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# ***Saying***

Stories from the Mothership:

Narrating Political Geographies of Nigerian Campus Cultism

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*for Eze,*  
*with love and gratitude*

## **Abstract**

*Sayling: Stories from the Mothership* is a collection of ethnographic fictions – short stories – adapted from notes, archival materials, and interviews compiled over a year of geographic fieldwork in southwestern Nigeria. Touching on a wide range of themes, from domesticity to internet fraud, the stories explore the interface of occult violence and youth politics in the contemporary period. They are connected through overlapping characters and through their relationships to a central geography: the University of Ibadan (UI), Nigeria’s oldest and most prestigious institute of higher education and the site of origin for the nation’s first campus ‘cult’: the Pyrates Confraternity. The collection is, in essence, a character study of Nigerian campus cultism, itself. The stories are organized into three sections that can be mapped onto a ritual landscape: the stages of initiation, participation, and renunciation serve to link diverse voices and life stories. The dissertation is framed by a Preface and Epilogue that explore issues of race, representation, and reflexivity, themes that are important to a project engaging with living memories of contemporary violence. A critical prologue and footnotes throughout serve to connect the creative core of this work to larger academic, literary, and ethnographic contexts. An appendix features maps that highlight spaces and dates important to the stories as well as four original interview ‘transcripts’, semi-fictionalised records that provide both additional ethnographic detail and evidence of methodology.

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

...contrary to the fashion in most prefaces, I will not add that 'all my mistakes and shortcomings are entirely my responsibility'. That is sheer bourgeois subjectivism. Responsibility in matters of these sorts is always collective, especially with regard to remedying the shortcomings.

– Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972)

Meanwhile, the author makes bold to declare that he accepts full responsibility for any fierce opinions, distortions of facts, and other such exhibitions of narrow-mindedness contained in this book with which the reader may find himself in violent agreement.

– Peter Enahoro, *You Gotta Cry to Laugh* (1972)

Flashback to the summer of 2007. It is Glasgow and the days are long. I am in that strange, solitary zone of final preparation for fieldwork. I alternate between bursts of accelerated activity towards the unknown and moments of lingering longingly with the familiar. I am readying to leave one world, hoping to competently navigate another. Concerned friends and family direct me to news stories about kidnappings of 'westerners' in the Niger Delta, the place made mythical before an international audience by the executed writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa. All I can think of is the time I attended a peace event and met a soft-spoken Scottish gardener who named his baby after the Nigerian martyr. The gardener towed his child through Glasgow in a trailer hitched to a bicycle.

In an effort to reassure worried loved ones, I browse the internet for corroboration of my intuition that all will be well with my travels. *The State Department advises Americans not to travel to this high risk country.*

As a former Foreign Service dependent, I have some credentials to fortify my fanciful opinion of the bidding for overseas assignments. I picture lunch hour debates over risk variables of potential posts. There sit two young consular officers, one of whom is also undercover CIA, stirring saccharin into Styrofoam encased coffee. The reassuring jingle of *CNN International* hums from a television suspended above a small room with four or five round tables and a counter for selling pastries. Three lunch staffs with hair nets and aprons gossip in the local language. One officer – the one who is not also CIA – dusts sugar from his navy blue lap, loosens his tie, leans back into the hard plastic seat and addresses his colleague: *I'd trade your Columbian kidnapping for my Nigerian armed robbery, any day.*

*They will not hesitate to shoot you,* says the man I have come to for help. We are meeting in his office at the University to discuss a bureaucratic glitch that has dissolved my anticipated fieldwork funding, but the conversation quickly turns to his estimations of my future safety. His advice: *Get a bullet-proof vest.*



The next day, *Michael Watts was shot in the hand*, I announce to dear friends who sit at our kitchen table in Glasgow. They are sopping up leftover mushroom soup with slices of pasty bread. One wears a towel around his waist and an expression of haste – he has a train to catch, a Prince concert in London drawing him south. The other sits with elbows on the table and an expression of concentration. I imagine his mind has been turning over the imminent task of finding jumper cables and halting the wasting of his car. I see as their gazes greet me that my comment requires some context, and so I explain that Watts is a well-known British geographer based out of California, and an expert on Nigerian oil politics. The breakfasters are understandably concerned, and I sense that this news flash was perhaps better left unshared. It has been a confusing few weeks of scrambling to firm up plans and at the same time being called to engage with a pattern of bizarre and unsolicited premonitions.

That night a third friend, who will later visit me in Ibadan, says she has something to tell me but wants first to assure me that her intent is not to alarm. She has been doing research into the trip – it will be her first in Africa – and she wants me to know she has become convinced she will die during her holiday. She says this with a charming combination of self-conscious flippancy and dead earnestness. She says she wants me to know that she has considered this possibility – inevitability? – and so, in the event that it does in fact pass that she

is hurled from the sky or stricken with a fatal disease, I must not feel guilty. It will be her own decision, her own responsibility.

At week's end I have an appointment for vaccinations, and a nurse sitting at a computer pulls up 'Nigeria' on the website for determining risk of Malaria transmission. The country map pops up as an ominous shade of red. There is no pertinent information other than the word, all in black capitals, **DANGER**.

What is the universe telling me? Should I cancel my plans, invest in body armour, or facilitate a workshop on (anti)racism in Scotland? Predictably enough, I opt to write it out.<sup>1</sup> Days before leaving for Nigeria, I pen a poem as a kind of short-hand reminder of what the tone has been in my thoughts, emotions, and encounters during these weeks leading up to my venture. I intend it to anchor me in an insistence on accountability and disclosure, whatever new identities the fieldwork phase of this project will bring.

**I will not hesitate to say:**

Don't get shot.  
Take a bullet-proof vest.  
Don't come back in a body bag.  
They will not hesitate to shoot you.

**All white people are racist.**

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<sup>1</sup> This Preface and the opening portion of the Epilogue were begun during this pre-fieldwork period.

**Responses:**

You can't say that.  
I am not a racist.  
I have nothing in common with George Bush.  
Perhaps all people are prejudiced.  
That's not the same as racist.

**Counter Responses:**

The marriage of white guilt with black opportunism  
is what destroyed the legacy of  
the American civil rights movement.<sup>2</sup>  
I don't need you to feel guilty for what your ancestors did.  
I need you to acknowledge that you have  
benefited from what they did.<sup>3</sup>

These stories from my pre-departure index a vein of racism that is painfully familiar; I share in it. As a privileged foreign child growing up in Babangida's Nigeria I kept a count of bodies that had been left by the roadside or washed in from the lagoon. They were swaddled in burlap or newsprint, and I could never find a way to see inside to anything specific about the lives they had been. What have such early, formative encounters meant for the orientation of my life and work? In my storytelling I risk continuing the tragic hegemony of the simultaneous hyper-humanization of the self – the traumatized voyeur – and the de-humanization of the other – the body – upon whom the self is predicated. But

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<sup>2</sup> For an argument of this thesis, see Steele (2006).

<sup>3</sup> The first stanza of this poem includes a series of remarks I have received from strangers, friends, and colleagues in the weeks leading up to my departure for the field. The second features common responses I have heard after asserting, admittedly to spark debate, that I along with all white people harbor unexamined racism. The third stanza ends with a paraphrasing of a quote given by a young woman who participated in an antiracist workshop for a diverse group of college students. The workshop was documented in the film *Skin Deep*, a documentation of anti-racist diversity training for American college undergraduates, directed by Reena Mohan (1996). The appeal of this young woman has stayed with me in the five years since I first saw the film. I return to it in the Epilogue below.

it is not always easy to know how to avoid this. My aspirations to more radical engagement may not save me from myself, cautions Achille Mbembe:

The uncompromising nature of the Western self and its active negation of anything not itself had the counter-effect of reducing African discourse to a simple polemical reaffirmation of black humanity. However, both the asserted denial and the reaffirmation of that humanity now look like the two sterile sides of the same coin (2001:12).

If this is so, then the question becomes: Can we embrace a process of healthy self-negation? How can we go about intentionally ‘compromising’ the self in order to forefront the other? This work began, on one level, with my curiosity about how far the practice of critical reflexivity in social science can be extended, and to what political and moral ends. The exploration drew me, perhaps ironically, to a methodology by which I might make myself more scarce.

In the course of this project, the decision to approach it as a piece of fiction as well as theory has offered many advantages. From an ethics standpoint, it allowed me to better protect the identities of those who chose to share their stories. From a practical perspective, it helped me to build alliances with people who were excited about participating in a creative process of storytelling, whereas they may have viewed with some suspicion a standard ethnographic invitation to perform the role of ‘subject’. The practice of writing in this way also enabled me to wander more freely through the emotional geographies of my characters, the uneven landscapes of their memories and dreams.<sup>4</sup> Narrative

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion see the section on ‘Narrative’ in the Prologue below.

invites compromise, the kind of self-compromise one gladly volunteers as part of the excitement of entering into relationship. As Chinua Achebe writes, “Fulfilment is other-centered, a giving or subduing of the self, perhaps to somebody, perhaps to a cause; in any event to something external to it” (1989:53).

If the fictionalizing process behind this project helped to disappear some of my own self-conscious presence in the heart of the work, it also – in a way I was originally unsure would succeed – enabled me to demonstrate the powerful combination of self-reflection and communal-cum-political commitment that characterizes the nature of storytelling in this precise Nigerian subculture. I initially feared that an emphasis on subjective narrative might jettison the larger politics at play in this material. As a social scientist, I am familiar with the project and promise (as well as the pitfalls) of analytic abstraction. Though I have long been fascinated by the potential of literary ethnography, I wanted to be sure that my project did more than ‘capture’ and ‘represent’ the voices of others. I chose an interdisciplinary methodology because of my belief that, in this particular context, it would in fact be the most strategic and appropriate means of accessing material and interrogating normative commentaries about campus cultism.

Though I defer to the reader for final judgement, it is my hope that these interlocking, often highly intimate and personal narratives will convey the impressive levels and ranges of socio-political literacy and sophistication that marked the contributions of my collaborators. In the course of writing the dissertation, as I returned to semi-fictionalised interview transcripts and began to move around biographic details, character composites emerged very clearly in the shadows of historical and political events. The geographies of social and communal relations gradually and rather effortlessly assumed their places as the true studies of the research. The result is a collection of stories in which individual, idiosyncratic voices seek their own fulfilments and find their logical extensions through relations with others. They exist, on one level, to enliven the study and preserve its connection with the real commentators who lent their expertise and experiences to this work. Equally important is each character's capacity to delineate – even insist upon – larger social causes and communal networks, spanning through time and across space. These characters are situated so that they might reveal the liberating promise of theory without disappearing under the potentially flattening impact of scholasticism. They speak from a position that is vividly articulated by bell hooks:

I came to theory because I was hurting – the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing (1994:59).

