijebu Ode
Wealth rushes into the Aafin Itoro

The southern towns of Ikorodu, Ejirin, Ikosi and Epe were inhabited by Ijebu that lived off the Lagoon that rimmed in their lands. Filled with fishes, lush with palms, mangrove, and evergreens, this land had plenty. Its peoples traded with communities along the lagoon and beyond. They excelled in long distance trade along the coast unlike their inland relatives in the forest and the savannah. The Aafin Itoro stood in the middle of a sprawling swamp which walled it in. The swamps were a maze of greenry and squelching water-logged land, many a nosey scout had lost their way in it. Their bodies rot in sweltering heat and became food for the catfish that thrived in the depths of mushy earth. The walls of Aafin Itoro stood in the middle of the town and the Eredo wall secured the domains of the Awujale. To the south, the Aafin Itoro’s throne room cast a shadow on Odi, the quarters of palace slaves also called Odi.

The nine-day Ijebu Ode market, Oja Oyigbo, heaved and sighed outside the southern walls of the Aafin. Traders came from as far as the land of the Ga and Fanti to the east and bartered salt. Thy also id business with the Gun, Fon, and Awori. The Ijebu traded their woven cloth with the Bariba and the Tapa who lived to the north of Oyo. The Awujale collected levies from traders and boats that accessed the Ijebu ports at Epe and Ikorodu, and not one thing reached the sea without the permission of the Awujale.

The reach of the Awujale of Ijebu Ode included the strip of land between the northern part of the Lagoon and the sea – Mawe country – and anything that floated beyond the Lagoon.
On this sparsely populated land behind the Lagoon and the sea, a gang of thugs made their own rule. The uthroats robbed, pillaged, and raped from their fleet of swift canoes. They became spirits that appeared on the Lagoon as they pleased and brought with them a fear that was unknown in those parts. The one-eared thief, Kurakura and the Mawe became a menace to the floating Oba market. The Awujale sent his trade representatives, the Agunrin to investigate the fall in revenue.

“Go to your respective guilds, greet them well and ask after their wellbeing. Then demand for what mine is,” Awujale said.

Agunrin brought back this message, “a certain Oyo exile, a one-eared man, stirred up the waters of the lagoon with the Mawe.” The Awujale stared at the trade representatives, “a one eared man?” He knew his Agunrin could keep the traders from diverting their business to the other trading ports on the Lagoon. Alladah, Ajase, Whydah will gladly receive the trade meant for him and his people. He sent an ambassador to the Mawe, “give me the Oyo criminal and your misdeeds will be forgiven.” The Mawe replied, “Kurakura is now a brother. One shouldn’t abandon one’s brother.”

Awujale called for an emergency meeting with his Iwarefa. He also summoned Olisa the mayor of Ijebu Ode, Aromire, the leader of the Lagoon fishermen and Sungbo, the wealthiest woman in Ijebu Ode. “So, this is how Sango and his madness will affect me and my people. Indirectly. No, before he does that I will break that fool’s neck and drown him in the lagoon. His lightning and all. That half-bred son of Tapa who wants to disturb my peace.”

The council of chiefs said nothing, the fear of the Alaafin Oyo made them mute. An Odi brought Aromire, the head fisherman, into the king’s presence. He prostrated before the Awujale.

“Aromire,” the Awujale greets you, Oliwa said, arise”
“Aromire, tell us of the one-eared robber,” Olisa said.

“We do not know much of him. He is an Oyo and has one ear.

“That is all you know?” Olisa said.

“We also know that he has no kin,” Aromire said.

“No man fell from the sky,” Sungbo said.

The Awujale signaled that an Odi take Aromire out of the room, “we need to fight Oyo.”

Oliwa the head of the Iwarefa sat close to the Awujale. He frowned deeply, he didn’t agree with what the Awujale said but he kept quiet. The Awujale looked at the Iwarefa, he couldn’t tell what they thought. They showed no emotions, which was expected of older men who had seen a lot of this world. “We may need to tell our traders to stay away from the Tapa and Oyo markets,” Awujale said, prodding the Iwarefa.

Olisa much younger than the six men wasted his words and showed too much emotions,

“Kabiesi, forgive me but how do we run Itoro if we do not trade?”

The Awujale looked at Oliwa, his lower lipped twitched. He knew that twitch from his longest serving chief. A sign that someone agreed with him. He leaned back into his throne and looked at Oliwa.

“We are safe in the forests here. Oyo’s gaze is elsewhere, let us not bring its gaze on us,” Oliwa said.

“And our trade with Oyo?” Olisa said.

Oliwa ignored him, and Olisa couldn’t control the anger that poured into his face.

“We need to call on our neighbours and have a plan,” Oliwa said, bringing on a frown on Olisa’s unwrinkled face.

