

From the Archives

Excerpts from *The Freedom Fight: A Novel of Resistance and Freedom.*

A Translation by Pamela J. Olubunmi Smith of Adébáyò Fálétí's
Ọmọ Olókùn Èşin

INTRODUCTION

The Novel

Set in 19th century traditional Yorùbáland in South Western Nigeria, *Olókùn Èşin* is a historical tale about feudalism and enslavement, freedom and independence. It chronicles brilliantly the rebellion of an idealist, Àjàyí, son of *Olókùn-Èşin*, a prominent member of the town's Council of Chiefs and the chain reaction of the revolution he mounts against the injustices of enslavement and any kind of feudal practices. His violent protest results in eventual freedom and independence for the people of Òkò from years of servitude under the feudal lord, Olúmokùn, signaling the beginning of the end of feudalism in Yorùbáland.

Told mostly from the protagonist's point of view, with the help of his two prominent compatriots, childhood friend Àyòwí and Ibiwumi, the town's Baálẹ's own daughter, *Ọmọ Olókùn-Èşin* chronicles not only the experiences and struggles of these three idealists, but also the inevitable uncertainties and risks of mobilizing the oppressed rank and file in a rule-of-fear system, sanctioned by traditional authority, the many trials and tribulations suffered at the hands of the wily oppressors, and the risks and frustrations of advancing the movement.

Ironically, despite the novel's tension, the ending is paradoxical. While the freedom seekers succeed in establishing a grassroots movement, first by their own example of charity and basic education, however, their hard-fought campaign is compromised by a less than convincing negotiation for freedom, which they gain by bargaining their forced enslavement for a voluntary servitude. Nonetheless, as with any fight for freedom in the modern world, the separation process between the colonizer and the colonized is tenuous, much like the typical Prospero-Caliban sort of scheming, distrustful bargaining between two "unequals." In Fálétí's words, "the choice of ending is no different from what happens in 'real-life' situations, when the colonizer ensures that he

does not leave the negotiation table completely empty handed.”¹ The incongruous, happily-ever-after ending of weddings among the freedom fighters, while plausible, appears rather contrived.

Nonetheless, its place in Yorùbá literary corpus and contribution to the revolutionary novel sub-genre cannot be overstated. Its significance is three-fold. First, it is the best, perhaps still the only, known example of the revolutionary novel sub-genre in Yorùbá that chronicles the practice of the feudal system in Yorùbá history, thus making it the standard example, a good one at that, of successful experimentation in the sub-genre. Undoubtedly, its depiction of slavery and resistance makes it unrivalled as an eloquent marker of a historical and linguistic age gone by. Secondly, it joins the ranks of the works of only two other leading contemporary Yorùbá writers, whose attention to language make them the remaining literary and linguistic purists of the previous generation of Yorùbá writers. Thirdly, since its publication in 1970, it has withstood the test of time as the premier example of “*ijinlẹ̀ Yorùbá.*”

Adébáyò Fálétí: The Creative Writer and his Works

Playwright, novelist, essayist, critic, radio journalist, humanist, social critic, purveyor of Yorùbá culture and language, poet per excellence – the mile-long resumé is replete with many notables, some of which began even before he stepped foot in a formal western schoolroom. Fálétí’s story is one dominated by creative and literary accomplishments begun as early as his teenage years. BoBornBBrn on December 26, 1935 at Agbooye, Ọ̀yọ́, he spent the first nine years of his life on a number of different farms near Ọ̀yọ́. Even though he had been able to read *Ìwé Kíkà Èkẹta*, (*Primary Reader*, level 3) of the standard (CMS) primary school text, he did not begin his formal Primary School education until age 9. At age 15, he began collecting *oríkì* praise poems of hunters, having been influenced by a chance encounter with D. A. Ọ̀basa’s *Oríkì Orílẹ̀* (lineage praise poetry). He began teaching at 16 and by age 17, he had written his collection of 100 proverbs. A year later, he began his operatic and acting career by joining various theater groups.

Holding day jobs from tax collector to produce inspector, to tax clerk, he wrote plays and poetry in Yorùbá and English. However, it was not until 1954, on the advice of a close friend, that Fálétí began writing mainly in Yorùbá. His *È dá kò L’Àròpin*, which he wrote during his senior year of secondary education (1951-1955) at Ibadan Boys High School, Ibadan, earned him the 1955 Western Nigeria Festival of Arts Award – one of several such prizes he won three consecutive years for poetry. The next five years were filled with a flurry of award-winning creative writings – plays, short stories, volumes of

1 An interview with the author, 12/10/08.

poetry, essays and articles on Yorùbá Institutions, poetry readings on Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, including three of his major works, *Nwón Rò Pé Wèrè Ni* (1956), *Ogun Àwítéḽẹ̀* (1956), and *Ọmọ Olókùn Eṣin* (1959), which were published ten years later between 1960 and 1969.

His combined twenty-year stint in cinema, news-casting, and program production, first at the Ministry of Home Affairs and Information (1956-59) and then at the Western Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation (WNTV/WNBS) from 1959 to 1976, afforded him the opportunity to not only write, produce and direct several plays, but also to produce a number of Yorùbá traditional culture programs on television and popularize serialized readings on radio. As an avid exponent of Yorùbá traditional culture and creativity, he not only studied Yorùbá poetry formally under the Yorùbá Historical Research Scheme headed by Professor S. O. Bìòbákú in 1962, but he also taught Advanced Yorùbá language at the Institute of Extramural Studies, University of Ibadan and edited *Olókun*, an intellectual journal in Yorùbá, from 1963-65. Despite a three-year hiatus during which he attended and obtained a B.A. in English with honors (1965-68) and a certificate of Proficiency in French Language and Civilization from the University of Ibadan and the University of Dakar, Fálétí continued his prolific output of creative works. His published literary works include: several essays and articles on Yorùbá Institutions in *Olókun* and *Àwòrèrín*; creative works of poetry, prose, drama and script writing – *È da Kò L'Àrópin* (1965); *Nwón Ro Pe Were Ni* (1965); *Ogun Àwítéḽẹ̀* (1965); *Ọmọ Olókùn Eṣin* (prose, 1969); *Ìdààmú Páàdì Minkàilù* (drama, 1971); *Baṣòrun Gáà* (drama, 1971); *Ewì Adébáyọ̀ Fálétí I & II* (poetry, edited by Professor Ọlatunde Ọlatunji 1982); Adejoke Ara Ijileje (collection of children's stories, edited by Professor Ọlatunde Ọlatunji). Included in his numerous published and unpublished documentaries, film scripts and film and video productions, a number of which he either directed and/or acted in substantial roles on stage, Radio or Television are: *Ọmọ Olókùn Eṣin* (filmed as *Ìjà Òminira* by Love Films), *Ọbátálá, Ò'Duà Heritage* (a Galaxy Television Production), *Àgbò Méjì* (video, 1990), *Ọkúnrin Tí Ó Ju Ọkúnrin Lọ* (video, 1994), *Àfọnjá* (screenplay, REDEL Productions – 2001), *Mágùn* (Thunderbolt) (Screenplay, 2001), *Baṣòrun Gáà* (video, 2003), *Ṣawo Ṣẹ̀gbẹ̀rì* (screenplay, 2004). Presently, Fálétí's creative-works-in-progress include an extensive Dictionary of Yorùbá Names – Pronunciation and Meaning, a screenplay of Kírìjì and Kúrunmì, epics of Látòósà and Kurunmi, two great Yorùbá warriors. The list goes on and on. In addition to creative writing, Fálétí has remained active in research, intellectual presentations and academic and public debates on the state of broadcasting, drama, and Yorùbá culture.

In a public and professional career that spans formally over three decades, Fálétí has earned his place of eminence among the Yorùbá men of letters gone

before him but who lit the way. Awards, the first and major one among many, which came in his early years in secondary school, are far too numerous to enumerate, and attest to a lifetime of literary, professional and civic achievement. Although the mere mention of the name “Fáléńí” to the rank and file tends to initially evoke poetry at its best and highest form, *ewi ijinlẹ̀* to the initiated, however, the name evocation “in the professions” soon takes on momentary associations: doyen of Yorùbá language and culture, *ipa takuntakun ... láti mú imọ̀ èdè, àṣà àti Litírésọ̀ Yorùbá dàgbà* (Egbẹ̀ Onímọ̀ Èdè Yorùbá, 2005); (Yorùbá) language purist; distinguished artist; pioneer in the development and growth of broadcasting in Nigeria (National Broadcasting Commission Award, 2006); dramatist, producer, commentator, translator, script writer, consultant – WNTV-WNBS, Broadcasting Corporation of Ọ̀yọ̀ State (BCOS), Radio O-Y-O., AFAN Productions Ltd., MAMSER. Such eminent associations as these are endless as is the commitment to preserve for posterity the historical and socio-cultural aspects of Yorùbá life. His erudition, imprinted with both traditional, “*ijinle*” Yorùbá lore (the classics) and the fundamentals of Western letters, is the much-needed legacy to which the culturally con-founded generation-X can look forward.

Yorùbá culture, language and literature

Perhaps more than any other African culture or language, Yorùbá – the people, the language, the culture – was the envy, the stellar example of possibilities, the affirmation of the very principles espoused for the frontrunner status it enjoys globally as a result of its diasporal expansion beyond the borders of its western Nigerian motherland. Today, this global status encompasses Western Nigeria as well as adjoining Bènin (formerly Dahomey), with its influence transcending the spheres of art and religion in the western world and the black diaspora, including Cuba, Brazil, Haiti, Trinidad, and the Oyotunji Village of South Carolina, USA. The vitality and durability of the culture continue to be the topic of numerous studies by Yorùbá and non-Yorùbá scholars.² Yorùbás claim a vital patrimony that continues to bustle with oral and scripted creativity, which is accounted for by their own firm commitment to reconcile their culture and traditions with the inevitable influences of modernization through the medium of literacy. Writing in Yorùbá has remained a fervid activity since 1848, and notably so with the 1938 publication of D. O. Fágúnwà’s *Ọ̀gbójú Ọ̀dẹ̀ Nínú Igbó Irúnmalẹ̀*.