For all these reasons, my decision to write critical fiction is as political as much as an aesthetic or analytic choice. In other words, though inspired by the qualities of many different selves, this work is an attempt to write against an apolitical preoccupation with selfhood, as described by literary critic Catherine Belsey:

The quest for the truth of the self, our own and others', endlessly fascinating, is precisely endless, since the subject of liberal humanism is a chimera, an effect of language, not its origin. Meanwhile, the social and political are placed as secondary concerns – naturally, since our democratic institutions are so clearly expressive of what we essentially are. In the subject's hopeless pursuit of self-presence politics can safely be left to take care of itself. And we can be sure that the institutions in question will in consequence stay much as they are (1985:54).

In the course of my fieldwork, I was often asked how my research would contribute to efforts to 'eradicate' campus cultism as a very real social 'menace' in and outside of the Nigerian academy. I have never pretended that this work could or should be levered as a tool of applied sociology. At the same time, I take these requests and concerns seriously. If I have anything to contribute to the queries around the possibility of change, it might be an indication that there is value in opening up the hegemonic stories around the causes and conditions of cultism, in allowing more voices of those directly implicated to sketch new studies of the politics at play. This is what I have attempted to do.

It is revealing that, given the topic of this research, people I interviewed were by in large exceptionally generous with their stories. Though many expressed concerns that their work must remain anonymous, I was struck by the ease with which cult members and former members, as well as victims of cult violence,

offered their life histories and observations – even their memories of trauma – for my creative re-appropriation. In this paradigm, stories are not objects for publication. They are living, dynamic performances, empowered through passage from one narrator to the next. What does this relative absence of possessive individualism mean for political subjectivity in this precise Nigerian context? In engaging with this seminal question, I have aimed to construct characters who effortlessly navigate the personal and political at every scale of their lives. They slip often into the specific details of memory but return to comment on the broader social and political institutions to which Belsey alludes. It is for this reason that, as the work's title indicates, I continue to view these acutely personal stories and memories as being *political* geographies.

This dissertation is about pirates of a kind, and in a sense I have given myself over to the subject. Like any author, I steal the riches that I taste and see and feel and (over)hear around me. I have plundered my 'field' for stories, images, and impressions that were not my own, and I have redistributed them freely. Notwithstanding the generosity shown me in the course of my fieldwork, I have not always been comfortable with this agency. I have grappled with the consequences of memory and with the larger moral dilemmas of representation inherent in this work, and at heart the questions raised remain unanswerable. I have come to understand that these problems call for the continuous refining of



skills (in relating, interviewing, transcribing, writing), rather than the uncovering of any truth.

At any rate, like any pirate, I could not have acted alone.

I am grateful for the essential financial support of the Scotland Marshall Scholarship, the Scotland Carnegie Research Fund, the Sir Godfrey Collins Memorial Scholarship, the University of Glasgow's Faculty of Arts, and its Departments of English Literature and Geographical and Earth Sciences.

A special thank you to Hayden Lorimer for his valuable feedback during my first and second year reviews. Without the dedication of my two wonderful supervisors, Willy Maley and Paul Routledge, this cross-faculty enterprise would never have materialized. Their personal commitments to learning emboldened me from the beginning. I have so appreciated their willingness to work with me across disciplinary and geographic distances, all the while trusting in my ability to creatively shape this research. I thank them for so many careful edits and enlightening suggestions. Willy and Pablo are each wonderful scholars, teachers, and people. Their respect and care for others is so apparent, and I am honoured by association with them.

Enough gratitude can never be expressed to my parents who first brought me to Nigeria, and who have made my education, as well as my life, possible, while never trying to dictate its direction. To those kindred friends in so many places around the world, your examples of creativity, compassion, and community inspire me every day. A doctoral dissertation can be an isolating pursuit, and my thoughts of you have kept me going many times.

Endless thanks to the Amos, Pearce, Lee, and Bode families, and to the many other friends in Lagos, Abeokuta, and Ibadan who graciously took me in and helped me find my way. The entire course and shape of my fieldwork unfolded through your generosity, and I can only hope to reciprocate one day. Thanks to Lisa for her energy and fearlessness, essential ingredients in our collaboration with local community organisers. A special nod to Deenie, who opened up his home to me and proved to be the most peaceful and patient man I have ever met. To my greatest padi Eze, your solidarity and unfaltering belief in me is responsible for the completion of this project.

Finally, let me turn my praise to those who inspired the voices in this collection. While in Nigeria I was many times, again and again, impressed by the talents of the storytellers I met. These are men and women whose accounts reveal very real traumas and frustrations, but also an abundance of humour and openness, the capacity to find joy in the momentary experience of sharing a tale. As an

ethical condition of our conversations, I have promised not to disclose those I interviewed by name, but I thank each of you for your bravery and generosity. If I have echoed even a small measure of the resilience and understanding inherent in your stories – in the ways in which you tell them – then I will be content with the outcome of this work. It is intended as a testimony to your strengths.

# Prologue

## Charting Course

In 2005 Wole Soyinka, 1986 Nobel Laureate for Literature and 1953 co-founder of the Pyrates Confraternity,<sup>5</sup> published an essay engaging with and against cultism. As the jacket to the Nigerian edition explains, “Soyinka takes a hard and uncompromising look at the issue of cults and the menace they have become, not only in our institutions, but to society at large.” The history of Nigerian campus cultism unfolds like a fable, a mythical journey by which (as the story goes) eminently noble, exclusive origins are corrupted through a process of endless, violent proliferation. According to normative discourse, the original fraternal societies are seen to have been, at best, radical pre-independence expressions of African autonomy within the elite colonial vortex of higher education. At worst, and perhaps more accurately, they were creative outlets for the youthful energies of “adorable zanies”,<sup>6</sup> young men of ideas and ideals who spoke a special lingo and occasionally dressed in masquerade to crash the sobriety of university events.

Soyinka introduces his essay with a brief ‘walking tour’ of the University of Ibadan (UI). Because the scene it sets is central to the history and geography of this dissertation, Soyinka’s spatial orientation is worth excerpting at length:

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<sup>5</sup> This 1953 date is disputed by some sources, a point I return to in note 26, below.

<sup>6</sup> This phrase is quoted on page 6 of Soyinka’s essay and attributed to Bunmi Salako’s memoir *Our UI*. Soyinka neglects to give bibliographic information, and I have been unable to find a copy of the book myself.

If I were giving a lecture of this title within the University of Ibadan where I was a student for two post-secondary school years, I would insist on making it a walking seminar. We could of course substitute Ife for Ibadan but all universities have distinct architectural characters even though, today, they do share a certain common trait. That common trait is not, I regret to say, a reassuring one – indeed it is depressing, as we shall find out as we proceed on a walk, albeit in imagination, through Ibadan campus.

I would introduce you to the landmarks of my student days; take you through Tedder Hall, Mellanby Hall, through Queen Elizabeth Hall. I would insist that we passed a few moments in a typical student room which, at no time during my brief stay, ever housed more than one student to a room.<sup>7</sup> I would show you the balconies, across which, both laterally and vertically, we used to pass ... I might even demonstrate how we used to climb across, and even up and down those balcony railings for a quick 'jist' – that is, conversation – whenever we felt too lazy to walk the length of the corridor, climb the stairs – I mean, what was the point of the long walk when the person you needed to see was directly above your head or beneath your floor. Miraculously, no one that I recollect ever broke his neck, which would have served us right. All the foregoing is to reassure you that students have always been students, anywhere and any time.

I would also introduce you to the dining room where the ritual of the High Table was enacted with all its colonial formality, the Senior and Junior Common Rooms where staff and student met after the formal dinner, which demanded a suit or a long-sleeves shirt and tie. In some Halls, the academic gown was mandatory, as were several features of colonial trappings – until we rebelled and reformed the system. Yes, rebellion is as old as life. Our rebellion was however against the colonial bag and baggage, not against the collegial spirit itself ...<sup>8</sup>

I would also insist that we stroll past the former bookshop in front of Trenchard Hall, the very roof on which that lamentably debased campus culture – the college fraternity – undertook its open celebration, after its birth in one of the garden alcoves overlooking the lawns of Tedder Hall. It was on that flat roof of the bookshop that the 'pyrates' began their epic 'sayle' into uncharted seas,<sup>9</sup> a voyage that has yet to end even after half a century (3-6).

Soyinka's essay is in large part a response to critics who would persist in connecting his participation as an original 'confraternity' founder with the contemporary condition of 'cultism'.<sup>10</sup> Pausing his virtual walking tour of campus,

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<sup>7</sup> At its height of overcrowding in the late 1990s and at the turn of the century, a two person room at UI might shelter up to fifteen students, who took turns to sleep and enjoy some privacy in the accommodation. Currently, eight to ten per room is common.

<sup>8</sup> Note the influence of Oxbridge culture in the colonial educational system. For an early discussion of the 'sub colonial' geography of neocolonial UI, see Hargreaves (1973).

<sup>9</sup> Note the spelling of 'sayle', inspiration for the title of this dissertation and a clear evocation of Elizabethan English, no doubt acquired from British colonial education.

<sup>10</sup> Although I sometimes use these terms (confraternity and cultism) interchangeably, it is important to appreciate their differences. 'Campus cultism' or simply 'cultism' have become the more widely used terms in the literature and in the larger society outside of the 'setting' (scene of involvement). Because of its ubiquity, 'cultism' does not always carry a strongly pejorative

he describes these critics as “unteachable minds [who] continue their attempts to criminalize the pioneer movement in a universal campus culture that their own spoilt, anti-social brats have debased, and turned into barbaric instruments for terrorizing their own colleagues, teachers and even the larger society” (6).

It bears repeating that this story of spoiling, as Soyinka tells it, is a common account of the trajectory of campus cultism, one that was reiterated to me often during my fieldwork. Accordingly, cultism began as an indigenous African answer to ‘western’ college fraternity culture but somehow metamorphosed into a Frankenstein monster made of mafia-style networks of gang violence, stitched with ‘black magic’.<sup>11</sup> To understand the shape and force of the story, it is helpful to know that the (post)colonial Nigerian Academy is elevated to such an extent that, however elite, it is commonly viewed in public culture as being a kind of microcosm for the formal politics of the nation.<sup>12</sup> The world of student activism (or ‘unionism’) is seen to map accurately against the national political scene. The quality of student living can be seen to indicate levels of poverty or oppression in the country. According to this logic, the presence of occult violence on campuses is an index of a larger corruption and decay in society. In the course

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connotation, but its use can index a context of criticism of these societies as connected to ‘tribalism’, ‘superstition’, ‘juju’, etc. The early history of the movement is generally described as ‘confraternity’, and current or retired members I spoke with tended to use that more dignified term or a euphemism when describing their involvement.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Black magic’ is one of the common terms for witchcraft or ‘juju’, a key theme throughout this work.