“Don’t fear Awujale, Oyo’s horses can’t come into the Ijebu land,” Olisa said.
“Should we involve the Mahin, Awori, Egbado and Egun?” Sungbo said.

“The kingdoms west of Ijebu and along the Lagoon too should bear of this burden,” Olisa said, the pockets of the king sould not bear this alone.”

“No, we should scratch the itch by ourselves for now,” Oliwa said

“Tell the Odi to repair the stockades along the market route. Make sure that the stakes extend well into the water.”

“Sungbo you built the Eredo walls, you know it well. Find out if we need to repair cracks in the Eredo walls. We need to prepare for a reprisal attack from Oyo,” Awujale said. I doubt if he’ll come south. I hear he has a growing rebellion on his hands.” Sungbo said.

“I still say we should not worry about the Alaafín,” Olisa said.

The Awujale had had enough, how many wars have Olisa seen? He got up from his throne, silencing Olisa. He had the support of the Iwarefa and Sungbo. Olisa would fall in line, sometimes bags of cowries affected his wisdom. His council remained on the floor, prostrate, until the Awujale and his entourage of Odi left the kobi.

*

In the Omu creek, opposite Ikosi town lived two families of canoe builders revered for their craftmanship. The canoes on the lagoon could be traced back to the families that made them. The two families had their unique style of carving, one cut down huge trees, trimmed and carved out the the hulk, while the other sliced the wood into planks and stretched them on to a frame. But both styles were sturdy and cut swiftly through the Lagoon and not turn people and heavy goods into the Lagoon. The Oliwa gave them the task of making the needed war boats and canoes, “do not make boats for anyone until you finish the Awujale’s need.”
The Awujale sent an empty calabash to the Mawe. He decided to give them one more chance before war. An Odi had left it near the stretch of mangroves their canoes disappeared into after their raids. He didn’t know who to give it to, and no one knew where the Mawe lived. The Mawe smashed the calabash and returned it to the Ikorodu market in a pot. They sent it down with the rising evening tide.

On the day the Awujale set for the battle, the fleets of war canoes from the southern parts of the Ijebu kingdom glided into place on the waters of the placid Lagoon. Using poles and paddles the warriors maneuvered their vessels to face the enemy. Each canoe was filled with over sixty men, armed with clubs, arrows, agedengbe, and spears. The Mawe in their smaller boats hooted and hollered at the big canoes sent to crush small Mawe, “heartless big foe nothing fools.” On their way to battlefront, the Mawi set fire to some house along their route of the lagoon, and Ijebu warriors could see the rising smoke from their side of the land. “The Lagoon is the boundary,” the Mawe shouted, and pointed their spears at the black smoke.

The Ijebu vanguard made up of Ijebu Ode, Epe, Ikosi, and Ikorodu canoes waited for the Mawe to come closer. They taunted them, “water rats you are.” The rest of Epe canoes blockaded the tiny opening on this stretch of the lagoon, the only way of escape for the Mawe. Twenty canoes made a line across the mouth of the lagoon that opened to the sea. Behind them the waters opened into a heaving salt sea. They waited, determined not to let a single Mawe canoe pass by them. The Ikosi positioned themselves and set an ambush behind a patch of mangrove, thirty canoes floated waiting for Mawe to come.

Both war fleets inched forward and clashed in the middle of the lagoon. Warriors shouting sprang from their canoe throwings spears and arrows into the bodies of men sitted in canoes. The Mawe threw firebrands soaked with palmoil into Ijebu canoes. Some were quickly
put out, but some seared the flesh of the Ijebu and a couple of canoes overturned. The Ijebu canoes moved back out of the reach of the Mawe. Then with a signal from the Ijebu Balogun, the Epe canoes feigned a retreat, and serveral cheering Mawe canoes pursued them. They fell into the hands of the waiting Ikosi warriors who hemmed them in and hacked them at close range with their agendegbe. The bigger canoes emptied its warriors into the bloodied lagoon. They swam underwater and lunged at the smaller ones and tipped them over. The Mawe abandoned their canoes and dove under the canoes swimming for land. Ijebu arrows aimed at the spots where they went under, but the Mawe could hold their breath for long. The ones that survived the arrows came up for air far away from the battle front. The Ijebu commandeered the nimble Mawe canoes and burnt their rickety stilted houses along the lagoon. They continued to burn bright into the night, and the bodies of Mawe and maybe that of the one-eared thief floated towards the sea.

*
The war of Beauty

Between Death and Shame

The Ibariba say

Death has the greater Beauty

With Olu Ode dead and Gbonka missing, the king at Nikki broke the peace treaty and attacked Eti Odan, one of the far-flung towns in Epo province of the Oyo kingdom. Ibariba warriors pillaged villages, raped women and took prisoners. Eti Odan called on Oyo for help, and Alaafin Sango sent warriors to defend them, maybe the people would see him as their defender again. Both sides didn’t see the need for diplomacy, they didn’t send emissaries to dissuade the other from warring.