Yorùbá love of rhetoric is much celebrated, thanks in part to the genius of the language itself and to the legacy of Yorùbá writer D. O. Fágúnwà, who

2 Babalólá & Gerard, 1971; Obiechina, 1975; Olábimtàn, 1976; Ìsòlá, 1978; Okpewho, 1983; Adébájo, 1991, etc.

unlocked its vast linguistic treasury much to the delight of an appreciative Yorùbá reading audience in the 1940s and 1950s. Yorùbás themselves take great pride in this acclaimed love of rhetoric, an acclaim whose perpetuity they owe to stalwart wordsmiths of the first generation such as Fágúnwà, Chief Fábùnmi, Isaac Dèlànṣ, who paved the way for second generation writers and word spinners such Adébáyö Fálétí, Akínwùmí Ìṣòlá, Ọládẹ̀jọ Ọ̀kédìjì, etc. To date, Yorùbá has evolved into a metalanguage in response to the tremendous influence of science and technology such that renowned socio-linguist and Yorùbá scholar, Ayo Bamgbose, noted the tremendous breadth of the language's expansion from the mid 19th century to the present, with much credit "to generations of writers, preachers, interpreters, translators, and scholars who have helped to expand the role of the language into new frontiers" (64). Most notable of these "new frontiers" is an expansive vocabulary evolving from "at least ten word-coining processes in Yorùbá: naming by comparison, naming by association, euphemism, onomatopoeia, puns, dialect borrowing, nominalization, idiomatization, loan-words, and tonal distortion" (53) for each of which Bamgbose listed one example after another, illustrating the creativity and linguistic ingenuity of the Yorùbás. With such linguistic acuity, little wonder that Yorùbás delight in rhetoric, in spite of themselves, and thereby ensure the vitality of their language and culture. It is this patrimony that has led many literary scholars and linguists to predict with much certainty, of all African languages, the perpetuity of Yorùbá.

Inevitably, any discussion of the evolution of Yorùbá language and culture would fall short of its merit without mention of D. O. Fágúnwà's contribution to the culture's literary history. Although much had been written prior to Fágúnwà, however, notably, it was Fágúnwà's 1948 publication of *Ọ̀gbójú Ọ̀dẹ̀ Ninu Igbo Irúnmalẹ̀* that marked the genesis of Yorùbá literature. Since then, writing in Yorùbá has remained a fervid activity, ensuring the endurance of Yorùbá language and its literature. Fágúnwà reveled with relentless pleasure and delight at pushing the boundaries of Yorùbá language to its linguistics limits. For this, he undoubtedly still holds a place of prominence in the literary and linguistic annals of Yorùbá language studies. As master rhetorician, Fágúnwà was the ultimate manipulator of Yorùbá language and storyteller, whose legacy became the yardstick for future Yorùbá writers. For all the criticism leveled at him for "sermonizing" *ad nauseam* in his novels, critics invariably equally and unequivocally laud his "admirable" use of language and his deftness at manipulating the Yorùbá language. It is from this legacy of rich linguistic and literary background that future writers such as Fálétí emerged.

When it appeared that the immediate years after Fágúnwà's untimely death would be filled with nothing but blind imitations of his style, the next generation of Yorùbá writers (Duro Ladipo, etc.) stepped up to the plate, as it were,

and not only filled the inevitable void many had feared and predicted, but also took on, quite ably and courageously, the linguistic challenge, similarly mining the vast resources of the language and extending even further the frontiers of the novel genre (* note Ìṣọ̀lá's comments on the subgenres of the novel). Thus, like their predecessors, Yorùbá contemporary writers, notably Adébáyò Fálétí, Akínwùmí Ìṣọ̀lá and Ọ̀ládẹ̀jọ̀ Ọ̀kédìjì, exploit the language's store of linguistic devices, pushing the Yorùbá language to the depths of its linguistic and creative limits.

While these writers have been influenced by the Fágúnwà in varying degrees, however, it is clear from their creative works that they have forged their own distinctive styles, parting ways almost immediately from Fágúnwà's fantasy style. Fálétí is a classic example of post-Fágúnwà Yorùbá writers, who like Fágúnwà

Fálétí and the Yorùbá Literary Canon

By all accounts, Adébáyò Fálétí and his compere, Akínwùmí Ìṣọ̀lá, are the leading contemporary Yorùbá writers, master manipulators of Yorùbá language – writers in whose hands the language yields pliantly. Versatile in all genres, Fálétí has dominated the poetry genre for the last four to five decades, during which time he has been engaged in the preservation of Yorùbá language and literature. Unlike socio-linguist, Ayo Bamgbose, of the liberalist school, Fálétí, like Ìṣọ̀lá and Ọ̀kédìjì, represents perhaps the last of the purist school. In his critical work on the distinct features of the Yorùbá novel, Akínwùmí Ìṣọ̀lá espouses this language purist stance in no uncertain terms, stating plainly four characteristic features of the writer's art, among them content, eloquence, but most importantly, “beautiful, elegant language” as overriding qualities or values by which a writer and literary works are to be evaluated – essentially, rudiments of a Yorùbá literary canon.

To this end, he speaks of three categories of writers: “the good,” “the so-so,” and “the superlative.” Contextually, his insightful analysis bears reiterating here. The first category of writers, he notes, are more content and narration focused than they are with rhetorical devices – “the fabric of the language.” Generally, good story tellers, whose work, in Níyì Ọ̀ṣúndáre's words, “[h]ave more artifice than art, more cunning contrivance than easy grace” (359), but nonetheless in works which, unconcerned about artistry, they are simply “concerned mainly with the facts of the story” rather than with the “pleasant turns of phrase” that blend tidily and artistically into the[ir] prose” (87). The second category of writers, “the potboilers”, whose works, also, constitutes the majority of Yorùbá novels today, are characterized by a lack of creativity and a bothersome “ordinariness of language.” Understandably, their

creative imagination is limited to aping stock themes, and their “inattention to the strict demands of literary elegance” results from pandering to a “school market” audience (89) -- hence, their oversimplification of language. However, what the works of such writers as Afolabi Olabimtan (*Kékeré Èkùn*, 1967), Oladipupo Yemiitan (*Gbòbaniyi*, 1972) and T.A. Awoniyi (*Aiyé Kòótó*, 1973), lack in linguistic elegance, Ìṣọ̀lá notes, is more than made up for with “humorous use of language” (96). The third category, though representing a small percentage of Yorùbá novels, Ìṣọ̀lá reserves for only a handful of literary stalwarts and craftsmen, “the most careful users of the language”, whose works are characterized by a variety of figures of speech and rhetorical devices and the “use [of] varying linguistic patterns of which the deliberate evocation of similarities through parallel structures through the use of simile, the special use of proverbs and idioms are noteworthy” (98). Adébáyò Fálétí (*Ọmọ Olókùn Èṣin*), Oladejo Òkédìjì (*Àjà L’ó Lẹ̀rù, Àgbàlagbà Akàn, and Atótó Arere*), and Ìṣọ̀lá himself, doyens of Yorùbá culture and guardians of what appears to be the passing age of “knowledgeable m[e]n at ease in the creative use of language [they have] mastered so well” (101) make a fitting trio of language and literary purists, trumpeters for the language’s past triumphs, and advocates for its future. Indeed, as writers of the purist school with a mission, they are not unlike the scholars of the French Academy in their commitment to language’s survival.

As Bamgbose noted, Yorùbá language is gifted with linguistic dynamism. The implications of its fast paced evolution are broad for the language itself and its literature. The literary vanguard of classical Yorùbá understands the implications of “changing times”; after all, its members were themselves beneficiaries of the literary and linguistic legacies of the ‘old masters’ before them, which allowed them to fashion their own distinctive linguistic styles with “the power and conviction of great writers.” In other words, avowed purist notwithstanding, what Fálétí and Ìṣọ̀lá decry in his book-length analysis of the state of the Yorùbá novel is not necessarily the passing of “old age” artistry and what it stood for in and contributed to the literary canon, but what appears to be the paucity of “new age” artistry that is “mining” the language evolution with equal artistic and literary commitment as did those gone before them.

Translation Issues

The text

The original text, written in 1959, was first published by London University Press in 1970. The Yorùbá text from which the present translation was made, was published in 1993 by Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) PLC. While writing a film script from the 1993 edition, Fálétí discovered

several serious and substantive interpolations of the text, a practical rewrite of Chapter 5, and several outright omissions of text. What transpired editorially is anyone's guess. But what initially appeared simply as "a case of the editors taking liberties with the original and suiting their fancy," as Fálétí resignedly tried to shrug off the interpolations he discovered, turned out to be more serious as I noted over fifty discrepancies beyond obvious spelling errors. The many modulations of the text, I discovered during the translation process and confirmed with the author include: rewrites, paragraph switchings, several italicized texts, thrown in randomly throughout the text, accidental markings (from perhaps student and/or editorial apprentice errors during a process of farming out the application of diacritical markings in line with orthographic updates). These were nightmarish for the translation, as the "check-with-Fálétí" errata list swelled, slowing down the process considerably.

Unfortunately, copies of the original 1970 London University Press, long out of print, are unavailable. Fortunately, Fálétí had not destroyed the long-hand manuscript from which he was able to mark out where the interpolations occurred in order to remedy and restore textual accuracy, which allowed the translation to be made based on the author's own marked-up text (see Appendix) and the subsequent, lengthy translator-author walk-through emendation of the text. For instance, without a chance question during an interview with Fálétí, in which I mispronounced Akóḍà, the name of an important secondary character, as Akóḍà, according to the diacritics in the botched up text, the sense and meaning of the translation would inevitably have been skewed. Inevitably, the privilege of my many author-translator interactions was both unusual and invaluable. Without these interviews, which were more informal, first-hand, anecdotal narratives in the history of traditional Ọyọ empire and confirmatory lessons in an antiquated vocabulary than they were typical, formal interviews, achieving the eloquence of the original in English, with its linguistic and lexical peculiarities, would have been problematic.

Novel's – language and style (lexicon)

While some of his plays have been criticized for too much melodrama and his works of fiction for their loose, undisciplined structure, his well-crafted poetic oeuvres and his signature use of arcane autochthonal words and phrases have earned him the befitting moniker: *Àgbà nínú Akéwì tí sọ̀rò̀ ijínlẹ̀* (The Master Poet who proffers profound messages). As fellow Yorùbá writer, Akínwùmí Ìṣọ̀lá aptly noted in *The Modern Yorùbá Novel* (1998), the unparalleled fabric of Fálétí's language is classical Yorùbá language at its best from the hands of a master poet, whose "deliberate reanimation of old words throw the reader back effectively into the culture and civilization of 19th century Yorùbá empire" (Ìṣọ̀lá 99).