<sup>12</sup> Public culture here refers to mediums like newspapers, radio, etc. Of course, all of the variables at play in this discussion retain a connection to an elite status. In the case of national politicians, the elitism is very much material, as well. I mention this lest the reader feel I am making an argument that Nigerian universities truly *are* microcosms of the larger society. The point is rather that certain influential modes of analysis (especially the daily newspapers) have historically attributed value and power to student politics in this way.

of archival research, I found one illustrating example of how this kind of metonymy is rhetorically deployed in context. The example relates to a dispute over student fees at the University of Ibadan.

UI, among other institutions, announced in 1999 its intention to institute its own 'municipal fees' to cover maintenance expenses. The University pointed to its inability to cover basic costs, citing a national epidemic of economic crisis as well as poor public utilities. An article in *The Guardian* commented,

It is unfortunate. Both the university authorities and the students' body are victims of the environment. The municipal charges, and the protest against them are by-products of larger distortions in society, being reproduced with telling effect in that university community (Staff Reporter 1999).

Students at Ibadan protested the fees, and the University responded by closing the institution, vacating dorms, and disbanding the Student Union. Three months later the university expelled 3,000 students, citing a "renewed drive of the school to regain its academic glory and to eradicate cultism and other ills" (Folarin 1999).

The depiction of cultism as a 'barbaric instrument' that must be 'eradicated' to restore higher education features as part of the introductory pages of many Nigerian published books on the subject, most of which are examples of applied sociology aimed at detailing and offering solutions to campus violence.<sup>13</sup>

American anthropologist Misty Bastian has been one of the few 'western' academics to analyze the topic, and in her contribution to the compilation *Magical*

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<sup>13</sup> For a recent example of this genre see Onyeka 2006.

*Interpretations, Material Realities* she appears to accept the basic tenets of this story. She traces cultism from nationalist efforts of the 1950s, through the drugs and weapons economy of the 1980s, and as a destructive parallel counterpoint to the protest movement of the 1990s. Recycling popular public characterizations from within Nigeria, she refers to student members as “thugs” who have been produced and allowed to thrive by the same military history that suppressed “university activism ... the trade union, [and] other socially conscious movements” (2001:79).

While the recorded facts these accounts are based upon need not be disputed, I would argue that the overly simplistic and linear nature of this stock explanation obscures important gaps in the story, gaps that point to a much more interesting, complex, and multi-layered historical geography. To return to the earlier example of the 1999 municipal fees, how is it that university administrators were able to link the disbanding of student politics with the stated goal of eradicating cultism “and other ills”? Was this an attempt to defeat student political protest, a campaign against cultism, or a generalised crack-down on student unruliness? The timing of the actions is especially interesting. Was the appeal to cultism a necessary defence for suspending the UI Student Union – once the heart of radical democracy activism in the nation – just months after Nigeria transitioned from a military regime to a democratic government? The situation appears more mysterious to anyone who has visited the campus in the last decade. A series of large billboards, prominent at the entrance of the campus and interspersed



throughout, proclaim in no uncertain terms the Student Union's as well as the University's opposition to cultism. What are the connections between university authority, cultism, unionism, and the large scale expulsion of students?

Incidentally, just a few years after this event, the University of Ibadan disbanded the Student Union indefinitely. The billboards remain to this day, but the Union no longer exists.

These questions and observations read somewhat like the opening of a conspiracy theory, and, indeed, the literature on theories of conspiracy has influenced this project. In her excellent contribution to the 2003 collection *Transparency And Conspiracy: Ethnographies Of Suspicion In The New World Order*, Bastian analyzes the origins of print and internet representation of 'Otokoto' stories, a Nigerian popular genre in which specific local events and patterns (of murder, abduction, etc) become understood as evidence of elite conspiracies, sometimes with global dimensions (trading in body parts, kidnappings for ransom, etc), all at the expense of ordinary people (2003:65-91). She argues that end-of-century Nigeria proliferated a 'mediascape' of such stories,<sup>14</sup> which exist in implicit resistance to the efforts of Nigeria's government and civil society to project a rational and ordered vision of the State. I find this work by Bastian to be more compelling than her earlier publication on cultism, and I think that is because the 'Otokoto' nature of campus cultism stories is not so readily apparent in the print media she analyzes. A different methodology is required to unearth the rich complexities and contradictions of 'secret' cultism

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<sup>14</sup> For 'mediascape' see Appadurai (1996).

and its intersections with institutions (unionism, administration, policing, government) that attempt to project a greater transparency.

Centring my work on ethnographic interviews and oral histories, I have investigated the murky space created by the intermingling of secret participation in occult violence with the normative world of politics and everyday life. To do so I have had to read between the printed lines, to hear beyond the hegemonic explanations, and to source, as best I could, the perspectives of those who have been agents in this world. The outcome is a collection of stories about isolation and belonging, violence and reparation, silencing and remembering, renunciation and resurrection. The stories cluster around themes and interconnect through characters. They are this study's answer to the possibility and promise of ethnography within a particular geography. They are fictions built from fictions, which are themselves echoes of specific memories, rumours, hyperboles, and performances in the lives of the storytellers who shaped the course of primary research. This introduction is intended to provide a critical base for the reading of the stories, some foundation upon which they may be mapped.

In reflecting on the process and practice of this work, from inception through compilation, I am struck by the interplay among four areas. Like points on a compass, they have each provided essential balance, guidance, and direction to the shaping of the project. I introduce the metaphor of the compass in order to illustrate that none of these categories is subordinate to any other; each has

emerged at times to return this study to its core intentions, and all have helped to chart a creatively authored dissertation. Each aspect informs my understanding of the responsibilities inherent in re-presentation and authorship, a topic I return to in the Epilogue, as well as underscoring my analysis of how the characters in this work experiment with agency as navigators of their unfolding lives. I am writing of *history, methodology, narrative, and morality*. I take each of these in turn, aiming not to provide an exhaustive context or literature review, but rather to set something of a scene for the stories that follow.

### **History: Situating Soyinka's Games**

The modern Nigerian university system emerged from interactions among three major external players: colonial missions, the colonial state, and African activists in Europe and the Americas. Formal Christian missionary schools began in the 1840s in southwestern Nigeria (Akani 1996:11). In 1854 an expedition of the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) established schools as well as agricultural farms and churches along the Niger coast and produced both a Yoruba dictionary and a Yoruba translation of the Bible. As a result of these efforts, missionary activities proliferated in the southwestern region at the same time as British colonial expansion began to assume the form of an early colonial state. Boarding schools replaced mission houses and began to train converts both for service in the church and for positions as civil servants in the growing bureaucracy (13).

In the early 1900s, these schools expanded to incorporate classroom education in agriculture and industry, and in 1916 the colonial government developed an Education Code to allow for greater state supervision and financing of schools (16-17). The Phelps-Stokes Commission of 1920, created through the funding and interest of international missions, was designed to tailor education to 'African needs'. It urged instruction in vernacular languages, the institution of scholarships (first at missionary-sponsored, and then state-sponsored schools), and the development of other incentives for African participation in colonial education. This broadening of education to value 'native' needs and capacities was critical for the emergence of nationalism in the southern regions. Indeed, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first president of Nigeria and a major nationalist figure, received one of the scholarships allotted to "deserving students" (Akani 1996, 18).

Around this time, diasporic figures, like W.E.B. Dubois, and student organisations, like the West African Students Union (WASU, founded in London in 1925), were agitating for formal state-sponsored education at all levels in African colonies (Olusanya 1982). Nigerian nationalism was thus linked to international movements from its beginning. Organizations like WASU provided models for the kind of student nationalist groups that would emerge in the Nigerian university framework.

As a result of the convergence of missionary, colonial, and inter/nationalist influences, a 1945 commission paved the way for the 1948 establishment of the first Nigerian university at the southwestern city of Ibadan. This event marked a turning point toward organised indigenous nationalism and eventual neo-colonialism by a British state that had anticipated the logical extension of its strategy for indirect rule. John Hargreaves explains the coloniser's motivation in his discussion of the colonial university:

The origins of these universities may be found in the reports of two royal commissions—the Asquith and Elliot Commissions on Higher Education in, respectively, the colonies generally and West Africa specifically, which appeared in 1945. At the time of their appointment the wartime coalition was formulating a whole new range of new strategies for the dependent colonies, designed to further the development of their resources, the promotion of public services which would increase the welfare of their people, and the gradual emergence of well-educated elites to whom the British government could gradually transfer responsibility for the administration, the technical services and (more slowly, perhaps) for the taking of political decisions ... in the British image (1973:26-27).

It was within this strategically transitioning world that Soyinka and six classmates, who came to be known as the 'Original' or 'Magnificent Seven', established the Pyrates Confraternity. The current website for graduated members of the fraternity, also known as the 'National Association of Seadogs', describes its original incarnation as having an ordering and moralizing effect on a student body of African aristocrats far removed from the "social realities of the nation", and at the same time overwhelmed with a flurry of competing nationalist movements, each inspiring "expressions of tribal pettiness" in the form of student clubs and societies. According to this internal source, the elaborate cosmology the Pyrates created – complete with a sacred scroll of initiation and a vocabulary for naming members and activities – was a reaction against what they saw as

divisive 'tribal' affiliations in the larger society.<sup>15</sup> The website's account continues:

Soon their rank increased to fifteen to become the 'fifteen men on a dead man's chest'. To combat tribalism within their ranks, they adopted pyratival names, different from their 'lubbish' names, with no trace to any tribe or origin. Thus was born the Jolly Rogers I (JR1) deck which for a long time remained the mothership of the Pyrates Confraternity (accessed 8 August 2009).

It is unclear to me what actual evidence, other than the claims of members and former members, there exists for the politicised orientation of the "Original Seven" confraternity founders as active 'rebels' vis-à-vis the colonial academy.<sup>16</sup> My sense is that they were privileged and creative idealists, rather than activists. They were ciphers in a kind of colonial-cum-neo-colonial game, adventuresome 'Peter Pan-Africanists' constituting an elite circle of membership, the exclusivity of which would catalyze the next stage in the story of campus cultism in Nigeria.<sup>17</sup>

Nigeria gained independence on October 1, 1960 and the First Republic was proclaimed in 1963 (Falola 1999:10). In his essay on cultism, Soyinka excerpts the following passage written by the Englishman Harold Preston, then university bursar and eyewitness to the celebration of this moment in history:

And who will forget the ebullient welcome given by the student Pyrates club to the late Alhaji Tafawa Balewa, Federal Prime Minister, on his arrival at the Administration Building and Trenchard Hall in December 1963 as the first Chancellor of the newly independent university...(cited in 2005:7)<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This is a unifying function also claimed, on a larger scale, by the National Association of Nigerian Students, its prior incarnations, and its university union chapters.

<sup>16</sup> Certainly the Seadogs website will display this kind of bias, but one wonders what the common version of the story would be had Soyinka, in particular, not met with such international fame.

<sup>17</sup> Thanks to my supervisor Professor Willy Maley for the pun, which I think says it all.

<sup>18</sup> Original source not given.