The River Moshu ran sluggishly in the dry season. Its feeble waters trickled through a dry bed. Oyo warriors avoided the rapids on the greater river at Bussa and walked through the River Moshu into the territory of the Ibariba. Their allies Kenu and Parakou allowed them to walk through their borders. Their sentries turned their backs to the Oyo, so that if asked by the Ibariba earth lords if they saw anything they would be able to answer truthfully. No.

The Oyo troops several thousands strong, camped a distance from Nikki, within Kenu’s borders. Sango with Oya by his right hand led the Oyo, no one rode by his left. A void nobody could fill. The camp ran out of food ten days earlier than planned. This wouldn’t have happened if Oba were here. The Oyo resorted to pillaging farms around them. Kenu and Parakou warriors defended their farms, and there were skirmishes between the allies. The chief at Kenu sent a message to the war camp of the Oyo. Three cowries tied together with a string. The Alaafin frowned at the message and crushed it underneath his feet. “I have nothing to do with you if you steal from me,” Kenu said, and Sango reluctantly told his warriors to stop stealing from relatives.
The Oyo vanguard, its mounted troops galloped into a field and each warrior cleaned the hoofmarks of his horse with a banana leaf trailing behind him. A storm of arrows and spears arose like a dark cloud on the Ibariba side of the battle. The Oyo warriors raised their leather shields and arrows pierced the hides of dead animals and found their mark in the flesh of the Oyo. The arrows were covered with Ibariba poison and cries of pain rose from the Oyo side of the battle. Oyo drummers began to pound their drums covering groans and spurred on their warriors.

During the night, another vanguard of Oyo warriors crept towards the camp of the Ibariba, but they were spotted, and another hail of arrows leveled them. It seemed Nikki stood better in this war, as it found ways to keep Oyo away from its gates. In the morning, lines of warriors from opposing sides formed on the battlefield. Both were led by light cavalry, behind them came the infantry wielding arrows and spears and machetes. They ran towards each other, screaming war cries and enchantments. Behind them drums and trumpets blared, and when they met, and they pressed so close to one another that they couldn’t wield their weapons. They resorted to head butting and biting. Nikki cavalry broke through the lines, and their horses trampled bodies. They leaned over their horses and they hacked at the smarming around them. They created pockets of spaces in the field of grunting and groaning men. Oyo warriors pulled the mounted warriors off their horses and rearing horses trampled them under their feet.

The reserves bunched around their commanders, waiting for their command. The Oyo infantry dazed by the death of the leaders of the warboys, Ekerin, Ekarun, and Ekafa, wandered uselessly as if in a trance on the field. For four days, the war raged, and men fell on the fields, more Oyo than Ibariba. In waves of advances and retreats, Oyo and Ibariba clashed again and
again. Alaafin Sango tired of the war decided to use the Ibariba thunder stones Osun collected from the king at Nikki to rout the enemy. “The stones Oya,” Sango said. Osun pulled up her war apron and untied her tobi pouch. She handed the pouch to him without looking at. It was covered in menstrual blood. He threw the pouch back at her. “The stones are wet and of no use.” In rage, he commanded that the reserves join the battle, but even the fresh warriors couldn’t bring down the Ibariba.

Onikoyi, the warrior coronet king of Ikoyi province arrived a day later and led his contingent of warriors to the very gates of Nikki. His drummers spoke of his greatness, and the tired and unmotivated Oyo warriors roused themselves and readied for battle again.

Onikoyi the warrior who never received an arrow in his back

The great warrior that frightens death itself

Child of the water lily

Onikoyi loves to war

When others drink palm wine, he drinks blood

When others plant yams, he plants heads

Onikoyi the one who cuts off heads

Onikoyi swirled around the drummer, until he became possessed by the powers he called on. He became one with the hawk and the eagle and the vulture. He swooped on his enemies. Onikoyi opened his war pouch and threw an egg smeared with death at the Ibariba. Splat. And another. Splat. And another. Splat. And fire blazed in the middle of the Ibariba. The fire raced through their ranks, but the burning men did not cry out in pain. Expressions of pain are a thing of shame to the Ibariba, and honourable Ibariba don’t show pain. Onikoyi rode after Tabusunon,
the Nikki commander, and severed his head. The glory on this field belonged to Onikoyi and Tabusunon, and it pained the Alaafin.