Historical space

In Fálétí's own words:

A dramatist is not a historian. You use materials of history to write a new work. If you want the facts of history, you go back to the historians. You don't teach history through drama except you want to write drama as strictly bound by the history of..."³

Thus, if the creative work itself is part fiction, the towns and their names are not fictional. For example, Otu, not far from Işeyin, Baba Ode and Ago Are are still extant towns that can be found on any map of the former Western Region of Nigeria. As for characterization, one character and place, in particular, stand out as the model for both the protagonist and locus of the story. The protagonist, Àjàyí, Omo Olókùn Eşin, was modeled after Fálétí's personal friend and hero, who indeed "was a rebel, so to speak, in Otu," the town where Fálétí worked as a pupil teacher. And Oko appears to be a fictional name for Oyo, given the history of excesses by the ruling class. As to the probability of Ibiwumi's character and actions in the novel, Fálétí explains simply:

[Ibiwumi is] a pure coincidence and an attempt to build up a good plot. At least for such a revolution to succeed there needs to be accomplices. For such an accomplice to come from their local royal line makes for a good story/plot line.

A good, interesting plot line it is indeed!

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Chapter One

Rebellion at the Thatch Farm

The blazing sun was at its zenith; its noon-day heat brutal and unabating. The breezeless, sweltering afternoon unleashed its torrid, humid fury such as we had never before known. Parched mortals dragged about listlessly, sweltering, withered from thirst. Our make-shift foot ware, obviously no match for this infernal torment, seared our feet. The scourging handle of our harvesting scythe, like hot embers, branded our already blistered palms. Ordinarily, it would be unnerving enough even under the normal circumstances of our servitude without such elemental conspiracy. My frayed nerves, at its breaking point, hardly needed provocation from the harsh, grating voice of Baálè's servant barking orders at us at every turn as he marched from one end of the field to the other. By now we were in mid-field, harvesting the thatching grass slated for delivery to Òkò. That was one among many of our bondsmen's annual obligations to Òkò.

The overzealous overseer patrolled, screaming at the top of his lungs, thrashing indiscriminately those of the bondsmen who, their backs bent, did not see him coming their way fast enough to straighten up. As for me, I had been erect for a long while, stretching my aching back. Hardly the case, but perhaps the man had not noticed me, or perhaps he had noticed but had chosen to say nothing, I do not know. However, as furiously as he was lashing out at the offending bondsmen with his whip, he seemed careful not to strike in my direction. Instead, he appeared to look the other way, perhaps intentionally, I surmised.

I knew it would not be long before some disgruntled laborer would sneak off to call attention to my liberties and insist that unless the overseer were playing favorites, he ought to not only to subject my back, same as everyone else's, to the lash, but he needed to keep a watchful eye on me to ensure that I toil like everyone else and not take any more stretch breaks until after all the thatching had been harvested at dusk, as scheduled. Ròtì was this infamous, officious task-master's name.

No sooner had Róti heard the complaint than he fixed his stern gaze in my direction. When he saw that I was not merely standing, resting, but that I was doing so boldly, with arms akimbo, he made straight for me, bounding towards me with the pace of one intent on dealing a crushing blow. As he came charging toward me, a voice apprised me of his approach in hopes that I would take to my heels in time to avoid the inevitable onslaught. Instead, I responded nonchalantly, "Yeah, I see him." My informer pressed his concern more urgently, "What! You see him coming and you've not taken to your heels?"

"Me, take to my heels? Why?" I replied, corky and impenitent. That shut him up; he did not say another word.

While this man and I spoke, Róti charged steadily towards me, looking fiendish, like one carrying hot coals in his bare hands. Just before he reached me, it had become obvious to everyone that I was his target. So, they took up the cry, every single man, from every corner, "Run! Run! Run!" they urged. I made no response. Instead, I shifted my weight and stood, solidly rooted to the same spot like a stump!

A few feet before Róti reached me, he lifted up his whip, expecting to deal its forceful blow to my back – yes, that same obstinate back that was now registering its first public defiance against the yoke of servitude to Baálè. Little did he know the scheme I had up my sleeve. Just before the blow fell, I deftly dodged to the right, throwing Róti off balance, horsewhip and all. As he was falling, I too went down so I could legtrip him. This is how I first disarmed Róti and made him eat dust. The older ones among the bondsmen present groaned in despair for the inevitable trouble that lay ahead. "Oh dear, oh dear, young man!" they muttered.

Róti had barely spat out a mouthful of dirt when he bellowed at the now confounded bondsmen.

"What! And you imbeciles are standing there gawking! Kill off the worthless, son-of-a-madman lout! Bludgeon the idiot to death!" he bellowed.

Seconds passed before a few of the bondsmen feebly lurched at me. As the first man raised his weapon to strike the first blow, I stayed his hand with my scythe, slashing his hand rather badly. The man let out a shrill, blood-curdling scream. Seeing that, the others backed off, keeping their distance. I still would not flee as would have been expected, and instead of wilting at the mere roar of this bully, I held my ground. By now I had more or less become the proverbial fish bone in everyone's throat.

Importantly, now that my challenge had compromised Róti's authority, he didn't dare touch me after he had managed to drag up and dust off himself. I had successfully called his bluff and reduced him to an impotent, screaming bull. All he could do was to bellow impotent threats at me, "You lout; you are

in deep trouble. Your father, your mother, your family is in trouble. The entire lot of you will pay for this,” he threatened.

My brothers with whom I had been harvesting the thatching grass took these threats seriously and were soon in tears. As for me, I remained steel faced, nonchalant like a man about to face his death. I stared down my older brothers with withering looks and scolded them for cowering to the bully, “Pshaw, look at you all, crying like a bunch of wimps!”

Róti soon managed to face me, “Get back to work right now! This matter will be settled later when we return to town,” he bellowed. With mounting courage I threw back my own challenge in his face, assuring him, in no uncertain terms, that henceforth I shall harvest thatching grass for absolutely no one. Not now, not ever again! Everyone was stunned by this brazen boldness. My brothers entreated with me, but I was unmoved. The elder bondsmen among us enjoined me, but I remained resolute. Instead, undaunted, I turned and walked away from the field, without another word. All the bondsmen stood watching, with mouths agape, confounded beyond measure, except for my older brothers, who railed at me every step I took as I marched straight home, undeterred.

Chapter Two

My Behavior explained

Understandably, dear Reader, perhaps this was unruly and unbecoming behavior, but I plead your indulgence, your understanding and feel compelled to explain why such incivility because, you will surely agree that, ‘there’s no wrath without provocation’. Besides, as we know, when a man weeps, does he not do so from the depths of mental anguish? Thus, I feel compelled to offer this brief explanation, so you will understand:

During the time this incident occurred, our town was under the tutelage of Òkò. My own hometown is Òtu, one of many smaller ones of Èkù Òsi principality. The Ògùn River is the boundary line that separates Òkò from one of its booty towns, further down towards the south. All the towns north of this boundary line comprise of the region we call Òkè Ògùn. This, therefore, makes me an Òkè Ògùn citizen from Òtu town. There is a cloister of towns in this Òkè Ògùn region. The most important among them include: Ọ̀yọ́-Mòkọ, Ọ̀yọ́-Koro, Ọ̀yọ́ Eléégún, Òtu, Ìşẹ̀yìn, Şakí, Ìwéré, Òkèihò, Ìgànná, Tedé, Ìgbòho, Ìgbèti and Kìşí. Some other smaller ones are Òkè Amù, Ipápó, Ilerò, Itaşá, Ìdikó, Ahá, Ìjío and Ìràwọ́. There are many other much smaller ones than these. Anyway, together, we make up one nation.

However, as large a body as we appear to be, ours has not been the proverbial “might in numbers.” Indeed, our number has not saved us from enslavement. Rather, we are slaves, colonized. We are mere fodder for the lazy Òkò. Annually, more than a hundred or so sons of the *òba* of Òkò would descend on the entire Òkè Ògùn region, pillaging and extorting all manner of gifts and donations, selling human beings at will and living it up indiscriminately off the people’s brawn and sweat.

Despite this, annually, the entire Òkè Ògùn nation is obligated to pay heavy taxes in to the Òkò treasury. Not only that, we must harvest the thatching reed to build and re-thatch the *òba*’s palace, and also carry to Òkò the supplies, including the wild game⁴ used for the celebration of the *òba*’s annual festival. To add insult to injury, whatever meat supply we are carrying for delivery, we cannot partake of during the journey even if it means we must starve to death. The rank and file may not roof their houses with this special, premium thatching grass, which is reserved for the *òba* only, even though it is we, the poor, common folk who must cultivate and harvest it. Of course, this high-grade, premium thatching bamboo grass makes the best roofing; its long, straight stalk and thick fiber make it durable and long lasting. Because it is rot resistant, everyone but the *òba* is forbidden to use it. We, the rank and file, must use the less durable, rot-prone, common thatching spear grass – the type, which rots and must be replaced annually.

A most vexing issue is the distance to Òkò. Of the Òkè Ògùn colonies, the closest one to Òkò is Òyó, a whole day’s journey on foot. Some of these colonies are as far flung as two days’ journey, some three days and yet others even as much as five days. Everything we carry to Òkò we must carry on our heads and transport on foot. Now, when we consider these burdensome, head-toting loads and tedious, exhausting journey on foot, not to speak of attendant starvation, I reckon the reader should be less inclined to denounce my rebellion. Moreover, were we to add insult to injury, considering this servitude and ingratitude of the people of Òkò, I am convinced, Reader, that you are likely to wonder why I did not rebel worse than I did or even sooner. The abuse gets even more intolerable when, after we all the pain and suffering we endure to transport the loads to Òkò, the townspeople do not as much as offer us a sip of water for our parched throats or even a morsel for our trouble. And, infrequently as it does happen, if and when the *òba* does offer us food, what eventually reach us, if anything at all, are scraps, after his servants had had fill. Even more egregious is this invidious act: should anyone from the colonies

4 Considered a delicacy, *èran ìgbé*, literally, bush meat, is hunted in the bush/forest.

commit the most trifling of infractions, he is punished most severely as if he had committed a grievous crime. But, alas, how do you deter a prodigal? Can you much blame these shrewd, shiftless lot when, to them, our generosity is a compulsion, not a kindness for which they are obligated to thank us?