The early post-independence years marked a period of great optimism and expansion in the university system, viewed as an engine for development, modernisation, and nationalism. The National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) was formed as an all-Nigeria student network that would represent the interests of the “first full generation of educated Nigerian youth” (Falola 1999:77). But the optimism was short-lived. 1966 brought the first military coup, itself largely catalyzed by student protest of the 1966 Unification Decree that would have transitioned the state from a federation to a unitary republic, threatening the politico-economic autonomy of regions (10). The coup ended the republic and launched the state into the 1967-1970 Biafra Civil War over the issue of eastern secession. This tumultuous period also saw the founding of a second UI confraternity, the Eiyé (Awe 2008:1). Eiyé is the Yoruba word for ‘bird’, and the ‘Air Lord’s’ cosmology drew inspiration from a Yoruba folktale in which witches turn into birds at night and terrorise the people (Akani 1996:59).

As the state embarked on a program of reconciliation and reconstruction, Nigeria enjoyed an economic boom after joining the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1971. During this period, in efforts to reconcile post-civil war tensions, the state instituted several “mushroom” universities, so termed because they seemed to “spring up overnight” (Bastian 2001:78). Their resources reflected their hasty construction, but this proliferation of new institutions served to open higher education, and in turn membership in NUNS as well as in the confraternities, to non-elite classes. Citing frustration with the

exclusivity of the Pyrates, a breakaway faction formed in 1972. Calling itself the 'Buccaneers Confraternity', this group preserved the basic seafaring lore of its rival but infused its language with a populist tone (Evbuoma 1988:1). In an effort to unify its rapidly growing chapters around the country, the Pyrates held, in 1973, its first national conference at 'Jolly Rogers 1', also known as the 'Mothership', both of which are euphemisms for the University of Ibadan. The end of the decade saw the first confraternity founded outside of Ibadan. The 'Black Axe', or 'Neo Black Movement', formed in 1977 at the University of Benin.<sup>19</sup>

Corruption, militarization, and mismanagement of oil revenues led to an economic disintegration by the end of the decade, affecting both the traditional elite and the new population of working-class students (Falola 1999:136-149). Students experienced increases in tuition and loss of faculty, and they responded with widespread demonstrations against the state. Several schools were closed, and the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS), a major political student union, was proscribed (Falola 1999:159). The union would re-emerge as the National Organization of Nigerian Students in 1978, and then again as the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) in 1980, which name it retains until today. Both within and outside the union, students continued to protest the oppressive measures of the successive military regimes.

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<sup>19</sup> The sociological literature on cultism published in Nigeria typically understands the development of new fraternities in terms of a larger analysis of the 'anti-social' nature inherent in cultism, of feelings of exclusion and rivalry on the part of students who were not successfully 'blended', or initiated, into existing groups. Statements by the groups themselves point to motives based on idealistic values and positive goals to aid society.



In 1985 General Ibrahim Babangida assumed power, inheriting a severely weakened economy. In June 1988 Babangida launched the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), initially refusing to accept loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) while nonetheless instituting its proposed policies. As historian Toyin Falola explains, the ensuing economic reform, ultimately incorporating both the IMF and the World Bank, “was to lead to a disaster of unimaginable proportions for the economy, enormous suffering to the people, widespread protests, and state violence” (1999, 184). The policies of SAP sparked several critical student protest events. In May 1986, students at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria staged peaceful protests over the impending SAP reforms. At least twenty were killed by security forces in what became known as the “ABU massacre” (Nkwona 1986). Additional protests at Kaduna Polytechnic, the University of Benin, the University of Ile-Ife, and the University of Lagos resulted in more deaths. In April 1988 thirty-three universities participated in demonstrations against the fuel price increase implemented through structural adjustment. In May through June of 1989, dozens were killed and hundreds arrested in riots and strikes that forced the government to offer welfare in the form of a “SAP Relief Package”.

At some point during this late 1980s period,<sup>20</sup> the ‘Viking Confraternity’ – the final major national society for male students – formed in Port Harcourt in the Niger

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<sup>20</sup> I have been able to confirm the exact date.

Delta, where the Ogoni Movement was also developing.<sup>21</sup> The period also saw the emergence of elaborate '419' frauds named after the clause in the nation's legal code that was meant to prosecute scam artists for swindling gullible foreign investors who had not yet caught on that Nigeria's petro-capital had somehow evaporated (Apter 1999).

In March through May of 1990 students and faculty nationwide protested the government's acceptance of a \$150 million World Bank university restructuring loan. The military assaulted and arrested hundreds of protesters, with hundreds more expelled from the university system. The violence continued at the Universities of Ibadan and Lagos in May 1992, where police killed three young anti-government protesters and wounded hundreds more (Staff Reporter 1992).

But the infamous 'election' of 1993 initiated a new level of protest even as it ushered in the regime of Sani Abacha, remembered as the most notorious of Nigeria's military dictators.<sup>22</sup> When MKO Abiola was democratically elected to assume the presidency, Babangida annulled the results (Apter 1999). Massive riots ensued, Abiola was detained, and Abacha assumed control of the state. Students continued to act, often in underground movements, in protest of Abacha's military regime as well as the collapsing academic system, and the inequity of the national and global economies. When Abiola died in detention in

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<sup>21</sup> The social and environmental movement spearheaded by the efforts of martyr Ken Saro-Wiwa.

<sup>22</sup> During my fieldwork, I was surprised to learn from a Sierra Leonean friend that Abacha is actually revered in that country for his contribution of military support that was critical to ending the civil war.

July of 1998, student response ranged from peaceful demonstrations such as displaying coffins in front of government offices (Staff Reporter 1998), to a direct action in which students stormed and torched a prison in order to free inmates (Fatureti 1998). The protests continued throughout the 1990s even as SAP policies began to result in the structural 'decay' of universities' infrastructure and the continued brain drain of their human resources; labour and student unrest accelerated.

University campuses also saw the arrival of female fraternities with names like 'Pink Ladies', 'Black Bra', 'Amazons', and 'Daughters of Jezebel' (Evbuoma 2008:2), as well as the steady creation of dozens of other cult organizations. It was also in the Babangida and Abacha years that campus cultism is said to have begun to 'turn on' students with an increase in incidents of serious violence, a trend linked to state involvement in student politics, but one which requires much unpacking.<sup>23</sup>

The elections in May of 1999 marked a transition from military dictatorship to civilian governance. Although there were disputes about whether the new President Olusegun Obasanjo (of the People's Democratic Party or PDP) had been elected or 'selected' for power, and although he had been a military ruler in the 1970s, Nigerian citizens enjoyed a few years of relative confidence in the State. The Human Rights Violation Investigation Commission, known as the

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<sup>23</sup> The complex ways in which this may have unfolded at UI are explored through several stories below, including "Manifesto", "Peace and Reconciliation", "Aso Villa", and "Second Coming".

'Oputa Panel', convened as a public platform for the airing of stories of state-sponsored murder, torture, and disappearance, although it was widely criticized for having no adjudicative power. By the time it concluded its hearings in October of 2001, the panel had received over 10,000 complaints of human rights abuses, and it was able to consider around two hundred. Many of the figures called to account were military generals, who generally either attempted to absolve themselves of accusations of murder and corruption or insisted that they were proud of their place within the regimes. As the editor of the Nigerian magazine *Tell* wrote, "[The generals] not only threw mud at one another, they competed very hard for the unofficial title of the 'greatest liar' produced by the army" (Igiebor 2001). The panel also featured an appearance by Wole Soyinka, who had left Nigeria in exile during the Abacha regime. During his testimony, Justice Oputa urged Soyinka to focus on providing suggestions for successful democratisation, but the Nobel Laureate spent most of his time describing attacks on his own body and reputation, demanding a formal apology from the Obasanjo administration, and providing information about the murders of MKO Abiola and others (Akinrinlola 2001). The panel concluded with recommendations that the state compensate those victims whose cases had appeared as well as re-open cases that had not been adequately explained.

Even as the drama of the Oputa Panel unfolded, ordinary Nigerians spoke of cashing in their 'dividends of democracy', their investments in political change through their decades of resistance and resilience (Akpan 2001). At the very

least, the freedoms of speech and assembly had been restored, but as Nigeria's economy crumbled under the force of neoliberal strategies of deregulation and privatisation, coupled with unprecedented levels of corruption, where was the pro-democracy movement? In a very real sense, it was (and still is) recuperating from years of outward resistance and inward factionalisation. As one 'former' activist told me, no one was ready yet to come out and criticise democracy. As another explained, especially in reference to UI, the movement – what was left of it – had gone underground. This is the period when the University of Ibadan raised its tuition fees and disbanded its Student Union. The violence of UI cultism peaked and was pushed off campus, a shift that indexes a larger national trend of cultist activities 'spilling' out of higher education and onto the streets, or into secondary and primary schools. But in other campuses and regions, confraternities thrived both in and outside the academy. In 2003 the Federal Ministry of Education published the names of eighty-five campus cults from across the nation.<sup>24</sup>

In their impact on the Nigerian Academy, the Obasanjo years marked a time of increasing economic inequality, the dissolution of dissident political networks in the country, and the rise of popular violence enacted through religious or 'tribal' dramas. But the period also embraced the arrival from other African regions of the telecommunications industry and the continent's version of the mobile phone revolution, which has been recognized globally for its unique innovations.

Nigeria also experienced the growth of a middle class of young professionals

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<sup>24</sup> Reprinted in Awe (2008:2).

employed by this industry as well as by the expanding banking sector; both of which joined the petroleum sector in recruiting university graduates (although there was still much more demand for jobs than there were jobs). Some who could not find 'legitimate' employment turned to the burgeoning industry of 'Yahoo Yahoo', an online form of 419 fraud innovated in mushrooming internet cafes, each attached to a diesel generator – Nigerians were still enjoying on average only three to four hours of electricity a day. This abysmal electricity supply, the focal point of much everyday frustration, has continued even after Obasanjo privatised the power industry, transferring the state run National Electric Power Authority (NEPA, affectionately termed 'Never Expect Power Always') to the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN, or 'Please Hold Candle Now') .

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of May 2007 the current Nigerian President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (also a PDP member) was inaugurated despite an April election marred by violence, widespread reports of rigging, and voter intimidation. Obasanjo's unprecedented personal corruption had been popularly attributed to his possession of an old 'military mindset', and Yar'Adua's lack of history with the military rendered him more credible in the eyes of many Nigerians. Two years into his term, however, he is generally seen as a weak leader, frequently absent from public life and unable to enact his inaugural plans. Nigeria's stock market has crashed as a result of the global recession, its banks are gripped in a corruption scandal, and the political situation in the oil rich and heavily polluted

Niger Delta has become, by all accounts, an overt – if largely ignored – civil war. Geographer Michael Watts is currently directing a major research project aimed at mapping the environmental, cultural, and political damage reverberating from this region. The project's first working paper, available online, describes the situation in the following terms:

The Niger Delta of Nigeria, the heart of the country's oil production, has become an archetypal case of what ... has been called a "zone of violence." Home to some of the largest, and highest quality, oil deposits on the planet, the recent history of the Niger Delta has been intimately associated with a commodity of unprecedented economic and geo-strategic significance and value that has, for the better part of three decades, been the lifeblood of the Nigerian economy ... The meeting ground of unimaginable wealth – perhaps \$600 billion in oil exports since 1960 – and the unremitting economic and political marginality of a complex mosaic of ethnic minorities, the delta has provided the fertile soil in which youth militancy, communal violence and intense struggles over customary authority has flourished over two decades or more (2004:1).