* 

The Oyo say when a warrior is beheaded, “the sword was out of its sheath in the warrior’s presence and returned to its sheath in the warrior’s absence.”
The beginning of the end
When short men grow long shadows
The sun is about to set
Then the night will come

In the seventh year of Alaafin Sango’s reign, dark heavy rain clouds hovered in the sky, but they moved elsewhere during the rainy season. The people watched with dismay as they rolled away, beseeching them to come back, but they didn’t. The cool winds that would have soothed them in sleep were also absent. At night, they rolled about on mats drenched in sweat and dreamed nightmares. The rivers in Oyo were faint in their beds, they trickled, and stank of dead fish. Markets grew lean, and crops withered in lifeless soil. Yam seeds rotted in the earth, knee high corn stalks yellowed, fruit trees didn’t flower, and everyman saw hate and jealousy in his neighbour’s eyes. In the tenth month of the year, Owawa, the harmattan winds arrived. They didn’t disappoint like the rains they brought in dry dusty winds from the sea of sands beyond Oyo.

The Alaafin worried about the rebellions which were not rumours any more, and his heart flopped about in his heart. Several agitators went about openly calling the Alaafin a tyrant, and their followers increased daily in all the provinces of Oyo. The Oyo Mesi no longer belonged to him, they were firmly on the side of the people. Sango continued to keep the Oyo Mesi fat, them and their compounds, yet his council lied to him during council meetings. He sneered down at them from his throne. He knew what they tried to hide behind their faces, the evil that resided in them. Samu, the only one who didn’t bother to hide the side he stood with, tried to play both, but everyone knew he stood for himself.

*
Sango heard the musical instruments of the Asugbin from his iyewu and wondered the reason for the celebration. A Teetu told him, Ayaba Oya danced in the Kaa Idi Obi. Sango smiled and imagined her dancing to the beats of the double faced bata drum. The musicians were led by Alusekere, head of a clan of Arokin, the beaters of the Sekere when they recited history. The king smiled and arose from his throne. He gathered his agbada around him and danced to the Kaa Idi Obi. He stopped at one of the doors, Oya wasn’t in the room, only the sly seven men of his council. They huddled together and had a look on their faces that he didn’t understand. He frowned, “what kind of a joke is this?”

The soothing voice of the Alusekere stopped him snapping another question at his council.

Dance my father
There is no merry
The buffalo is gone
Be calm my father
The skin is gone from the rafters
The buffalo has galloped into the forests of the savannah
Be calm my father
An Alaafin does not grieve

The Oyo Mesi didn’t know how to tell Alaafin Sango that Oya left the Aafin, so they summoned the Arokin. Sango stood like his stilled heart and fear filled the Kaa Idi Obi. Only the voice of the Alusekere and the rattle of his Sekere echoed bravely within the thick walls of the hall. Sango sat on his throne and listened to the words of Alusekere’s song…the buffalo broke
free. He jumped up angry, “I’ve been merrying when I shoud be grieveing.” The Oyo Mesi dropped to the ground and when they tried to crawl out of Kaa Idi Obi the Alaafin roared, “did she leave with my children?”

The once melodious sekere became solemn, and the Arokin placated Sango’s troubled soul with his oriki:

Oranmiyan’s son
The death, father and father
Great warrior that displays his valour of battle fields
He who looks furtively over fences for someone to fight
The great flood that fights
And snatches the frontage of a father’s compound away from the son
The eyes that water and shed blood
If he enters the stream his horse snort
If he doesn’t enter the streams his horses snort
The one Sango kills
He kills completely
The one Sango kills
He kills completely
Because he can
My father the Alaafin

*
But the betrayal of the Oyo Mesi didn’t pain him as much as the pain lodged in places in his chest. Alaafin Sango sent out parties of senior hunters to the forest where he met Oya, three of them were back. They didn’t find Oya or a buffalo skin near the waterfall. He hoped that the rest of the party would find her and be able to entreat her to come back. He heard from one of Bayanni’s Termites that Oba lived in Igbon, married, and with child. The news had made him search his innards and it shocked him when he came to the realization that he missed her. He knew he had treated her unjustly. He missed her ability to think things calmly and her plots against him. Her love for him didn’t allow her to think them through though, or she would have killed him over a hundred times. He smiled sadly as he remembered her antics and her bluster.

Osun floated about the Aafin, her mind deep in her dreams. He couldn’t tell if she woke up from sleep anymore. She told him she had many children in her dreams and they loved her.

* 

When he stopped searching for her, Oya came back to the Aafin because of her children, and not with the hunters, by herself. She didn’t say she came back for him. She would have trampled the hunters to death as they walked around her forests, but she knew their wives and children. Her motherly love made Sango remember the mothers. He decided to visit the mothers who ruled from the lone tree in the night market.