Unfortunately, by sheer number and cunning the Òkè Ògùn people have assailed the Otu into mindlessness, and deftly robbed them of every ounce of pure commonsense. Alas, it is this lack of shrewdness that has made us easy prey to these shiftless slackers, who are too lazy to do their own farming much less clear the brush from their overgrown roadways. It is Òtu men who carry the supply of yamflour to their *oba*, Olúmokò; it is we who provide them with honey, and for shame, even the indigo with which the *oba*'s wives dye their cloth. If we were astute at all, we would have liberated ourselves from such servitude and exploitation long ago. Such travesty it is, to think our population is many times that of Òkò's, but the Òkò people are remarkably keen and have used their cleverness in duping us to their advantage. And we the people of Òtu, what have we done to stop them? Absolutely nothing. We are nothing but fools. The greater we are in sheer numbers, the less acuity we've shown for ordering our own lives.

This state of affairs fomented in me a long, abiding hunger for change. How I detest bondage of any sort. I renounce enslavement and do not want us to live our lives, colonized by Òkò any longer. We hold no pawns. We want no pawns, and therefore feel we should not have to be pawns under any overlord. I desperately hunger for independence. If I had my way, I would want freedom from Òkò for our people. And if the Òkè Ògùn nation shuns the drive for independence, that's their call, but I would not want us, Òtu people, to have a hand in our own perpetual servitude. For me, personally, I denounce and throw off any form of enslavement by Òkò henceforth. The need to satisfy this desperate hunger for freedom, dear Reader, explains simply my behavior, my revolt, at the thatch farm.

Chapter 3

My Appearance before Baálè

After I had stormed off the thatch farm, I headed straight home. Father was home eating lunch. As soon as he saw me enter he dropped his spoon nervously. It was unusual for me, or any of my brothers, to return home so early in the day, really.

"Àjàyí," he called out, anxiously. "Are you alright? Is anything the matter? Where are your brothers?"

"They are still at the farm. Nothing is the matter." I answered.

"If there's nothing wrong, as you say, then what are you doing home so early and alone, without your brothers?"

“Róti kicked me out,” I offered, reluctantly. “As is his habit, he was going around thrashing the workers. I, for one, refuse to stand for that kind of abuse henceforth. Absolutely, no more. Because I stood up to him, we got into a fight.”

Quite an intuitive man, my father sensed there was much more to it than I had offered. He intuited that whatever it was, it was dangerous. That set him off ranting.

“Pray, tell me, when did flogging the workers become your problem? How does doing his job become your business? Do lazy, unmotivated workers, not deserve the lash? And this should be reason enough for you to just walk off the job, young man? May God save me from the misery you’re about to heap on your head!”

My older brothers soon returned home in the midst of father’s railing, their very presence adding fuel to the fire that was beginning to rage in him. “And, precisely, what is the reason for this early return home anyway?” he queried them too. “Well, that son of yours has stuck his foot in his mouth and brought trouble on your head.” It was my eldest brother who answered him. My father had guessed as much and known I would get myself neck deep into some kind of trouble, he spat. My elder brother filled him in on the details of the fight at the farm, stressing, especially, how I had made Róti eat dust, how I had slashed someone’s hand with a scythe, and how I had left the farm in a huff.

My father listened carefully, forcing back tears of anger. He arose quietly, lurched at me and barraged me with slaps to the face and heavy blows to my ears, screaming, “You want to kill me with all your trouble making. I am not a troublemaker. I am a peace-loving man.” He gave me a sound beating until the women of the household intervened, begging and pleading with him to spare me. No sooner had the women succeeded in finally pulling me away from my father’s grip than my mother rushed in to the crowd’s pleading chorus: “Enough, enough, don’t kill him; please, that’s enough.” When mother heard the news that I had started a war on the farm, she too pounced on me, screaming as she pounded my head and shoulders with her fists. Once again it was the women of the household rescued me, telling mother I had received punishment enough already from my father. My brothers stood back, watching me take this battering, without saying a word. It was not until afterwards, when things had quieted down, that they broke down the details of what had transpired after I had stormed off the farm. Apparently, Róti must have feared that other farm hands might follow my act of rebellion and disobey the *oba*’s laws as they choose, without consequences. Róti wisely calculated that should things get out of hand, as they very well might have if he didn’t clamp down now on the workers, it is he who stood to suffer the consequences of a worker rebellion the most, since it is he who would have to be at the Baálẹ̀’s beck and

call and do all the grunt work we were forced to do. To stave off any ideas of rebellion, he ordered an immediate assembly of the farm hands.

“Let me reassure you, Àjàyí’s act of civil disobedience will cost him dearly. For starters, as punishment for his impudence today, he and his entire family sentenced to the labor of harvesting. They will harvest without any help whatsoever the remaining acres of grass fields that the entire village had been assigned to harvest,” he announced, before dismissing them all. This early dismissal accounts for my brothers’ early arrival home, barely minutes after I did.

Now, dear Reader, you have no idea of all that is involved in this annual harvesting. At the onset of the dry season, the senior Baálè would summon all the other junior baales, the ones who must assemble the young male harvesters, based on household size and the number of young males in each household. For instance, a household of ten males will be required to contribute five male workers. In which case, households with fewer males bear the brunt of this conscription rule the most. As you can imagine, in a household with only three males, all three are required to report for work. Alas, that was my family’s lot; there were the three of us – my two older brothers and me. My father is the fourth male. Of course, he’s too old to count. Consequently, whenever there is the summons to thatch-harvesting duties, my father was always obliged to send all three of his sons.

When father finally calmed down much, much later, friends and relatives coaxed him to return to his half-eaten lunch, by which time his appetite had waned. He merely picked at his plate of food, then, finally pushed it away. My brothers had likewise lost their appetite. But, not I. As for me, I was not affected in the least bit by their concerns. I wanted my lunch three and then, and did ask for it. Father heard me but said nothing. However, I had barely taken the first bite when he walked over to me and grabbed the plate of food from my hand and dumped it, plate and all, in the trash.

Now, that was enough to unbridle my tongue.

“Father, yes, I did cross the line, I admit. You’ve punished me hard already, and I accept the punishment. But does one have to slave all one’s life? Are you not sick and tired of living the life of a bondsman? Now, if you wish to remain a pawn for the rest of your life, then I am afraid, I do not. God created all humans equal. There’s nothing in His laws that sanctions enslavement of one by another. No man can claim otherwise or use his power or wealth or riches to hold others in perpetual servitude or discriminate against them. And when rich men empower themselves and try to enslave others, then someone has got to stand up to them and say, “No!” I insist that we should no longer be bondsmen. God willing, we will no longer be anyone’s servant bondsmen,” I declared.

My father was stunned beyond words. “What did you say?” he stammered. “Did I hear you correctly? Did you say we *will* no longer make obeisance to the Olúmokò? May Almighty God strengthen our allegiance to Olúmokò. Are you out of your mind? If you no longer want to owe allegiance to Olúmokò, that’s your business. And, if that’s the case with you, young man, I suggest you move away from Òkò and live elsewhere. In case you have forgotten, let me remind you, we are Òkò’s meal ticket – have been for generations and will continue to be for generations to come. You want the long-held tradition broken? God forbid! This kind of treasonous talk is enough to start a war. May Almighty God save me from the perdition you are about to bring on my head,” he finished, quite vexed.

“No, no, I have no intentions of bringing perdition on your head,” I attempted before he could finish speaking. “But you can forget about your father’s generation. If, as you say, your father before you pledged a lifetime of perpetual servitude, then I say, that’s the past, no more, at least not servitude, for this generation.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” father replied. “So, now you think with a snap of the fingers you can do away with a way of life we’ve lived for generations before you were born. Well, let me tell you, young man, may God keep us from harboring any such treasonable thoughts – talk about sacrilege!”

Father was still speaking these words when Kí-tòba-ó-şę, one of Baálẹ̀’ s bondsmen, entered with the message that Baálẹ̀ wanted my father to not only appear before him immediately but he was to bring me along with him.

My father sprang to his feet immediately, threw on a garment and was out of the door in a flash, with me in tow. Our gathered relatives could smell trouble. My brothers, my mother, and some womenfolk formed an entourage behind us. My father was quite vexed and ordered the women to return home, turning a deaf ear to their entreaty to accompany us. ‘Nothing that concerns women in this matter,’ my father told them, dismissing them with a wave of his hand. Mother’s tentative gait spoke volumes of her anxiety. I could tell she didn’t want to turn back.

By the time we arrived at Baálẹ̀’ s, the courtyard was swarming with people beyond its breadth. By all accounts, my notoriety had spread far and wide, presumably from the news mongering of the dismissed farm hands, who, like my brothers, and me were obliged to explain their unusually early dismissal to their own families and sponsors. The assembly was packed full of the town’s elders and a number of women, gathered to witness the handling of this unheard-of case of flagrant civil disobedience.

Since Baálẹ̀’ s assembly hall now overflowed with onlookers, Baálẹ̀ himself had had his royal stool carried out to the courtyard. Róti planted himself beside Baálẹ̀, with eyes blazing like hot embers! The man whose hand I had cut

with the scythe stood next to Róti, the injured limb dangled in front of him like a wall gecko. The majority of the elders were on their feet, too chafed to sit, I suppose. The white smoke snaking skyward from Baálè's pipe cast a shadow on his face, preventing him from seeing us when we entered the middle of the assembly. He became aware of our presence only after one of the chiefs, forcibly yanked the pipe from Baálè's mouth. "Would you put that darn pipe away, for God's sake! This is not the time for jolly pipe smoking, is it? I bet you didn't even see them come in through that haze of smoke, did you?" the man seethed, his teeth clenched in frustration and anger. Startled, Baálè shifted in his seat, sat upright, and fuming with faked fury asked, "Are they here now?" At that very moment our eyes met. Even before he spoke, my demure father was already fully prostrated before him, penitent. "Yes, I am here. I am here, your honor, I lay here before you, my Lord. Have mercy!" he implored Baálè. As for me, not caring one bit about protocol, I merely stood there erect before them and watched.

Baálè nodded my father's greetings, told him to rise. "You have heard by now about your son's transgression, haven't you?" he sneered as my father began to slowly pull himself up. Barely half way up from his prone position, down my father went again, stretched out fully on the ground before Baálè. "Yes, I have been informed. I am fully aware of it. They ensured that I heard about it. I implore you, your honor, save me from this ignominy," he pleaded.