Having not travelled to the region myself, it is difficult to the point of impossibility for me to differentiate the many militant groups operating in the Niger Delta, or to understand which are genuinely allied to a political as opposed to a financial cause. My relative proximity to the politics of this war only left me more persuaded of its dizzying complexity, but several sources and individuals I have consulted suggest strong links between Niger Delta kidnapers or combatants and both regional and national campus cults.<sup>25</sup> Even without precise information about these linkages, it is clear that the trajectory of cultism's story is intimately bound up with the history of the Delta and, inevitably, of the oil economy.

Anthropologist Andrew Apter insists on a structural understanding of Nigeria's 'decay', a view that looks beyond conventional explanations revolving around accusations of corruption and tribalism. His monograph *The Pan-African Nation:*

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<sup>25</sup> I believe these links to be likely and significant enough that I have explored them in some of the stories below, especially "Water for the President", but a detailed investigation of this topic will have to await the next stint of fieldwork.

*Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* concludes with a section titled “The Vampire State”. In it, Apter writes:

How did the most robust national economy in black Africa, fuelled by an oil bonanza that inaugurated an era of unprecedented prosperity, give rise to the cannibalistic vampire state described so vividly by Ken Saro-Wiwa? How did the engine of development and progress that burned so brightly in the seventies and early eighties—bringing contracts, commodities, and new opportunities to virtually all sectors of the Nigerian economy—degenerate so thoroughly into a self-consuming, predatory regime by the 1990s? To understand why things fell apart in Nigeria so soon after they appeared to be taking off, we need to look past the limits of ethnic politics and poor leadership per se and return to the underlying contradictions of oil capitalism in Nigeria’s enclave economy (267-268).

This economy – imbued with a drama of bleak contrasts and conflicts – serves as the scaffolding of the stories below. It is a structure woven through with pain, with traumas and resiliencies that reveal its points of strength and weakness, the very fact of its omnipresence, into the present day.

I have provided this brief timeline in an attempt, however general and incomplete, to illustrate how the histories of cultism, the university system, and the Nigerian state have unfolded together. It must be disclosed that some of the dates and details are difficult to verify, especially with regards to the origins of confraternities,<sup>26</sup> and the linear nature of the telling is unsatisfying for all the reasons outlined at the beginning of this prologue. As important as history is to this project, the stories below draw more upon the forms of history that are recovered, obscured, and created in *memory*, in *performed* memory, with all of its subjective slips. But despite the shortcomings of this section’s universalising account, a basic historical grounding is important to assist the reader in

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<sup>26</sup> For example, the 1953 date that is attributed as the origin of the Pyrates is disputed in some sources, which claim the key year was 1952.



navigating the themes, characters, and events that animate the stories. The stories remain within a precise historical range: the fifteen year period spanning the Abacha, Obasanjo, and current Yar'Adua administrations, a time of living memory for Nigeria's current generation of graduates. The most important interviews I drew from were conducted with veteran or retired activists, confraternity members, and observers, and although they had much to say about the present state of affairs, their ventures into the recent past were often most compelling. My narrators reconstruct the events of their lives in light of contemporary pressures and uncertainties.

Before exploring in detail this role of narrative, I turn in the next section to the second point in my compass, the theorizing and construction of *methodology*.

### **Methodology: Theorizing Slips and Fidelities**

Misty Bastian writes in relation to campus cults: "An important part of media and ordinary Nigerian discourse about campus [conflict] during the last decades of the twentieth century was an understanding that university violence was carried out on several levels" (2001:80). As I have argued above and attempt to illustrate in the stories below, the violences analysed here are dynamic and plural processes, occupying various scales and locales and reverberating across time and space. Excavation beneath the surface of public and popular accounts reveals not only the multi-layered character of university conflict in this period –

the perception of its metonymic relationship with society – but also complexly spatial linkages among seemingly divergent agents, elaborate and conspiratorial geographies of power and alliance, and unfolding revisionist impacts of memory, rumour, and story.

To the extent that this work of ethnographic excavation has not been adequately presented by ‘western’ social science, it is perhaps because the subject of inquiry, though clearly extremely significant to the Nigerian political imagination, is heavily shrouded by perceptions of danger.<sup>27</sup> From a merely practical perspective, as I began my fieldwork, how was I to access this complex and guarded world, let alone apply my methodological tools and insights to theorise its complexity? My answers to this question comprise a kind of analytic trellis around which I might weave the creative narration at the heart of this dissertation.

### *Fieldwork as Methodology*

In her seminal 1987 article “Explaining the Present”, Sally Falk Moore describes the challenges facing the social scientist who must “develop double vision, to seek potential longterm implications in the day to day stuff” of fieldwork (1987:727-728). Part of this challenge involves breaking with structuralist and

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<sup>27</sup> As an aside, I had a chance encounter with Misty Bastian in Chicago months before beginning my fieldwork. When I told her of my topic, she dramatically urged me to reconsider and, at the very least, to take great pains in ensuring my safety.

interpretivist attempts to characterise societies or cultures as synchronic totalities that can be unearthed through rigorous description and analysis. She writes:

The assumption that a plurality of limited systems of meaning are likely to intersect in any ethnographic scene promises a better understanding of the permanently transitional condition around us than any expectation that an encompassing system will one day be worked out (730).

Central to Moore's argument is an emphasis on sorting out the interplay between ethnographic events as snapshots in a process of signification, and the production of historical meaning. Moore insists that some events have more historical weight than others, and should be appreciated as such. These special events reveal "ongoing contests and conflicts and competitions and the efforts to prevent, suppress, or repress these" (730).

In his article "Stumbling on Analysis: Psychoanalysis and Everyday life", cultural and literary critic John Mowitt describes Freud's Vienna as "a place where mis-steps are necessary ... [where] one can end up in the wrong place, precisely when circulation is urgent" (2002:81). In such a complex social reality, in which a variety of stories and identities circulate within individuals and communities, there are many opportunities for parapraxis, for "mistakes" and mis-steps, slips and trips, for one apparent reality to expose beneath its surface another reality, and for each to exist within the other. The effect is serendipity, as Mowitt describes. It may appear that "things happen not because they must, but because everything that takes place could have failed to take place, but somehow did not" (71).

These observations by Moore and Mowitt suggest to me that fieldworkers are in a special position to foreground the inevitable experience of losing one's way, of making mistakes (in engagement, interpretation, and analysis), as a potential route to the construction of critical (and critically reflexive) theory. Mowitt's use of parapraxis – the Freudian slip – is particularly helpful in that it acknowledges the researcher's own internal motives and desires as choreographer of the field experience; though sometimes inept, the researcher is never passive.

If applied to the scenario Moore describes, philosopher Alain Badiou's theory of the genesis of subjectivity offers a further interesting analysis of how the agency of the researcher can change through the experience of fieldwork. Badiou's work attempts to circumvent limitations of both analytic philosophy and poststructuralism in terms of their engagement (or disengagement) with the notion of the 'subject'. He strongly rejects what he sees as poststructuralism's apoliticising preoccupation with difference, and he calls instead for anti-imperial politics capable of commenting affirmatively on *multiple* universal truths. Like prominent Marxian thinkers, such as Wallerstein and Graeber, Badiou links poststructuralism to the rise of (neo)liberal values, including the hegemony of an identity-based appeal for justice. In so doing, he provides an ontological contribution to a growing body of work that critiques difference and rights-based politics as strategies complicit in legitimising and even mirroring the authorities they seek to disempower.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> For an excellent application of this critique see Brown 1995.

I do not share Badiou's blanket representation and critique of 'poststructuralism', but I do find three elements of his theory of subject formation to be particularly useful for understanding fieldwork. They are: the *emergence* of the subject, the *singular* experience of this emergence, and the relationship between the subject and her enactment of subjective *truths*. These three comprise Badiou's theory of 'fidelity' to a 'truth encounter', described here:

...the question of agency is not so much a question of how a subject can *initiate* an action in an autonomous manner but rather how a subject *emerges* through an autonomous chain of actions within a changing situation. That is, it is not everyday actions or decisions that provide evidence of agency...It is rather those extraordinary decisions and actions which *isolate* an actor from their context, those actions which show that a human can actually be a free agent that supports *new* chains of actions and reactions. For this reason, not every human being is always a subject, yet some human beings *become* subjects; those who act in *fidelity* to a chance encounter with an *event* which disrupts the *situation* they find themselves in (2003:6).

There are a number of relevant traits inherent in Badiou's truth encounters. First, truths emerge from within a plane of isolation and displacement, where the 'actor' has been removed from his or her element, or 'context'. I can think of few better descriptions of the experience of fieldwork.

Second, truth encounters cannot be orchestrated. They are idiosyncratic and surprising by nature, and no-one can effectively set booby traps to trip others into an arrival upon one's own truths. Perhaps the best we can do is to cultivate an attitude of openness to experiencing the world of the 'field', an awareness of the reductiveness and inaccuracy of our orienting maps (our research proposals), and a generosity in sharing our animation, as truth-subjects, with the other 'subjects' we meet.

Third, truths cannot be dominated or exhausted. We are the subjects of our truths. We can enter into a dialogue with the infinite series of possible manifestations of them, but we cannot presume to *know* or *embody* them fully. They are not reducible to us. This is Badiou's way of both critiquing and offering an escape from the potential for cynical navel gazing in the face of the unknowable, and yet this aspect nonetheless preserves the key postmodernist insight into a necessarily fragmented and incomplete subjectivity.

Finally, truths cannot be possessed. The moment we deny another access to our truths – on the basis of any identity – those truths are shattered. This principle might encourage us to acknowledge that, as academics in positions of relative affluence and influence, we must find ways to resist participating in a political economy of knowledge extraction, production, and circulation that is inherently and violently exclusionary, a point to which I will return below in my discussion of morality.

Like most researchers at that stage, I began my work in Nigeria with a necessary measure of heightened awareness as well as openness to being educated in ways I could not foresee. Having trained in a range of qualitative methods, I entered the research with a toolkit of strategies for doing ethnographic geography. These included hardware for creating a database of sound, video, and photographic impressions, as well as skills for the work of archival research, participant observation, surveys of public culture, and, most crucially, open-

ended qualitative interviews.<sup>29</sup> I have introduced Badiou's theory as a way of including the 'cultivation of openness' among these ethnographic resources. In fact, I have come to view this quality of orientation as being absolutely essential to the possibility of forming critical insights through fieldwork. My own research, for example, required a willingness to abandon the details of plans, to follow the leads and contacts of those who were willing to grant me access to a taboo space of secrets and rumours, hidden from a rationalising view. As Peter Geschiere writes:

Occult forces are, by definition, hidden, which renders them extra efficacious in an authoritarian context. The intrigue and rumors that surround witchcraft always refer to secrets. Through this, the idiom creates a space, imaginary or not, that is beyond the state's authority (1997, 99).