*
Moonlit Strolls

Orunmila: Epinrin leaves fall softly because they are light. The heavy leaves of poroporo land with a thud while egungun leaves hit the ground with thunder-like reverberation. The same is true of men. Everyone dies as he lives. Everyone succeeds as he performs. (Oyeku Meji)

* 

The Alaafin Oyo, Sango, the third king at Oyo, the companion of the Orisa, the fear that swallows smaller fears, death, the father, and mother walked out of his room dressed like a commoner. Two Arepeju waited outside his chambers. They leaned against the wall when he opened the mat that covered his door. Their lidless eyes stared at him. He didn’t know if they were awake until they jumped off the wall and prostrated as he walked by. He didn’t wear his beaded slippers. He wanted to feel the earth of Oyo intimately. He didn’t wear his royal beads on this stroll. He stood under the verandah of his kobi, and he saw a moon lit courtyard. He moved out of shadow of the Kaa Idi Obi and walked away from the main Aafin gate.

Biri appeared at his shoeless heels, and the Alaafin walked towards the strangers’ quarters of the Aafin. He stood in the shadows and watched the noisy crowd from across the courtyard that alienated them from the rest of the Aafin. He moved closer, and waves of different languages rolled over him. He stopped and listened. He watched Aafin slaves serve food and water. They would serve them all through the night. He saw the woman, a dipomu, he gave refuge. He couldn’t recall where she came from but remembered they accused her of killing her husband. When her village chief had sought his permission to behead her, he declined—insufficient evidence was the reason he gave the chief, not that he needed to give a reason. She ran into the Aafin and held tightly to one of the intricately carved silk wood posts of the Aganju’s verandah, screaming “Alaafin save me.” Her tears made him remember Oba.
He veered away from the strangers and headed for one of the smaller gates, a secret one known only by him and Biri. He raised the creepers covering the gate and he stepped through the Aafin’s walls into the home forest. The moon couldn’t reach through its thick canopy, and he stumbled before his eyes got used to the night. Sango couldn’t see Biri, but he felt his nearness.

He continued to walk away from the Aafin, the path inclined slowly downwards. He turned right at a crossroads and faced the Aafin’s main gate. The night market closed around him. The noise soothed him. He walked towards the outer rim of the market. He heard two women come up behind him, and he slowed down to listen to them.

The community isn’t smilling,” one said.

“It isn’t,” said the other.

“The Ajeles have gone mad with taxes.”

“Like their master in the Aafin.”

Biri slipped out from under Sango’s heels and moved to his side, ready to snuff light out of their eyes, but his master waved him away. Sango walked into a darker part of the market, where the dead but not dead favoured, even the Akudaya complained. One Akudaya told another, “it is time we left the world and become dead.” The other said, “I wish I could shorten the number of my days. I tire of its length.” Sango listened to the complaints of people all over the market about Oyo and his reign. He felt that his ears would drop away from his head from the weight of their heavy words.

He sat under a tree and watched the market clear out of the square. He waited for that time of the night came when the deepest darkness collected in puddles and corners. The mother-birds flew into the market square and became women. But the meeting didn’t start, they sat quietly and waited for him to talk. He didn’t.
“We can see you.” The chief mother-bird said.

“I know you can my mothers.”

“No. We stopped being your mothers many moons ago, you just didn’t notice.”

“You won’t come to see me, so I’m here.”

“It’s too late.”

“A mother never abandons her child.”

“It is too late. The spirit has left the body.”

*

The malevolent wind blew gently at first, whispering coolness on the skins of the Oyo. It moved through cracks in the walls of Oyo compounds collecting secrets lodged in the cracks. It teased out sighs from the people, and whispered their secrets back to them. The laden winds were laden, they grew stronger, gathered sand and threw it at the walls. They opened the cracks, wider, letting in more wind. Slivers of dark clouds appeared in dusty skies. They grew over the days and moved across the face of the moon, and shadows lurked in Oyo. The skies grew bigger and darker, and the shadows crept into compounds. It entered rooms and whispered into ears and gossiping tongues passed them on. The wind cupped these whispers and dropped them into other ears, and the whispers frolicked in their minds. A hot wind blew over Oyo and the Aafin, even the Alaafin felt it in his rooms. The people couldn’t sleep because of the fears that roamed about in their heads at night. During the day, they poured into their squares and protested the rule of the Alaafin Oyo. They tried to cover the din of the whispers, and the earth of Oyo shook with the force of their anger. They waved leaves and branches and chanted about Sango and his heavy yoke, “Let Oyo be. We live with heavy fears in the deep of our chests.”
They cried to their legislators, the Oyo Mesi, to make their grievances known formally to the Alaafin. The Oyo Mesi met and heeded the voice of Oyo, the kingdom would disintegrate under their watch otherwise, but they protected their own interests too. The people threatened to burn down the compounds of chiefs and noble. Basorun gave the Alaafin a calabash filled with parrot eggs and didn’t say anything. The message of parrot eggs reverberated in the silence in the Kaa Idi Obi, “Oyo feels your exhaustion. The people relieves you of their burden. Oyo rejects you. It is time to sleep with your ancestors.” Sango received the calabash from them and walked away into his rooms. The Oyo Mesi looked at him, confused, they expected Alaafin Sango to rage and tear at them.