Telling my father to rise once again, Baálè simply put him in his place with a proverb. "One cannot prevent one's offspring from sprouting fangs. Sooner or later, he will discover that he does not have lips large enough to conceal the fangs. Your son has sprouted fangs for teeth, now he must find lips to cover them up." As Baálè gloated, my father, all penitent, turned hither and thither, begging and pleading, more or less groveling, trying to ingratiate himself to Baálè: "Please help me, your honor, it is to you I turn for help in this matter," he importuned Baálè.

All through this exchange between Baálè and my father, the frustrated chief that chided Baálè was restless, now beside himself with anger. Indeed, I had forgotten to mention his name. They called him Òdòfin. Òdòfin cared little for the way Baálè was handling the meeting. As for me, I still stood there before them, without a care, much like a rat in the midst of a crowd in broad daylight. I stood emotionless, my body language carrying my message loudly and clearly.

Finally, after much fuming, Òdòfin turned to face me as he spoke, "And you, young man, you do know the grievousness of your seditious act, don't you?" he hissed.

"No, I don't," I retorted.

“You don’t know? You are not aware that your behavior constitutes a misdemeanor, a criminal act, which carries a heavy penalty?” he shot back.

“In that case, sir, forgive me, but I do beg to differ,” I began. “There is no criminal act here. There is a clear difference between a misdemeanor and a crime. The trouble is, by definition, the result of acts that I have engaged in are by design. All that’s transpired is by no means accidental. They are intentional, calculated and fully planned. I planned them very carefully and carried them out alone. There is nothing criminal about my actions or behavior for which I should be sorry. I have done nothing wrong.”

“What!” the throng of people thundered, their surprise united with shock. Ọ̀dọ̀fin’s jaw dropped, his wide-open mouth like a baby bird’s anticipating its daily feed. We did not know when the wad of chewing *tobacco* on his tongue fell out to the floor.

“What! You criminal! You dare to admit openly that your defiance was by design?”

“Indeed it was, most certainly calculated!” I replied firmly, unnerved.

“Why, what were you thinking? What was your motive?”

“My motive? There’s no complicated motive, other than the fact that I had had enough of Róti’s abuse.”

“Had had enough of Róti’s abuse, eh?”

“Yes, that’s correct, you heard me, and I repeat, I was tired of Róti’s ugly display of power. Not only that, I find your council’s governance spineless, unacceptable and your leadership ineffective. I am sick and tired of all of you,” I blurted out.

The crowd of on lookers was gasped. Ọ̀dọ̀fin was himself stunned to silence. By now, my father, a chief himself like the rest of them, must have been mortified as he stood nervously, watching me from his little corner. The poor man, he abhors any kind of fussing and would go to any length to avoid conflict. But, as the saying goes, in every dark cloud, there is a silver lining. Luckily, many people admire him for his easy-going, law-abiding demeanor. After his long silence, Ọ̀dọ̀fin spoke again, “You are fed up with our leadership and spineless governance, you say?”

“Yes, indeed, I am. Really, in my opinion, your governance is an absolute sham,” I replied.

“And that includes your father as well, right? Is he not a chief, a councilman, like the rest of us? If you’re fed up with us and the system, then perhaps you should have single-handedly installed a different governing body with your own Baálẹ̀, your Ọ̀dọ̀fin, and the whole lot of us replaced...” he droned on and on. So I cut short his sermonizing. “Look,” I began, “all this sermonizing does not concern me. My main concern is...” As I prepared to give a long treatise, my father suddenly bounded toward me with a clenched fist,

intending to shut me up, but Baálẹ̀ swiftly stayed his raised wrist. “Let him be. Let him speak his mind,” Baálẹ̀ ordered.

I expressed much gratitude for Baálẹ̀’*s* intervention without which an assault from my father would have had a catastrophic outcome. A number of things could have happened. Had he assaulted me and forbidden me from speaking, I would have had to either outright defy his authority and speak my mind anyway, taking on and demeaning you-know-who in the process – and this act would have angered a number of people and tarnished my integrity in the eyes of my loved ones and supporters. Or I would have remained silent, have them chastise me publicly, and have the matter resolved there and then. Now, had I elected to do the latter, no telling how long we would have been at it. Nonetheless, I once again thanked Baálẹ̀.

Baálẹ̀’*s* intervention had effectively neutralized my father’s ire and silenced him, at least temporarily. However, it was Àró, another chief, who took up the hue and cry. “Should we not ask him to tell us exactly what all the rancor is about, for crying out loud?”

“My rancor?”

“Yes, you heard me – this gall that’s gnawing at you?” he sneered.

“My rancor is quite simple,” I began, my voice increasingly lowered but audible enough like the voice of a debt broker awaiting a debt settlement. “Yes, my rancor, simply and precisely, is this: I tell you once and for all, I will no longer be a pawn. I refuse to toil for others’ enjoyment,” I declared.

You could see the wrath emblazoned on Ọ̀dọ̀fin’s face. He was incensed as were many of the chiefs as well as the young farm hands that felt I had made them the laughing stock of the town. He turned his head briskly toward me like an owl surveying a slingshot that just whistled past it. “Who are you to dare declare that you will no longer be a pawn. The nerve of you!” he hissed, his chest heaving with spite.

“I am son of Olókùn Èşin, born of Olókùn Èşin, a chief like yourselves. To be born of royalty but live the life of a slave, what interdict! Sired by Olókùn Èşin, only to be a bondsman? Lord forbid!” “Yes indeed, it is I, son of Olókùn Èşin, who boldly, unequivocally say right here and right now, no more slavery for me, ever!” I announced with fervor to the consternation of all those gathered.

By now, Ọ̀dọ̀fin was beside himself with rage. “Ọ̀mọ̀ Olókùn Èşin,” he belted like a raging bull, “Whose sons then do you suggest we should send to be bondsmen since you deem yourself above pawnhood?”

“I did not say others should either,” I replied. “In fact, since I will no longer tolerate any kind of servitude, I should wish the condition on no one else. I say we should all throw off the yoke of bondage, period. That, precisely, is my point, my peeve. As far as I’m concerned, those decades of bondage end

today. I say, enough is enough.” Loud peals of derisive laughter from the crowd greeted my idea. Some wrote me off as one with bats in his belfry; others were bent on driving me insane. But I tightened the screws and put a flea in their ear, going straight to the heart of the matter. “Look, this is no laughing matter. If you find me pesty and my idea ludicrous, then, likewise, you ought to find intolerable and unacceptable your perpetual subjugation at the hands of the Òkò people; in which case, you ought to announce your intent to free yourselves from bondage forthwith. Away with bondage to Òkò forever!” Laughter, this time much more derisive, filled the air. Baálẹ̀ shook his head in disgust mixed with disbelief at my foolish daring.

“Away with bondage to Òkò, did you say?” he seethed. “Is that what you said? If not bondage to Òkò, then bondage to whom? Is it to Ibadan we will pledge allegiance? You know, your stupidity will be your death. A man who neglects to assist his kinsmen may become a slave to an outsider. Better a known master than an unknown one. Òkò is the only master we’ve known and served for generations, and we will continue to do so to our dying day,” Baálẹ̀ said.

The last words had barely dropped from Baálẹ̀’s lips when Àró, fuming furiously, took over the inquisition. “Ọmọ Olókùn Ẹṣin! From which of the honorable Olókùn-Ẹṣin lines are you descended anyway?” he mocked to the delight of the jeering throng.

“Me? I’m a proud descendant of the Olókùn-Ẹṣin of Òtu!” I shot back to utter derisive laughter.

“Even the Olókùn-Ẹṣin of Òkò himself would not be as daring. Who do you think you are? You worthless son of Olókùn-Ẹṣin of Òtu; you come here to wreak havoc. And you know, that proverb you glibly quoted, “To be born of royalty, but live the life of a slave...” you did not originate it and is not yours to claim; when it was first quoted, it was applied in specific reference to the more important Olókùn-Ẹṣin of Òkò, in case you didn’t know that.”

By now, I was fuming. How daring of them to question my name, my honor! “What is the difference – Olókùn-Ẹṣin of Òkò, Olókùn-Ẹṣin of Òtu...-What’s the difference?” I asked.

This retort met with renewed, mocking laughter. Granted, there is a difference alright, according to the time period and tradition. Even my own father, the Olókùn-Ẹṣin of Òtu, would admit that there is a difference. But, as far as I was concerned, for argument’s sake, they are absolutely the same. So, I pressed further. “I think it is preposterous for one lion to claim that he’s the only lion king. Lion King, Olúmokò, King of Òkò, and the Baálẹ̀ of Òtu, as far as I am concerned, are all of the same rank!”

“Oh no,” screamed Baálẹ̀ at once, as if jolted by lightening. “I am certainly not in their league, not even in the same ranking as his sitting mat, you troublemonger. No, no, I’m not big league enough to stand in their company.”

“Fit to be in their league or not, one thing is clear: Our enslavement days are over forthwith,” I countered. This enraged him, indeed. “Alright, young man,” he spat out, “enough of this seditious nonsense you’ve been spouting out here. For all your seditious blabbering and utter disrespect of our traditions, I decree that you and you alone must cultivate our annual allotment of thatching hay to Òkò. Whatever additional portion is required, you will cultivate that too, alone and unassisted.”

The gathered throng shouted their approval, “hurrah.” Róti’s face broke out into a smile. The people were jubilant and relieved, either because this punishment takes the burden off their backs or, perhaps, they believed that this might arrest what they deem to be foolish talk on my part.

But before Baálẹ̀ could finish talking, I interrupted him with this remark: “For the remainder of this year, I shall harvest or cultivate thatching hay for nobody, neither will I allow anyone of you to go to Òkò to pay homage, ever again!”

Angrily, Baálẹ̀, Àró, Ọ̀dọ̀fin, the other chiefs and the rank and file townsfolk turned to my father, railing, “Get your mad idiot of a son out of our sight! It’s all bravado. He is deluding himself; but he can be sure that he and he alone will harvest the thatch from the farm this year. That ought to rid him of all this seditious madness.”

The gathering at Baálẹ̀’s ended in this uproar with the throng of people milling about helter skelter like a pack of provoked stink ants.