In order to find ways of seeing into this space, one must surrender to a certain amount of unpremeditated guidance. But even as one maintains openness to the leads of others, it is important not to fall into a trap of gullibility. Antonius C.G.M Robben warns:

Any research on political violence runs into too many skeletons to handle, too many closets to inspect. Aside from the deliberate lies, half-truths, and unfounded accusations – many of which are impossible to trace or verify—there is a lot of malicious gossip and character assassination....Secrecy seduces (1995:83).

In slipping into ethnographic truths, one must avoid becoming entangled in a kind of 419 scenario of 'ethnographic seduction'. Secrecy seduces; openness intimidates. Fieldwork is finicky business.

### *Theory as Methodology*

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<sup>29</sup> See the Appendix for a discussion of the 'open-ended interview' methodology.

In this section I map the key components of a 'conceptual toolkit' (to borrow the phrase coined by Deleuze and Guattari in 1988), which draws eclectically from a range of disciplines and epistemological positions and provides a context for understanding thematic patterns emergent in the stories below. This effort logically begins with an engagement with Africanist literature about the occult – the realm of witchcraft and ghosts. As the reader will discover, the contemporary world of Nigerian campus cultism is deeply imbued with beliefs and discourses about witchcraft, commonly glossed as 'juju', 'jazz', or 'black magic'. As a measure of the latent commitment to these practices in the larger society, as well, a popular explanation was told to me several times, by different narrators, during my fieldwork. The trope is situated in the context of the region's vibrant Pentecostal culture. As the story goes, no matter how committed a man is to Christianity – how opposed he is to any sign of 'satanic' juju – he will happily swear his life upon the Bible but will never attempt to deceive a traditional 'fetish'; the risks are just too high.

As anthropologist Harry West has pointed out, witchcraft and other forms of occult enchantments proliferate in some contemporary African contexts precisely because of their power to both account for and resist rapidly changing social, political, and economic circumstances (2001), which Jean and John Comaroff have theorized as comprising "an ambiguous mix of possibility and powerlessness, of desire and despair, of mass joblessness and hunger amidst



the accumulation, by some, of great amounts of new wealth” (1998:283). In her recent article “A very modern ghost story: postcolonialism and the politics of enchantment”, geographer Cheryl McEwan provides a helpful overview and analysis of recent works on the African occult from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. In explaining a particular South African ghost story, she charts a helpful middle way between “the overly cynical politics that works to disenchant the world and more optimistic accounts of the ethical possibilities of enchantment”. The approach she articulates is helpful for understanding my research. She writes:

... it is possible to reveal injustices in the world while simultaneously revealing that world as thoroughly enchanted and enchanting, haunted and haunting. Ghost stories thrive, in particular, in times of upheaval and transformation, reflecting both the profound anxieties that accompany socioeconomic, cultural, and/or political change and ways of coping or resisting some of the effects of these changes. They are products of very specific conditions and experiences, of individual and collective imaginations that are framed within and constituted by broader sociocultural and economic contexts. They interject the missing, the spectres that are otherwise obscured in dominant discourses of modernity ... In encompassing emotional, psychological, and cultural aspects of people's lives, they open up the possibility of more ambivalent yet critical readings of modernity (2008:43).

The world indexed by the stories in this thesis is, as McEwan so helpfully describes, both “enchanted and enchanting” and strikingly, powerfully unjust.

Victor Turner’s work on the transformative power of ritual is particularly helpful in theorising the power of occult violence. Turner suggests that ritual symbols are capable of containing a spectrum of meaning that terminates at two poles: the ideological (rational, referential, articulable) and the sensory (affective, ambiguous, inarticulable). The context of ritual mediates the dialectic between each pole of meaning, but in extreme moments of contact or entanglement of the

ideological and the sensory, social transformation becomes possible. This blending occurs especially in moments of ritual liminality. Turner develops the concept of liminality by examining rite of passage rituals that suspend initiates (recruits) in a space between recognised subject identities. Turner writes of individuals in such a process: “the subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, ‘invisible’” (1967:95). He or she exists at the *secret* periphery of social order or, to use Mary Douglas’s terms, in the powerful transitional space between “purity” and “danger” (Douglas 1976).

In Turner’s examples of rite of passage rituals, individuals who are neither boys nor men are structurally hidden from view. Members of secret cults in post-1999 Nigeria occupy just such a hidden position. As it did for activists in the Abacha years, this hidden status allows cultists to act outside of the authority or control of the university or the state, even if there are surveillance and punitive measures in place. Superimposed on Turner’s dialectic between ideology and sensation is the dialectic between social structure (a slippery concept in his work) and the experience of community that he calls ‘*communitas*’. Turner suggests that liminality makes *communitas* possible. Marginalised and weakened, but collectivised, subjects accrue a special kind of power that exists outside of and is capable of interfering with institutional structure. He writes:

Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority ...The process of leveling and stripping...often appear to flood their subjects with affect. Instinctual energies are surely liberated by these processes, but I am now inclined to think that *communitas* is not solely the product of biologically inherited drives released from cultural constraints. Rather it is the product of peculiarly human faculties, which include rationality, volition, and memory, and which develop with experience of life in society ... (1969, 128)

Through channelling “rationality, volition, and memory”, the rituals of community developed within secret cults may be most important for their capacity to engender sensory transformation while drawing from ideological positions that speak to the need for control and order. The forces of liminality and *communitas* reveal not ‘arbitrary’ power, but rather the capability to influence, disturb, or transform social structure in particular ways. From this perspective, campus cultism is not so much a force for the collapse of structure, but rather one among several agents in the ongoing negotiation for re-ordering, for meaningful change. Giorgio Agamben’s theory of the ‘state of exception’ can operate as a useful tool for explaining how liminality relates to order. In describing the interaction between spheres that are conventionally viewed as separate and opposed, he reveals how phenomena that are deemed to be unwanted, transient, and peripheral to the normative world can become, and must become, central to our analysis. He writes:

The state of exception is...not so much a spatiotemporal suspension as a complex topological figure in which not only the exception and the rule but also the state of nature and law, outside and inside, pass through one another. It is precisely this topological zone of indistinction, which had to remain hidden from the eyes of justice, that we must try to fix under our gaze (1998, 37).

This dissertation can be described as an attempt to do just that, to look closely at the political geography of Nigeria’s oldest university campus, as it existed at particular historical moments, as being a ‘zone of indistinction’. Within this zone, apparent binaries like ‘conspiracy’ (backward, dangerous, corrupt) and ‘transparency’ (rational, open, secure) are seen to interact. This is a theme articulated brilliantly in Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s 1967 novel *A Grain of*

*Wheat*, where one person's Mau Mau uprising is another person's Special Branch interrogation; secret and violent organizations are not unique to native cultures, nor are they confined to the margins of the State. As Friedrich Engels famously wrote, "... every state ... consists not merely of armed men but also of material adjuncts, prisons and institutions of coercion of all kinds, of which gentile [clan] society knew nothing" (1884:207).

But this structural representation cannot be static. It is constituted, exposed, and disrupted by processes of fetishisation: deconstruction, displacement, performance, and resistance. Michael Taussig's creative application of fetishism to the nation-state frames his attempt to understand the 'mystical foundations of State authority' (1993:216):

What I wish to suggest with considerable urgency is that what is politically important in my notion of State Fetishism is not only that this necessary institutional interpenetration of reason by violence diminishes the claims of reason, but also that *it is precisely the coming together of reason and violence in the State that creates, in a secular and modern world, the bigness of the S* – not merely its apparent unity and the fictions of will and mind thus inspired, but the quasi-sacred quality of that very inspiration, a quality we quite willingly impute to the ancient States of China, Egypt, and Peru, for example, or to European absolutism, but not to the rational-legal State that now stands as ground to our being as citizens of the world (223).

Fetishism is an apt metaphor for phenomena like *communitas* and *nation-state* partly because it is as problematic as its given referent – rich in internal contradictions, powerful as sacred taboo, and burdened by unsettling associations. As co-editor and contributor to *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, William Pietz argues that Marx's use of commodity fetishism must be understood

as grounded by material, historical roots, which link it both to philosophical debates about religion, and to travel and ethnographic narratives in a racist imperial context (1993:119-151).

Taussig takes up this suggestion by following a creative argument towards revealing the State as fetish. En route, he defines the fetish, following Durkheim, as the site “where thought and object interpenetrate in the significance of collective sentiment”, which means that collective self-awareness is achieved only through a dialectical relationship with some object of thought, for instance a totem (1993:233). This theory provides one explanation for the use of ritual objects in constructing religious identity, including that of citizenship vis-à-vis the religion of the State. Again following Durkheim in a section entitled “The Peeling Off of the Signifier and the Power Thereof”, Taussig takes a further step and suggests that representations of a powerful object – a fetish – actually multiply and gain power over the represented. The State, as the projected representation of the body of the Nation, achieves this fetishistic power through a variety of secrets, the ultimate of which is the secret of its own hollowness (238). As David Hecht and Maliqalim Simone explain:

The state is often not only inept but violent and repressive. Yet for all its hollowness and brutal authority, its emptiness should not be considered a sign of uselessness. State rituals become a ‘form’ that people participate in in order to avoid ‘content’ (1994:21).

Taussig’s State Fetishism is dramatically illustrated in an essay on Nigeria by anthropologist Andrew Apter. In “IBB=419” Apter unpacks the era of the Babangida and Abacha regimes, remembered as a historical period of extreme

illogicality and illusion in reference to political process and economic reform. It was the era that produced Nigerian “4-1-9-ing”, elaborate financial scams that really were, and indeed are, prototypical examples of what Jean and John Comaroff have referred to as “producing wealth from nothing” (1999:313). This was also the era that witnessed the infamous 1993 non-election discussed in the timeline above. It was at this time that Nigeria experienced a collapse of social infrastructure on the heels of exorbitant petrol-wealth, leaving a public shadow-play of value with little or no capital to prop it up. Apter writes:

...the lessons to be learned from the international ‘419’ are not about fraud and dissimulation as such. They are about a symbolic transformation whereby the value forms that emerged during the boom years have become detached from the value of oil itself, to become forms of value and sources of illicit profit unto themselves...Within this nation of masquerading value forms, democracy could not and cannot take root (300).