Sango placed the calabash on a table and sat on his akete. He looked at a corner of the room where several of his beaded crowns were arranged. He picked up his coronation crown and said, “Oyo Mesi want me to look inside my crown, an abomination.” The same crown that made him divine when he wore it would be his death if he looked into its interior. He saw the beaded birds attached to the crown, and he remembered the mother-birds. He had not taken their powers seriously. The beaded birds perched on his crowns and his beaded authority staffs. He remembered their words, “the spirit has left the body.” He understood why they turned their backs to him under the Iroko tree. He sat back and closed his eyes. He would not look under his crown to see what his destiny hid there. He would not poison himself. “I am not sleepy,” he muttered to the crown. Oya’s cry exploded within the walls of the Aafin, “ny son would not die with the Alaafin.” Sango roared from his room and ordered her to keep quiet, “I will not sleep. Rest, your son would not die with me.”

*
Alaafin Sango defied Oyo and in a terrible rage climbed to the top of Ajaka hill. He stood and viewed Oyo metropolis. He channeled his emotions from inside his being and fire roared out of his mouth. He raised his doubled headed axe and called forth lightning and thunder from the skies. He threw them down at Oyo. He would show Oyo his powers and quell the dissensions threatening to burn down Oyo. His lightning stones fell, they became edun ara, and whatever they landed on they set ablaze burning with his rage. Their cries for mercy floated up to him, he didn’t hear or heed, and black smoke rose up from Oyo. He continued. Drained, and his anger spent, he returned to the Aafin proud of the display, no man could stand before him now. They told him of what he had done. He fell to the floor horrified, and Ilari caught him before he touched the ground. “Bring back my brother Ajaka, my reign has come to its end,” he gasped.

His women threw themselves on the earth and clutched their breasts, “Sango o, our husband that kills has killed us with his fury,” they cried. One of his stones burned down the sleeping quarters of his children and concubines. He couldn’t bear to look at the mothers of his children. With great regret for his actions, he decided to leave Oyo, but the people pitied him and told him to stay. He remembered the calabash in his room and he didn’t listen. The Oyo Mesi tried to comfort Sango, but tears fell from his eyes. “An Alaafin must not grieve,” said Samu

“Fetch Alusekere, the Arokin,” Basorun said

Alusekere’s sleepy eyes looked on the distraught person of Alaafin Sango. In his mind, Alusekere opened the verses of the chronicles of Ife and Oyo. He opened an archive many years old. The spirits of his lineage of chanters imbued Alusekere’s thin bent frame with strength, and he danced to the beats his coral beaded gourd. Akigbe’s voice shook as recited the oriki of the Alaafs of Oyo. The words shook his body with the power of history. Alusekere rhymed the exploits of brave Oyo and the history of Oyo. The Alaafin didn’t listen.
The arokin covered the mouth of his sekere and the voice of the gourd deepened, as if possessed by many voices.

Do you hear

Or do you not hear

Who he asked me to praise

We greet the Alaafin

My fathers greet the Alaafin

Alusekere swung his face back and forth as he repeated the deeds of great warriors. He searched inside the minds of long dead Alusekere and revived their stories. Alusekere tried to comfort the Alaafin with precedents and found none.

Which king’s behavior will you emulate Alaafin?

Name the king

But know that one day

An Arokin will say,

On Jakuta, the fourth day of the four-day week

Alaafin Sango did

That which he was not supposed to be

Man of war

The warrior that gathers a town in his embrace

If he is angry with it

He will slam it on the ground
If he is happy with
He holds it tighter

We hear that some sons of yours died
We hear that some daughters of yours died
Death is not new
It happened to Oranmiyan, your father

Sango stepped out to the Aganju and looked back at Alusekere, “I hear you Arokin, the anger in me is no more. But I do not accept this,” Sango said, I do not accept this fate.” Remorseful, he took off his beaded crown and ejigba beads and walked out of the Aafin, barefoot. Biri and Omiran followed behind him. They knew his pride wouldn’t allow them to comfort him. A raging Oya followed him, she mourned her nine with surly winds and pulled down trees in her way. Osun stayed behind in the Aafin inconsolable. Some didn’t understand why she cried, after all she had no child. Others said she cried for her burnt clothes and jewelry, but they couldn’t say it to the face of the woman who loved her co-Ayaba’s children like the ones in her dreams.