Chapter 22

Lágboókò

We had been enjoying a leisurely stroll about town when the thought came to me.

“How about a visit to Baálẹ̀’s?” I suggested to Kọ́lájọ.

Whatever possessed me to think such a thought, I don’t know. But I did anyway, and Kọ́lájọ acquiesced.

Baálẹ̀’s courtyard was abuzz with a seething crowd, bustling here and there. Tethered to a post just outside the courtyard was a huge ram. Drummers, relaxing, sat to one side. Undoubtedly, it was a special day of sorts. We soon spotted a few of the *ọ̀ba*’s attendants and asked them what the fuss was all about. They were making ready for the arrival of an important guest, a prince, worthy of such elaborate preparation, they offered. From where is this prince coming? I ventured. That was bold of me. The prince had departed Òkò

a while Ago and was headed toward Ọ̀yọ́ Koro from whence he sent word to Baálẹ̀ of his impending visit today, the servants informed us.

Mere mention of the name, Ọ̀yọ́ Koro, and I remembered the spoiled brat prince who had torched every single wayside market along the road to Kisi. The thought sent shock waves through me. It was most difficult to watch the servants pour themselves into the elaborate preparation they were making for this arsonist prince! I glanced at Kọ́lájọ to get his reading of the people's docility. Like me, he was furious, but with a quick nudge to my side he signaled restraint.

A few feet away from the *ọ̀ba*'s attendants, Kọ́lájọ pulled me aside. Caution and patience, he stressed, are of the utmost importance. We would have to bide our time and move cautiously if we are to make inroads and gain access to important information, he pressed. Our best plan, he advised, is to mill with the crowd to welcome the prince.

In the midst of our deliberation, we could hear a blaring horn in the distance, intoning these words:

As is a man's might,
So does a man act...

There was no mistaking the signature tune announcing the prince's arrival in the outskirts of the town. Besides, the heralding notes of the *tianko*⁵ flute was unmistakable.

Lágboókùn, Lágboókùn!
Here lies a pit!
And there rises a mound!
The dead does not fear a pit
There rises a bump!
And here lies a pit!

A few bars into the flute's shrill message, I yelled, "Good God, this is incredible! All that fuss, and it's only Lágboókùn after all!" Frankly, I had been truly frightened by the flute's intonation, especially after I learned the identity of this august visitor – the wicked, notorious Lágboókùn, reputed to be the most inhumane of all Olúmokò's offspring. Yes, I too had heard the rumors about his hostile incursions. Merely mention his name and every single Baálẹ̀, without exception, would quake with fear. Unlike his other siblings and many of the *ọ̀ba*'s attendants, he seldom made the pillaging rounds of the surrounding villages. However, woe betide us, the few times he did, the stench of his exploits hung in the air for years, literally. And who is now making a grand entry into Ìgbẹ̀tì but the same infamous Lágboókùn – the very same arsonist

5 A narrow "talking" flute carved from bamboo cut at both ends.

who ruthlessly torched market-places and homes along the road to kisi so he could light his way.

At the first fleeting sound of his signature flute, the townsfolks were sent into frenzied excitement. We too joined in the ado. Drummers hunkered down, drumming wildly. Baálẹ̀ himself was leading the welcoming throng headed for the townsgate.

As Lágboókùn appeared a short distance away, the salute guns let off a round of welcome shots. Unbeknown to me, some hunters had been concealed in the woods to shoot real choice canon rounds as part of the welcome revelry.

Lágboókùn himself, perched atop his horse, was heralded in by his horn blower. A long train of load-toting attendants followed, carrying the sundries of gift items he had looted during his many forays into villages far and wide. Livestock by the numbers trailed; the attendants carried chickens by the dozens. Muscular-bodied guards that followed numbered more than ten. Perched atop his horse, his eyes were glazed as if from too much drinking.

When he and Baálẹ̀ approached each other, Lágboókùn bridled his horse as the crowd, in dead silence, formed an honor guard of sorts along the pathway. The old man Baálẹ̀, Lágboókùn's own father's age-mate, prostrated fully before this punk, as they greeted each other amid the stillness of the crowd. After they had exchanged pleasantries, the crowd buzzed back to life again as it headed back to Baálẹ̀' s house with drumming, dance and all. The sound of Lágboókùn's flute floated above the din:

As is a man's might,

So does a man act.

I say, so does a man act!

Guns boomed and banged, instruments clanged in rhythm. But suddenly, without warning, Lágboókùn roughly bridled his poor horse and gruffly beckoned Baálẹ̀ to his side.

"Baálẹ̀, we've heard nothing but one gun salute after another in this pagentry. What a fine display of skill this is. Now, since your hunters are such adept shooters, they may as well go put their skills to even better use. Have them hunt and bag me a succulent guinea fowl or two for my supper tonight."

As he spoke, Baálẹ̀ merely demurred, chanting, "Absolutely, your honor. May you live long. May you live long."

Straightaway, without blinking an eye, two hunters stepped forward, wordlessly. Even though dusk had descended, they went searching for a guinea fowl for Lágboókùn's supper. It wasn't until they had departed that Lágboókùn resumed his triumphal ride to Baálẹ̀' s house.

I don't recall how we made it to Baálẹ̀' s – we neither jogged nor walked. It was somewhere between a jog and a fast-walk – we sort of sprint-walked. When we finally arrived there, the servants had begun to clear the compound

and chase away the gathered crowd, especially the young children trying to squeeze themselves into the crowd. But we left the bustling gathering, and soon retired to Kòlájò's, intending to return later in the evening to join the reveling. We had gotten word of the famous *Api-nti*⁶ drummers scheduled to entertain Lágboókùn – really about the only event that piqued our interest in all the entertainment that would last until dawn. So, we strolled back home.

Lágboókùn's treatment of the hunters angered me no end. I complained to Kòlájò against his entreaty for patience. I knew Lágboókùn was once more up to his rampant abuses; once unbridled, always unchecked, unchallenged. I fumed, furious, truly consumed with anger. How I desperately wished for Omo Olókùn Eşin's sudden appearance on the scene to get a much-needed wing-clipping show on the road.

Long after supper, early enough in the night, we returned to Baálẹ̀s. The evening's events had not yet begun although the crowd was already gathered and waiting. The place was lighted up brightly by the blazing oil lamps surrounding the parameter of the arena. The full moon also lent its glow. Lágboókùn, the guest of honor, sat to one side alongside Baálẹ̀ and his own guests as well as the lackeys in Lágboókùn's entourage. They all sat comfortably toward the elevated entrance of a porticle built across Baálẹ̀s quarters. The flute orchestra sat further down from them, on the other side by the drummers and dancers. Other spectators stood about here and there, and those lucky enough to find seats sat down. The guests were offered refreshments. There was much bustling. Revelry filled the festive night sky. For so much ado, you'd think it was a reprise of Baálẹ̀s own installation ceremony in the making.

The entertainment soon began as scheduled. The crowd finally settled down. The entertainers took up the adulation, welcoming Lágboókùn in pulsing measures, one minute drumming their praise, the next breaking into sporadic dancing. Lágboókùn beamed with unmistakable pleasure. Indeed, who in his right mind can resist the titillating pulse of the "*api-nti*" drums. Moved to rock to its rhythm or hum along its lyrics, usually one is enraptured by it in spite of oneself. Famed for its *api-nti* drumming artistry, Igbẹ̀ti lures the rich and famous, who stop over for a good dose of this classic entertainment.

While the dancing progressed, I inched my way to a spot close to Lágboókùn. I wanted to hear every word that fell from the lips of this brazen rogue. As the drummers drummed and dancers swayed, my eyes never strayed from his mouth. His words were few, but crass. As the drummers and dancers performed, Kòlájò gave me the benefit of his expertise with a running

6 *Api-nti* – a small, single head "talking" drum, the earliest form of Yoruba drum. While the Koso was reserved for royalty, *api-nti* was the common folks' choice drum for special occasions.

commentary on each dance and its dancers. The best is yet to come from the ace dancers – male and female alike – he assured me. The guest of honor’s deep pleasure was transparent, betrayed by the dances that especially pleased him. His hearty laughter and applause were long and generous.

A number of drum tunes and dances later, the drumming ceased – some kind of interlude, it appeared. They roasted a good supply of plantain. They recited praise poems for Lágboókùn; they lauded his father, the Olúmokò, *oba* of Òkò; they also regaled Baálẹ̀ of Ìgbẹ̀tì with his own praise poem. It was after this protocol that the drummers and their dancers turned to each other in greeting. Then silence and inaction, once more – an intermission, I surmised.

But apparently, it wasn’t an intermission, after all. Barely minutes later, the frenzied drumming soon started up, announcing the entrance of a young female dancer into the arena. She was unfathomable, beyond description. She neither danced nor walked but glided to the center of the stage like a chameleon. The crowd went ballistic with excitement, cat calling, whistling, applauding for what seemed a long time. As the crowd finally quieted down, the drummers themselves ceased their drumming. There was absolute silence all at once. But nothing fazed the nimble dancer as she glided from one end of the arena to the other, not making eye contact with anybody.

At that instance, I saw Lágboókùn’s eyes flash as he leaned over to Baálẹ̀, asking:

“Who is that?” he enthused.

“She’s a member of the drumming group. Her name is Arinládé, head dancer of the group,” Baálẹ̀ returned.

Even so, Lágboókùn’s jaw remained agape, he was too dazed to speak. I too gazed at her and finally understood Lágboókùn’s stunned reaction. How could anyone resist such voluptuous and tantalizing grace? Fair skinned. Robust. Her loin cloth was of fitting and appropriate length. Her hair neatly coiffed in the popular *şògò*⁷ style, her arms and legs, nay, her entire body, glowed in the lamp-light.

She danced a while in the center of the arena before she approached first Lágboókùn’s seat, curtsying in greeting, and then to Baálẹ̀’^s, greeting him likewise, all the while, flashing an endless, radiant toothy smile that showed off her filed front teeth.⁸ What a paragon she was! I kid you not!

As she floated in dance, a song tune was raised:

7 A Hair style.

8 A traditional Yoruba Fashion statement -- it was fashionable and considered a thing of beauty for women to file their two middle top incisors in to a v-shape with a smith’s file. Women who did not spot the fashion were considered not beautiful. Non-conformity invited derision and invoked the abusive statement, “E woe nu e bii aake” (literally, look at her teeth like an axe).