Issues of authenticity and value, and how they circulate within both global and local structures, are central to an analysis of Nigerian politico-historical geography. In his work analyzing the pre-colonial region now known as Nigeria, David Graeber suggests that the presence of inter-mingled spaces, where opposites blend, is not new, nor has it always been liminal (2005). In exploring sixteenth and seventeenth-century encounters between European merchants and certain African peoples (including the Tiv of present-day middle-belt Nigeria), Graeber places the dangerous secrecy of rumour and the use of violent threats at the centre of political order. By investigating the cross-cultural creation of the ‘fetish’, Graeber suggests that European depictions of Africans as ‘inferior’, ‘unintelligent’, and ‘bestial’ derived from two responses to the colonial encounter. First, Europeans experienced what Graeber sees as a ‘crisis of cultural

relativism' in recognising their own cultural tropes in the 'otherness' of Africans. In contrast to, for instance, indigenous societies of North America, many West African societies 'traditionally' included cosmologies, political structures, and social structures that shared many basic assumptions with European, Judeo-Christian models. Graeber cites as examples the basic cosmological problem of human suffering, the belief in a kind of Hobbesian state of human nature that is indexed by rituals of affliction, and the role of social contracts in engendering state or state-like institutions.

The key difference, according to Graeber, between African and European political imaginaries lay in different associations between state-like authority (*power*) and violence. While Enlightenment Europe tended to glorify the state as a bastion of justice and a necessary institution for the maintenance of peace, the African systems Graeber describes tended to exaggerate the violence of authority. They often accomplished this exaggeration through ritual, performance, and in some cases through the periodic purging of powerful people (for example, the occasional witch-hunt, which might result in actual or symbolic killing or humiliation of people who had assumed too much power).<sup>30</sup> This observation leads Graeber to his second point, that European merchants grossly misunderstood African discursive and ritual exaggeration of violence, assuming it to represent a literal propensity to violent assault and thus an inherent inferiority.

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<sup>30</sup> I am grateful to my supervisor Professor Willy Maley for the intriguing comparison of this 'periodic purging' to the execution of Charles I in 1649. In stark contrast to other, earlier state forms, the success of the modern, colonial state lies precisely in its capacity to conceal its violence.

Ironically, as Graeber points out, conflict throughout pre-colonial Africa was on a much smaller and more local scale than the violence of the parallel religious wars of Europe.<sup>31</sup>

Though Graeber is writing about pre-colonial Africa, his suggestion that political violence has been purposefully exaggerated in African cultures is useful. It may suggest explanations, for instance, of how stories of occult violence on Nigeria's campuses function when they circulate as gossip, rumour, and exaggeration within a larger political logic that implicitly associates danger and politics. This logic may rely on violent acts for substantiation, but discursive reference to the violence, not of the 'other' but of the 'authority', can be as effective in establishing and maintaining power. These insights point to the need to locate theoretical tools, such as Taussig's fetishism and Agamben's 'state of exception', within a specifically Nigerian context.

In what ways are the Nigerian State, and the 'zones of indistinction' it either obscures or attempts to order, cross-cultural products of 'western' and 'African'

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<sup>31</sup> As an aside on the issue of perspective with regards to piracy and colonialism, consider the following excerpt from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*: "But I had another reason, which made me less forward to enlarge his majesty's dominions by discoveries. To say the truth, I had conceived a few scruples with relation to the distributive justice of princes upon those occasions. For instance, a crew of pirates are driven by a storm they know not whither; at length a boy discovers land from the topmast; they go on shore to rob and plunder, they see a harmless people, are entertained with kindness; they give the country a new name; they take formal possession of it for their king; they set up a rotten plank, or a stone, for a memorial; they murder two or three dozen of the natives, bring away a couple more, by force, for a sample; return home, and get their pardon. Here commences a new dominion acquired with a title by divine right. Ships are sent with the first opportunity; the natives driven out or destroyed; their princes tortured to discover their gold; a free license given to all acts of inhumanity and lust, the earth reeking with the blood of its inhabitants: and this execrable crew of butchers, employed in so pious an expedition, is a modern colony, sent to convert and civilize an idolatrous and barbarous people!"



concepts of violence and danger? How might Graeber's provocative suggestion that Europeans misrepresented African state forms help to account for pervasive representations of African governance? Do imagined binaries, such as the State and violence, or the victim and the victimized, exist precisely to obscure the spaces in which they do not exist, or to distract from those ways in which they may inter-exist? Do the complex, overlapping identities of Nigerian students, confraternity members, activists, and graduates render them, in fact, agents of deconstruction? Derrida asks:

...does deconstruction insure, permit, authorize the possibility of justice? Does it make justice possible, or a discourse of consequence on justice and the conditions of its possibility? Yes, certain people would reply; no, replies the other party...In this first fictive exchange one can already find equivocal slippages between law (*droit*) and justice. The 'sufferance' of deconstruction, what makes it suffer and what makes those it torments suffer, is perhaps the absence of rules and definitive criteria to distinguish unequivocally between *droit* and justice (1992:4).

Again and again, both implicitly and explicitly, the stories I listened to in Nigeria seemed to be grappling with the distinction between law and justice, and in that active engagement they were transgressing boundaries laid down by Nigeria's state and civil society projections of transparency and 'good governance'.

Through their performance of *multiple* truths, how do these underground voices agitate for justice and change? How do they remember? And how do they suffer?

In seeking answers should we – as Agamben suggests – attempt to 'fix' the liminal space under our 'gaze'? Mindful of the important literature critiquing the

geographic ‘gaze’ as central to the enactment of western imperial projects,<sup>32</sup> I have aimed to reject the scientism of that metaphor. My strategy, however informed by social theory, has been more novelistic than scientific, and this particular methodological choice deserves its own point on the compass.

### **Narrative: The Art of Gist**

In her influential monograph *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*, historian Luise White embarks on a methodology that lays a kind of foundation for the possibility of my own work. In writing a colonial history of parts of East and Central Africa, White draws upon “vampire stories”, oral histories gleaned from interviews that, she argues, “offer a better, clearer, more analytical picture of the colonial experience than other [traditional] sources do” (2000:307). Her summation of the problems and potentials of this mode of making history is worth excerpting at some length:

... the problem of this book has never been vampire stories, but history writing. The stories ... are fine, worth taking at face value as few other texts are. Historical reconstruction is somewhat more ambiguous and complex, and it does not emerge full-blown from the deployment of good stories. Some of the issues that have recently troubled historians—are we writing truth, or stories? is history constituted by facts, or by many narratives?—are themselves troubled by vampire stories. The line between fact and story, indistinct as it is for most historians, is made concrete by people who believe that some agency of the colonial state captured Africans and took their blood. Vampires are a story, but belief in vampires is a fact ... The imaginary makes the real, just as it makes more imaginings: it is the inclusion of both that gives depth to historical analyses, and, if not some certainty, at least solid grounds on which to assess motivations, causes, and ideas (308).

In writing this dissertation as a collection of fictional stories, I have attempted to construct, through the imaginings of others, some “solid ground” on which we

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<sup>32</sup> See for example Godlewska and Smith (1994).

may begin to critically assess and interpret this supremely evasive subject. As I have argued above, this analytic goal serves as a major reason for my choice of an interdisciplinary methodology.

A second reason is the primacy of narrative, itself, in the (sub)culture I am investigating. In my last morning in Lagos before leaving the country at fieldwork's end, I was fortunate to chance upon one final, impromptu interview with a 'fine boy', a retired Buccaneer.<sup>33</sup> I did not record our conversation. While in the course of my fieldwork I had developed a strategy of fictionalisation. Most of those I interviewed preferred not to have their voices recorded, either to protect anonymity or because of the alienating sense of mediation the technology created. I sometimes took notes; at other times I just paid close attention. Later I would 'write up' the interviews from notes and memory, viewing this as an important first stage towards the eventual creation of composite characters and thoroughly fictionalised stories. I jotted a few words down in my notebook as this fine boy spoke, and a year later I remember vividly the 'gist' of what he shared. To paraphrase:<sup>34</sup>

In the setting you have this thing called orientation. The boys who are really inside, their orientation is much. It all comes down to the stories you know. If you have more stories, your orientation is better. Like if I know five things and you know ten things, you will definitely bully me. You will say I don't have orientation. Power is what you know. That is just it.

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<sup>33</sup> Buccaneer members are also known as Fine Boys.

<sup>34</sup> In the Methodology section below I will discuss the reason and technique behind this process of 'transcribing' interviews from memory.

This interview marked a perfect conclusion to a year of conversations.<sup>35</sup> Fine Boy summarizes beautifully one of the central ‘subjects’ of this dissertation: the culture of storytelling that circulates through and around the lived world of Nigerian campus cultism. That this cultural practice is explicitly linked to geographies of association – to hierarchies and alliances – comes as no surprise; I had been struck many times by the talents of the gifted raconteurs to whom I listened. At the same time, I was careful not to fall under their spells.

Anna Simons has written of the reliance on rumour in a crisis-stricken Mogadishu of 1989: “Because knowledge could not be substantiated on the streets, information that came in the form of rumor was often treated as knowledge and, in a sense, became knowledge” (1995:53). Not only do rumours compel people to action, but they also come to constitute a body of experience, a reservoir of status. Although I believe it is crucially important to fully protect the identities of the people I worked with, my decision to novelise their accounts also stemmed from the extent to which I understood their stories as performances to be appreciated and admired, rather than clues in a detective drama. The information I was offered in interviews often involved rumours and character assassinations that were not necessarily meant to be confirmed. What I found more interesting, still, was the tendency of certain rumours to appear again and again, in different forms. It is both challenging and exhilarating to write about campus cultism because virtually every detail and date is passionately contested.

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<sup>35</sup> In total I facilitated over thirty interviews, ranging in length from fifteen minutes to over four hours.

I dealt with this by delving into the quality of those contestations – the emotional depth of a conspiracy tale or the embodied uncertainty of a narrator’s voice.

David Hecht and Maliqalim Simone write:

Political and cultural methodologies of transformation are by necessity ambiguous. ‘Nothing works, but everything is possible,’ remarks the Sudanese writer Abu Gassim Goor – and these sentiments increasingly seem to embody contemporary African realities where societies are simultaneously flourishing and collapsing. In thousands of small ways, African societies ‘play’ with a visibility – fronting masks when nothing is hidden; deploying stark realities as covers for something more complex or uncertain’ (1994:52).

In the interviews, transcripts, and stories I co-constructed with Nigerian storytellers, I was drawn especially to these “thousands of small ways”, which animated particular moments of narration and performance. If I chose this methodology as my way of reading between the lines of more normative and public accounts, then I must ask the reader to also read between my lines of fiction, peppered as they are with clues to overarching themes and micro-interconnections.