*
The king didn’t hang

Sango, Òyá, Biri, Afefe, and Omiran fled the Aafin at night. Sango ran towards Tapa, his mother’s people. Everyone with him entreated him to turn back to Oyo and accept the people’s terms but he refused. He stopped at Koso on the way to Tapa to gather his broken spirit. Biri and Omiran left him at Koso. They believed that he would return to Oyo, if they left him, but the shame of going back to Oyo kept Sango from following his two loyal servants.

The people of Koso knew that a great person passed through their town, but they didn’t know him. They welcomed him at the Aafin of their chief, and Oya. At night, Sango slipped out and wandered around the home of forest. He stared at the sky and remembered the bright star that fell across Oyo that night. It spoke of him and his end. Gbonka roamed free and would continue to challenge him unless he killed him. He had only one choice in Oyo, the calabash of parrot eggs proffered by the people.

He beat his chest and said, “death is quicker than shame.” Sango looked for a great tree. He walked by many, but they didn’t satisfy him until he saw a huge Cotton Silk Wood tree; a community of trees with trunk sized branches. Its roots covered a patch of the earth around him, and the width of its buttress roots made him grin. He climbed over the twisted roots of the Ayan tree and got to its trunk. He patted the tree and whispered to the spirit in the tree, “I greet you.” He made footholds in the side of the tree with his double headed axe and climbed towards its branches. The streaks of a new day appeared in the sky and Sango’s body dangled from the Ayan tree.
Biri and Omiran returned to Koso the morning of the next. Oya thought Sango had left for Oyo without her, “didn’t he go with you?” Biri and Omiran searched inside the small home forest and found him. Biri couldn’t bear to look at his friend’s body, he had failed him when he needed him the most. Biri backed away from the sight several times but came back. He finally made himself move close to the tree and cut down the body. He raised his voice and wept over the body of the Alaafin. Omiran heard his voice and ran towards it.

He sat by the body of the Alaafin and convinced Biri that they go back to Oyo, the people need to mourn the passing of the Alaafin. They ran back to Oyo and its gates they screamed, “the Alaafin hangs from an Ayan tree. The people of Oyo knew they pushed Sango to this, and they mourned his passing with great sorrow. They said, “His reign brought Oyo respect and our neighbours feared our Alaafin whose mouth erupted with fire and smoke. But he had a heavy burden.” The Oyo Mesi put together a group of nobles and told them to bring the Alaafin’s body back to Oyo. Biri and Omiran led the noblemen back to the spot but couldn’t find the body in the Koso forest. They wandered in the forest for days, and the noblemen began to doubt their story. On their way back to Oyo, they found a deep hole in the earth with vegetation cleared from its wide mouth. Biri stopped by it and wandered about the depth of the hole. He peered into it and they heard Sango speak to them from inside the hole, “I am with you. Remember me.”

*

On the third day after Sango’s absence, a heartbroken Oyá left the Aafin and walked to the Northwestern edge of Oyo to the swamps at Ira. She stood at the boundary and looked around her, to her right she could see the land of Ibariba, to the left Tapa, down south Oyo. Here at the boundaries, Oyá’s tears became a flood and they pooled at her feet. She raised her hands to the skies and the earth swallowed her, feet first. She left behind a deep hole and it gushed with
water. Her life force drained into the swamp which trickled into the Great River, and she became one with the lifegiving brackish second flooding of the Greater River. Her servant, Afefe, blew Oya’s tears into a raging river and she birthed nine tributaries before plunging into the rolling salty river of the south.

Oba heard of Sango’s disappearance and the death of her one. She broke free from her husband’s comforting hold and ran towards Oyo, but her wounded heart couldn’t take her body there. She fell to the earth at the southern boundary of Igbon. She heard her husband’s footsteps as puddles formed around her body. She sank into the soft mud and became a river. She flowed through Iwo and passed through the savannah. She continued down south, angry. She left Osun in charge of the Aafin Oyo and in less than a year she let Oya take control of their husband.

Osun walked out of the Aafin gates and, no one could restrain her. Her servants asked her, “To where Ayaba?” She said, “no where.” She wandered outside Oyo and into forests for days not caring about her appearance. At Igede-Ekiti she fell to the ground tired and she became a river. She flowed southward and at the Asejire gorge she frothed into a rapid. She heard Oba’s river seethe with rage for her running of the Aafin. Both rivers, Oba and Oya met at the northern end of the Asejire gorge and tumbled though the depths of the gorge in rapids. At Olumoye, with their anger spent, they became two rivers and slithered away from each other.

Babayanni heard the news of Sango’s disappearance, days after it had happened. The Oyo Mesi didn’t know how to tell her, especially their involvement in the incident. They feared the little king and her Termites and her possible retribution. They decided to tell her their version before she heard the truth, “he did not die,” they said, “he went into the earth and was no more.” “Just like a corpse?” she said. She walked away from the Ilari Fogbonja, Use-wisdom-to-fight, and retired to her rooms. She repeated, “Dada my brother, the cord that moored my life to the
earth.” That night winged termites flew out of the tall termite mounds in the Aafin Seele, after a light rain shower. In the morning, the tops of the termite mounds lay open, beheaded. Beside one, the little king slept in death, her body covered by crawling termites.