Arinládé, this trading for profit making is no easy task
 Arinládé, trading for profit making is no easy task
 Today it's off to Ìpàpó
 Tomorrow, it's a long walk to Ìgbòho
 Arinládé, this trading business is no easy task.

The drummers raised their pitch. When Arinládé responded with one of her moves, people's jaws dropped with wonder and amazement. She moved her supple body this way like a top and gyrated and turned that way, her bare breasts undulated with perfect rhythm to the drumbeat. With each move, the crowd roared its approval. I tell no lie, I was most impressed myself. You see, first, it's a forward movement like a masquerade, then it's backwards like the classic *Eyéba*⁹ choreographers, swaying this way then that way, sometimes signaling with a deft hand gesture an intricate move or teasing the drummers with an amazing signaling with a neck and head move, all in rhythm with the drum.

Her provocative moves teased the drummers, egging them on to frenzied drumming and inspiring an endless round of song after song from their repertoire. What an engaging performance it was. Entranced and looking ridiculous and comical, Lágboókùn was utterly oblivious to the erratic and twitching moves he was making to the rhythm of the drum with his arms and body.

When Lágboókùn could no longer hold himself back, suddenly he commanded his guards to remove Arinládé from the dance arena and bring her to him.

Instantly, his lackeys descended on the arena, grabbed Arinládé and hustled her away to the consternation of the crowd. The drums, in response, suddenly went silent, as the crowd milled around the parameters of the arena, wondering, confused. Sensing impending trouble, parents instinctively grabbed the hands of their children amid the confusion and eerie silence. When Arinládé finally stood before Lágboókùn, his first words to her were,

"Why is such a gorgeous and beautiful dancer like you tucked away here in a place Òkò?"

Then facing Baálè, he said, "Baálè, I think I will take this "daughter" of yours back home with me; I will make her my wife; henceforth she will regale me with her marvelous dancing!"

Immediately, Baálè jumped to his feet, prostrated before him and, imploringly replied, "*kábíyèsí*, your honor, your "son" is her lover."

9 A masquerade dance.

“Yes, and so why does that matter? The mature squirrel ends up sucking his own child’s breasts.¹⁰ So, why is that a problem?” he replied glibly.

A throng of supplicants joined Baálẹ̀ in pleading with Lágboókùn to reverse his decision. Arinládé sat, dejected, among them, next to Lágboókùn’s feet, staring into space. The more they implored Labookun, the more livid I got. I felt like kicking the whole lot, but I kept my cool, looking on, waiting to see how the matter will be resolved. Even Kòlájọ cautioned utmost patience, lest I preempt an unnecessary riot.

Not too far from where I was standing, I could hear heavy breathing, punctuated with sighing. When I looked to see where it might be coming from, I saw a man – a grown man at that – sobbing! What could possibly make a grown man like you sob so like a child? I wondered aloud. Asking merely made him convulse.

“She’s my fiancée. That’s *my* woman they want to take away from me,” he wailed.

“Your fiancée?” I asked, bewildered.

“Yes, she’s my fiancée, my wife to-be.”

“When you call her your woman, do you mean legally?”

“Yes, she’s mine. She’s betrothed to me. She’s mine. Help me. Please intercede on my behalf,” he sobbed helplessly.

That man’s wailing soon reached Lágboókùn. “Who is that?” he asked, his tone dripping with contempt as he walked up to where the man and I stood.

As quick as lightening the man bolted and had melted into the milling crowd. The crowd now stared at me, yet I stood my ground, not flinching a muscle. Lágboókùn thought I was Arinládé’s husband. “Did I hear you say ‘wife’? But, it appears to me that you have married out of your league. This woman, here, is royalty – lovely as she is,” he said, pulling Arinládé toward him before she pushed his arms away from her.

My patience had paid off I reckoned. This was the moment I had waited for. Pretending that I was indeed Arinládé’s betrothed, I faced him squarely. “Indeed, I am her husband to-be. It is I who so declare and you cannot have her. You see, greed and avarice are your problems. Over my dead body, I say. You’ll take her nowhere. You’ll have to kill me first, today, here, right now,” I threatened.

10 Lágboókùn invokes here the moral ineptitude of the animal world, where familial relationships and kinship taboos are non-existent. In essence, he is commenting on his own lack of morals and ethics and his disregard for them. In this instance, his bestial instincts rule, and like the mature squirrel, who does not recognize nor has any filial association with its young ones who had long been kicked out of the familial nest soon after birth, Lagbookun could care less about “relational ties”, sanguine or otherwise that stand between him and his very openly declared sexual desire for Arinlade.

The more I spoke the higher my voice rose, attracting the attention of the crowd; It didn't take much or long for them to gather, staring and waiting. Lágboókùn too was shocked, unable to call my bluff, as it were. Arinládé herself seemed pleased, less tense; in fact, you could see her relaxing more and more with every syllable I uttered.

My emboldened voice had now gathered the strength of total defiance, contrary to anything Lágboókùn had ever known. He carefully lifted the oil lamp to see the face that uttered such defiance, such outrage. As always, his lackeys were at the ready to strike, but Lágboókùn signaled them to hold off for the time being. Baálẹ̀ also started to speak but Lágboókùn rudely held up his hand to shut him up. As the standoff began to intensify with my resistance fully emblazoned over my face, Arinládé panicked anew, but the quick wink I threw her way soon helped her relax once again.

"To think your hardened countenance has rendered my tongue impotent?" the man sneered, holding up the oil lamp even closer to my face.

"She is my fiancée. She belongs to me. She stays here, case closed." I spat the words in his face, snatching the lamp from his hand. I jumped to Arinládé's side, and before they could register their next response, I had grabbed Arinládé and, with lightning speed, whisked her off, away from the crowd.

In the middle of the uproar, Lágboókùn signaled his thugs to give chase. Baálẹ̀, befuddled, cussed up a storm. It was total mayhem let loose.

It appeared the thugs were secretly thrilled at the turn of events. They gave a lack luster chase at best, and I had screwed up their trail anyway. My mission was to carry off the woman to safety, so I bounded with her to a destination of which I hadn't the foggiest idea myself. However, as luck would have it, the drummers had noted and followed my trail. They arrived on the scene the very moment I was setting down Arinládé from her perch on my shoulders. "Thank you, thank you; we are indeed grateful," they chanted. I handed Arinládé over to them, instructing that she be spirited off into hiding. She was their responsibility now, mine no longer. They hadn't heard the last of it, I warned. The fight is not finished yet; in fact, it was only just beginning. So, for now, Arinládé must go underground, I instructed.

I left the drummers to return to Baálẹ̀' s. Kóájọ̀ was nowhere to be seen. Noise filled the air. Lágboókùn was livid. While the chiefs pleaded with him to no avail, his thugs vented their frustration on whoever crossed their path. As soon as I appeared on the scene, a cry went up, "here comes the groom." Stomping feet bounded toward me. Before the first couple of thugs could reach out to grab me, I deftly shifted right, eel-like, sending them all sprawling like a bunch of bumbling fools that they were. Before they could rebound, I had made my move, much to hoodwink Lágboókùn's confusion. Even before he could open his mouth to speak, I had grabbed him around the neck like one

possessed. “Trouble maker, trouble maker!” the crowd chanted. I held his neck in a choke hold and yanked on, taking him down in a flash. I sprang to my feet swiftly but then, someone tripped and sent me flying up in the air. As I landed, I head butted Lágboókùn on the chin – crack! Down he went, slumped in a heap. The crowd roared yet again!

All throughout this free-for-all, the crowd had trampled and trashed the area. Hardly a lamp stood undamaged – hardly eight of the several dozens left, the others trampled. Only the light of the moon lit our way now.

When Baálè tired of it all, he bellowed over the din of the crowd, “Do you stand there idle? Do something. You stand and watch this imp bring perdition on our heads?” The chiefs and the palace assistants sprang into immediate action, their clubs raining blows on my head. Throughout this skirmish, Kólájo did not join in the fray. The truth is, I did not even see him. Apparently, as the melee brewed, Kólájo was relaxing in a corner somewhere a few feet from the center of the courtyard. Even as fighting broke out here and there, and as I fought that duel-to-the-death fight, Kólájo sat, seemingly taking it all in from this safe haven. I probably wouldn’t have spotted him at all had I not squared off with one of the brawlers that pounced on me. The man and I were locked in a wrestle hold; I grabbed one of his legs and he grabbed my neck. We wrestled and wrestled, each of us scheming on how to bring the other down. We tugged at and pushed each other until we reached the wall against which Kólájo was leaning, chin resting in his elbow, watching the skirmish, seemingly unfazed by it all. As we tumbled toward him, Kólájo swiftly shifted positions, smiling sheepishly. It appeared he did so to avoid being crashed into. This uncharacteristic nonchalance angered me no end. “Kólájo, what the hell are you doing there, damn lazy bones coward you?” I huffed and puffed, wanting so badly to throw off my assailant, rush off to Kólájo and beat him to a pulp. However, my assailant had a tight grip on me as we pushed and shoved, one trying to out-manuever the other.

We continued in this life and death grip for a while, the crowd shoving us hither and thither. When I glanced toward Kólájo’s hideout, there he was, still gazing at us, still untouched, unmoved by any of the fighting around him.

But then, in a flash, he sprang to his feet as if stung by soldier ants. “Enough!” he bellowed. “Enough of this foolishness, at once,” he roared, his chest heaving up and down with anger as he tore off his clothes, stripped himself stark naked, and ran wild up and down the courtyard as if possessed. By now, the crowd that had gathered around me and my assailant while we wrestled had lost interest in our tussle. All eyes were now fixed on Kólájo, who kept up his rampage like a caged animal let loose, slamming his head against anything and everything in his path – walls, poles, the *o*dan tree in Baálè’s courtyard.

Then, suddenly, right in the middle of one such run, he stopped. “Alas, alas, what has come of the world!” he bemoaned. As he resumed his madman prancing, he grabbed one of Lágboókùn’s lackeys unexpectedly by the scruff of the neck and, pushing him along, he slammed the man’s head against the head of another of the lackeys – wham!! The two crumbled in a heap to the ground.