Sango’s followers banded together and called themselves Mogba, they said, “Alaafin Sango didn’t hang.” Sango’s opponents mocked his supporters, the Mogba, they said, “their king hanged, yet they lie.” The Mogba climbed Ajaka hill with edun ara and tormented the Oyo with thunder and lightning. They set compounds of dissenters ablaze and the people said, “Sango didn’t hang” to escape his anger from the skies.

*
Another Ending
Another thread of memory
Another whispy thread
Woven into the story of the thunder king

Alaafin Sango, tired of the squabbling of his Ayaba and complaints from the Oyo of his rule decided he needed rest. “The Oyo Mesi started impeachment proceedings against you,” Samu said. Sango knew Samu didn’t give him that information free. He knew Samu would demand a price. Oyo Mesi’s games exhausted him. Sango couldn’t remove his brother’s, Alaafin Ajaka, curse from his mind and his head rang like the worn-out anvil of a blacksmith. “A fit of madness,” some said, and only Osun or Oya could bring him out of it.

Weary of the problems in the Aafin, Sango mounted his horse and rode into the Aafin home forest. He rode for days not stopping until he got to Oke Ajaka. From the hill, he looked down at Oyo one more time and turned his back on it. He rode his horse onwards to Tapa, to the lands of his matrilineal relations. But he stopped at Koso and commanded that a chain come out from a huge Ayan tree. With it, he climbed up into the skies and rested there but for only awhile. Oyo looked for him everywhere but didn’t think to check the skies. One day, he threw his edun ara in the sky and his war lords followed the rumblings of thunder and flashes of lightning to his new abode. They brought with them the troubles of Oyo, “war knocks at Oyo walls via the Ibariba king at Bussa, and his brethren from Illo and Nikki.”

Sango said, “leave me. I enjoy peace in the skies and will rule Oyo indirectly from here, unseen. I will talk to you from the wide expanse of the sky, look for my lightning and thunder.”
Yet Another Ending

Another layer

Caught in a moment of memories

Becomes a story

Sango lowered himself into the earth at Koso. He stamped on the earth thrice and it opened its mouth to him. He had caused the death of his sleeping children and concubines. He threw edun ara from a hill at his insolent people to show them his might. From Ajaka hill, he heard their cries in the fire started by his lightning. He ran to the Aafin Oyo, but he could do nothing to stop the fire. Dejected, he watched Oya try to stop the fire with her winds, but they fueled it and fire burned higher. Even in the bowels of the earth, when he remembered his actions, his hot anger burned his heart and tears at his torn spirit again and again. He reached for the skies and tore it apart in rage. He flashed his lightning across the face of the sky, and his anger rumbled through the expanse of the earth as thunder.

Basorun spoke the words that ended Alaafin Sango’s reign, he spoke it on behalf of the heaving, angry Oyo masses, “the Orisa have rejected you, the people have rejected you, and the mothers-birds have rejected you.”

The words wrapped itself around Sango’s heart and squeezed it hard; a death sentence pronounced over his life. Those words compelled him to commit suicide and die honourably. He rejected the words. Osun and Oya couldn’t strangle him as customs dictated, so he swallowed poison, and walked to Koso.

*
Arokin’s Song

During the time precedences didn’t yet exist in the Aafin Oyo and we were yet in the beginning of our stories. The very first story spoke of our beginning.

A long line of Arokin
Reach far back to the beginnings
A father, my fathers
They were when things were
Are filled with stories
We gathered stories and archived them in words and sounds and dances. We guided male and female kings by citing precedence, gently. We made jests of their pride with precedents gently. We brought to their attention the grievances of the people by citing precedence, gently. We nudged their hearts and spoke to the humanity they carried within divinity, gently. And they danced and listened to our Aro and Sekere while we wove stories of the past with the present and they became our future.

In the Aafin Ife, Owu, Ketu, Sabe, Oyo, and Itoro, Arokin from the clans of the Alaro and Alusekere added verses of the lives of Oba, Osun, Oya, and Sango to their songs. These memories reached back into our past and live on in stories told by the generations of the Arokin.

Seven is the number of a strong man
Seven is the number of man not born illegitimate
Seven are the number of years Sango ruled
And Sango fought ten wars
We were there when the wars raged, and Oyo bled from these campaigns
Esu sat at the crossroads and watched

With his cudgel and staff

And Sango built a kingdom that will last ten thousand years

And three strong women fought by his side

Oba, Osun, and Oya
Work Cited


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