Kòlájò continued the rampage undeterred; slamming together a few more lackeys’ heads before they could figure out what had hit them. The instant he caught a glimpse of the tangle that was me and my assailant, he charged. In one deft move, he lifted us both and flung us away from him like tangled toothpicks – bam! we landed with a thud. Can you imagine the confusion – now who was fighting whom? About what? Kòlájò could have cared less who was friend and who was foe. He’d picked this one up here and toss him on top of another there, and the two would topple over haplessly like matchsticks. He’d randomly grab now this man and then that and with but a flip of his wrist, send them crashing into other sprawling men. He attacked everyone, regardless of size. Even strappy men looked like weaklings in his grasp, their heads knocked together, and matter of factly, dumped on their hindquarters. Oddly, he’d fight for a while, then he, too, would bang his head against the wall. And looking about and not seeing other remaining heads to bat around? It didn’t matter, Kòlájò would fish out one, pull his victim towards him, and head butt him. And then, once again, he’d take off running about like a madman without a stitch on.

The melee got out of control; the din was truly uncontrollable! The women raised their shrill voices in protest of their husbands’ degradation at the hands of one man:

“Alas, the world’s turned upside down!”

“Alas, the world’s gone topsy turvy!”

They screamed as they ran helter skelter in the confusion. Simply invincible, Kòlájò had become a monster turned loose. About seven or eight hefty men tried to jump him only to be thrown off effortlessly like a bunch of weaklings. It now became a combined army of Lágboókùn’s lackeys and Baálè’s assistants against this one-man army, Kòlájò. All the other previous skirmishes and concerns simply got pushed aside; they ceased their search for Arinládé and abandoned their pursuit of the band of drummers. Even I had become of little consequence to them now. At the moment, Kòlájò consumed everyone’s attention – especially how to subdue him. The women heightened the chaos with their persistent screams and shouts:

“Alas, the world is gone awry...!”

“Help, help us!”

There was no guessing how much worse the situation would get – people had grabbed whatever they could: wood wedges, night sticks, pestles, etc. what’s the might of eight lanky men clubbing Kó’lájò mercilessly? Ah, heaven help any of them should Kó’lájò manage to grab one of their clubs, I thought to myself. Just one single strike from Kó’lájò’s possessed hand would cripple the unfortunate victim for life. It was rather peculiar, the more attackers and weapons aimed at Kó’lájò, the more Àroused he became. In one instance, when a bunch of men armed with cudgels, clubs, and whips rushed toward him, Kó’lájò gleefully baited them, “Today, the day of armageddon!” he screeched, inviting their advance with a cocky “bring-it-on” tilt of his bald-head toward them. “Yeah, this feels good. Give me more. Let those clubs massage my itchy scalp!” he provoked as the attackers clobbered his head with abandon. But, I kept thinking, heaven help the victims of Kó’lájò’s sudden, unpredictable lethal moves. Four to five culprits is all that’s needed for Kó’lájò’s trademark head butting and cracking to begin to leave his victims paralyzed in a heap.

As they say about things like this, there is more than meets the eye with Kó’lájò’s berserk behavior. It’s bad medicine, a sorcerer’s curse, that’s taken hold of him, some would hazard. This skirmish alone recorded an untold number of casualties among the palace servants – many wounded and countless with broken limbs. Some were bloody-nosed and others were half dead from exertion. That was a horrible fight, indeed. What a vanquisher Kó’lájò was on that day.

But for the intervention of a certain relative, a man from Kó’lájò’s household, there’s no telling how much longer the skirmish would have lasted. Lord knows what the man proffered or did to disarm him, but as Kó’lájò prepared to charge at him, down he went in a heap to the uproar of the crowd! The more he struggled to pick himself up, the more his weak legs buckled under him. He barely landed before the crowd rushed him. They swiftly lassoed one leg with a thick rope! Someone pulled on the rope from the opposite end. It was the relative I had mentioned that had corralled him like a steer. When Kó’lájò was finally brought down to his knees, a host of strapping young men grabbed him swiftly to the clamor of a vanquished but appreciative crowd. The helpless elders chanted from their safe haven:

“Thank you, brave one; we express our sincere gratitude, thank you.”

Quickly, they had tied up Kó’lájò, hands and feet, without a stitch on. They had replaced the broken lamps that had previously lighted the arena. They tied one end of the remaining rope securely around his neck and, pushing his neck forward, they tied the other end around his knees very much like a hunter’s bounty. They then positioned him squarely in the middle of the arena and surrounded him.

For whom the bell tolls, I thought. Kòlájò's final subjection presaged my own future. I watched helplessly from the center of the arena while they tied him up. By the time they had finished binding him up, they had convened to decide his fate, not before they had dismissed the women, on account of Kòlájò's nakedness. They brought up all sorts of issues, some fact, others fiction. The longer they deliberated on Kòlájò, the harder Kòlájò strained against the binding ropes in the middle of the arena. And then, suddenly, one of Kòlájò's captors recognized me. Pointing at me, he ordered, "Arrest that one too!" Before I could blink, about ten thugs had grabbed me. Within minutes they had me, but not without a struggle. It was while they were tying me up that it happened. Snorting like a sow, Kòlájò screeched:

"Ah, it's impossible. Such an interdiction!

Who would think of tying a knot around the trunk of the baobab tree?

Who would think of stabbing the air?

Who would think of raising a striking hand against the chameleon?

Ah, such taboo! Impossible!"¹¹

With a slight, effortless twist of his torso, the binding ropes gave way, as he spat out these words and, literally falling from his body, they gathered at his feet. The ropes, still knotted, were neither frayed nor broken. But Kòlájò literally stepped out of the contour of the original knotting.

It was pure pandemonium as the crowd dispersed, yelling, "He's come undone! He's on the loose again." I too had sprung up soon after the thugs had departed. Almost immediately my captors' attention shifted from their previous task of arresting me. They all ran helter skelter, waiting to see who will confront the escapee, who was now standing with feet firmly planted in the midst of the chaos. With outstretched arms, Kòlájò reached into what was still left of the crowd. The first few people he plucked, he flung against the wall, leaving them rhything in pain. I, too, moved swiftly, taking advantage of the distraction. Anyone within my reach, I grabbed in an arm lock and sent the unlucky victim sprawling.

This, apparently, fueled the chaos even worse. The attention was now turned away from Kòlájò. Before I knew it, about ten hefty men had swept me up; a few of them continued to work on Kòlájò, riling him in every manner possible. The ten ruffians carried me to the very front of the courtyard. They put me down and bound my hands and legs securely with rope. Their sheer numbers castrated me, literally; they beat me to an inch of my life before they tied me up. Commotion erupted from Kòlájò's corner: Had they been able to subdue him again? Was he back on a rampage? I couldn't tell.

11 An incantation (*ofò*). The baobab tree.

Now securely tied and bundled up, I was carried on the head of one of the burly ruffians toward Kòlájò's corner. Apparently, they had recaptured Kòlájò and were tying him up, this time more cautiously and with better, stronger rope. I'm not sure they truly had the upper hand this time, but eventually it appeared they did it right and had him subdued.

Kòlájò would have likely broken loose yet again had he not been betrayed. "Cover his nakedness," the relative-of-sorts hazarded. "That could, perhaps, be the source of his prowess. Cover his nakedness." Surprisingly, that, indeed, did it! The secret code had been cracked. Kòlájò's body withered. The secret to his Samson-like prowess had been revealed.

"Ah!" the crowd sighed, relieved at last.

Quickly, they searched for a new pair of trousers, after all nobody really knew what become of Kòlájò's own clothes. A stranger donated his own pair of pants. But here's the dilemma: how to get the trousers on him without untying his feet and risking yet another rampage. The solution to their dilemma was to try a kilt-like 'bànté'¹² apron. Again, swiftly, someone wearing a *bànté* donated his *bànté*. They lifted Kòlájò up and tied the *bànté* around his waist – what a comic sight! Kòlájò in a *bànté*! Hilarious!

Like a raging fire that has been doused, Kòlájò withered into a heap on the ground as soon as the skirt was secured around his waist. The collapse of the giant pleased the crowd, which had been the victim of his devastating rampages.

As soon as Kòlájò hit the ground, they quickly adjusted the apron-skirt, passing a strip of it in between his legs to ensure that his backside was covered. They plunked me down right next to Kòlájò, and formed a secure circle around us. When the buzz about Kòlájò's latest apparel hit the air, the curious women came in droves to witness the sight for themselves. They each carried an oil lamp. Some of the crowd hurled abuses on our heads; others spat on us. Still others pelted us with handfuls of dirt and whatever they could lay their hands on. We suffered this infamy until an elderly man chided the crowd for its deplorable behavior.

Lágboókùn was the most pleased at our demise. Nothing short of our capture and complete disarming would satisfy or convince him that the rampage had not been staged and the people of Ìgbètì were not on our side. But his elation notwithstanding, we were the victors: Lágboókùn had lost three of his teeth, and more importantly, they had not found Arinládé, the main cause of this melee. She and her fiancé were long gone; and I, the "pinch hit" husband, was now captured. Most importantly in all this is the fact that we

12 A kilt-like skirt.

had successfully initiated a riot that rained on the parade they had planned for Lágboókùn that night.

Nonetheless, the council decided to make it up to Lágboókùn. They offered him a handsome fee for his lost teeth. They compensated him for Arinládé's disappearance. We watched the entire goings-on, tied down to the spot where they had placed us. We were repulsed, naturally, but as disgusted as we were about the whole affair, we could do absolutely nothing; we felt totally spent and frankly, impotent.

They kept a close eye on us for what seemed like ages before they moved us to Baálẹ̀' s house. The townspeople had handed us over to Lágboókùn; we were now his prisoners, and he could do with us whatever he pleases; more seriously he could imprison us in Òkò. He could kill us if he wished or release us if and whenever the spirit moved him. We spent the night at Baálẹ̀' s. We heard nothing from Kọ́lájọ' s folks. Kọ́lájọ had made his bed, now he must lie in it, they had said. They were themselves, outraged by his insubordination and wanted no part of the fallout.

At the crack of dawn the next day, they rechecked the rope cuffs and leg holds, this time loosening the leg holds but tying our hands behind our backs. Lágboókùn selected four of his lackeys to escort us straight to Òkò. We were to be locked up at the infamous Olósi prison. Lágboókùn would himself return to Òkò after a quick jaunt in the environs. The journey to Òkò took us three full days. Upon our arrival, we were taken directly to Olósi prison.

Needless to say, we arrived in Òkò with heavy hearts and concern for Àjàyí, who had gone to Ìràwö and from whom we still had heard no news.