My decision to use narrative – indeed, fiction – as a central analytic instrument should as well be understood within the context of the poststructuralist turn in social science, and in particular in anthropology. The 1986 publication of *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* opened up the possibility for overtly experimental ethnographic forms (Clifford and Marcus 1986). I have been heavily influenced by James Clifford, co-author of *Writing Culture*, whose interdisciplinary – perhaps post-disciplinary – work draws upon history, anthropology, poetry, photography, and many other modalities. My study of

Nigerian literature has also been very important, and the inspiration I have drawn from many past and present Nigerian authors is reflected in epigraphs that open each story. Given the topic of the thesis, a primary engagement has, of course, been with the works (both fiction and nonfiction) of Wole Soyinka, whose writing I allude to in several footnotes.

The body of stories is organised loosely according to a social theory of the three stages of ritual initiation (severance, threshold, return),<sup>36</sup> each of which corresponds to major transitions within the cosmology of cultism: '*blending*' out of 'normal' society and into confraternity involvement, participating in the '*setting*' of this world, and eventually exiting through some experience of '*renunciation*'.

I view the genre of 'cult story'-telling as being akin to what Andrew Apter has recently termed 'critical agency', discourse that is connected to ritual, that used language to levy socio-political power and create the possibility for revealing and transforming the order of things (2007). Echoing Apter, I postulate that it is precisely these discourses to which we must listen if we seek to understand and re-present African political realities. In his posthumously published article "Of Other Spaces", Michel Foucault coins the concept "heterotopia" to describe geographic spaces that, like utopias, "have the curious property of being in relation with all...other sites." They act as mirrors, reflecting reality in ways that contradict, expose, and unsettle (1986:24). Foucault relates the fascination with heterotopia to the spatial turn in Western society, tied to the problem of location

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<sup>36</sup> For an explication of these terms, see their author Genep (1960).

in a globalising world (23). Heterotopias are distinct from their utopist cousins because they actually exist. Though set apart, they can be visited and inspected on many levels. They are as varied as cemeteries, prisons, colonies, and vacation resorts. Some are spaces of illusion, functioning to expose 'real' space as also illusory. Others create "another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (27).

I pose the possibility that the geography of campus cultism in Nigeria can be understood as heterotopic in both senses, depending on variables of time, place, and vantage point. My stories have attempted to reveal it as such, to suggest the many mirrors and illusions, mysteries and exposés, which this cultural condition offers to the larger context in which it finds itself. I conclude this introduction to the stories contained herein by turning to a consideration of the moral consequences of re-presenting this heteroglossic, heterotopic space of critical agency.

### **Morality: Geographies of Solidarity**

In relation to his research into violence in Sri Lanka, E. Valentine Daniel poses the following question: "How does an anthropologist write an ethnography or...an anthropography of violence...without its being a pornography of violence" (1996:4)? Daniel calls attention to the ways in which ethnographers may, consciously or unconsciously, generate new violent experiences for 'subject',

'audience,' and, indeed, for 'author'. In unpacking this, Daniel negotiates a number of concerns he has experienced firsthand, ranging from the ethics of protecting the anonymity of his informants, the importance of guarding his own safety, and the temptation to accept a "way out" of the work of documentation if and when it becomes too traumatic or overwhelming to process. This "way out" might involve either "betraying" victims of violence by "flattening [their accounts] down into theory," or simply choosing not to write at all (4-5).

As the above cited quotation by bell hooks reminds us, theory need not have a wholly 'flattening' effect; equally possible is its power to create space for liberation. To the extent that the latter, rather the former, is achieved, there must be an understanding of the potential for a particular kind of analytic violence that Robert Hayden has termed "forced unmixing" (1996). Forced unmixing refers to the abstraction of inherently messy, overlapping concepts and realities into neat epistemological categories and theoretical insights.<sup>37</sup> According to this reading, social theory both mirrors and ironically perpetuates a kind of discursive violence, nested in larger material circumstances of inequality and violation. As others have pointed out, the work of analysis can have a life-draining effect on the rich texture of ethnography,<sup>38</sup> drastically displacing people from their representations.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Hayden (1996) uses the term 'forced unmixing' to refer to the process of re-imagining the nation through the construction of a state constitution. I borrow and apply it to the process of producing theory.

<sup>38</sup> See for example Graeber (2007).

<sup>39</sup> See for example Winkler (1995).



Daniel raises difficult issues around balancing passion with abstraction, sensation with theory, and feelings of vulnerability with feelings of obligation. Yet there is another, even more disturbing possibility for betrayal. In his work on resistance, James Scott has argued that subaltern actors often negotiate power in ways that evade state scrutiny. In so doing, they escape – however narrowly or incompletely – the violence of a hegemonic project aimed at discovering, codifying, and enforcing certain ways of living. In light of this, as Badiou has written in his “Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art”, “It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent” (2003).

Recognition of these dilemmas underscores the need for alternative modes of geographic writing, which are, as Deleuze and Guattari have said of philosophy, capable of simultaneously accessing the realms of sensation, concept, and emotion in the ‘subject’ as well as the ‘audience’ of the work (1994). Because I was originally trained in cultural anthropology, many of the sources I have drawn upon come from that tradition, which has long theorized the problems and limitations inherent in collecting, transcribing, and representing the human experiences of ‘others’, and especially politicised or violent experiences. Stemming from a discipline-shattering critique of anthropology as an imperial project, interventions into questions of ethics and ethnography have, as described above, often been centred on the practices of writing and analysing text; the publication of Marcus and Clifford’s *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* is generally seen as a marker for this turning point.

While this tradition of textual analysis and experimentation is certainly a major epistemological and methodological source for this work, it has ethical limitations. The basic (and indeed classic) anthropological project of amassing ethnographic 'data' to be diffused into abstracted 'theory' is, as Daniel and Hayden suggest, one of the problems. Another is the relative marginality, compared to the traditions of dissident geographies,<sup>40</sup> of engaged or activist anthropology and of a literature that theorises its possibility. It is for this reason, in particular, that I am grateful to have had the opportunity of this interdisciplinary doctoral project. My adoption of a geographical perspective urges me to think more carefully about how power operates differently in various localities and across multiple scales.

*Women in the Field: Critical Feminist Methodologies and Theoretical Perspectives* is a collection of articles in a 1994 edition of *Professional Geographer* (Katz et al.). Though dated in some respects, the collection remains a relevant introduction to feminist methodologies for (de)constructing the work that occurs in the 'field'. Indeed, a feminist position of creative, critical, and reflexive *engagement* – of concern with productions of material as well as discursive inequalities – provides a good framework towards a consideration of what would constitute a *moral* geography. Key methodological positions explored in the collection can be summarised as follows:

First, engaged feminist geography must participate in the reflexive deconstruction of 'field', 'text', power, and positionality so as to reveal these categories as multiple, constructed, and open to change. This includes an openness to

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<sup>40</sup> See Blunt and Wills (2000).

incorporating reflexive attention to dimensions of fieldwork that are emotional and (auto)biographical, not as an exercise in narcissistic navel gazing, but as a strategy for the production of more nuanced, skilful writing, research, and activism.

Second, there should be a *critical* commitment to emancipatory politics, enacted at multiple scales. This entails recognition of the limitations of, for instance, the assumption of solidarity; the ‘global sisterhood’ movement is an archetypal example. In Paul Routledge’s paraphrasing of Amita Baviskar (1995): “a sensitivity to ... power inequalities serves to undermine scholarly pretensions about collaboration, because although we acknowledge the ethical dilemmas of research we rarely resolve them. While recognising this dilemma, [Baviskar] forcefully argues that we cannot let our ethical dilemmas immobilise us” (2002:493).

And, third, engaged geographers empower themselves to freely draw from a flexible toolkit of methods and strategies for the construction of ‘mutual solidarity’ alongside the sensitive production of knowledge (see Olesen 2005). This position may be conceptualised in terms of occupying a ‘space of betweenness’, a “third space of critical engagement” (Routledge 1996), or spaces of displacement(s). Furthermore, the construction of ‘common ground’ may be possible only through a willingness to engage with difference and antagonism.

It is important that the possibility of a geographer contributing to change, not just in text but also elsewhere in the 'world', is highlighted in each of these areas.

This prerogative reveals a depth of understanding that the many dilemmas around power and representation, which are inherent in our texts, are compounded, many times, in the material world. Genuinely engaged geography is rarely easy, but I am struck by the gumption, resilience, and pragmatism of these feminist practitioners. In discussing the problematics and potentials of scale involved in politically engaged 'fieldwork', Marxist geographer Cindi Katz outlines points that are similar to those raised by Daniel. She writes:

...if some common grounds are established [between 'researcher' and 'researched'], there can be mutual learning about the meaningful differences and workable affinities in our positions vis-à-vis the structures of dominance. Then perhaps, we—all participants in the work—can appropriate this knowledge in ways that strengthen us in our encounters with these structures of dominance, and allow us the possibility of connecting across class, race, gender, or other lines to confront their manifestations in everyday life...In practice this stance may call for different strategies than might be best from a social scientific or careerist standpoint. For instance, ethnographic work can (inadvertently) expose sensitive practices of subaltern people to those who (might) use this knowledge to oppress them...M. Milagros Lopez (1992) inspires with her admonition to scholars working with subaltern groups not to render the practices of the oppressed visible to those who dominate, but to make the operations of capitalism and patriarchy more transparent to the oppressed groups (1994:70-71).

Katz very clearly indicts the kind of knowledge extraction that renders subaltern actors legible to potential oppressors, but she does not end there. Drawing from Lopez, she offers a direct example for possible alternative engagement. In light of this literature, one wonders: is the chief responsibility of the researcher to abstract global theories through the study of particularities, and then to 'speak for' local people, to make analyses available to academic and development markets? Might it not also be important to co-construct mutual solidarities 'in the field', relationships which forefront a 'speaking of' ourselves (Guha and Spivak

1988), a “being with” as well as “for resisting others” (Routledge 2002:478), a democratisation of theory and analysis? Such a position would engage the admittedly challenging process of offering one’s skills and resources (whether academic or not) to organising efforts against these regional and global trends as they are locally enacted.

Peter Hallward has written, in relation to postcolonial studies, that the ‘literary sphere’ cannot always be effectively allied with material political agendas (2001). I disagree strongly with Hallward’s reductive dismissal of engaged textuality, yet I do appreciate that literary interventions are not always enough in themselves; they can exist usefully in relation to other forms of solidarity. As Heidi Nast writes, “politically committed fieldwork involves many kinds of representational negotiations, not just literary ones. It is elitist and simplistic to problematize fieldwork in terms of a ‘crisis of [literary] representation” (Katz et al. 1994:63). To be sure, as indicated at several points above, I have attempted in this project to push literary experimentation beyond a reflexive preoccupation with representation as it links to self. I have, rather, sought to explore the highly politicised spaces between subjectivity and theory, which are complexly negotiated by the characters who shape the body of this work. At the same time, in embracing a feminist politics that considers methodology and method, and which opens up categories like ‘field’ and ‘text’, I acknowledge that the writing of research, whether in conventional or experimental modes, cannot be made to do all the work of political engagement that it might aspire to. For an example of a complementary, activist methodology I need look no further than the work of my

supervisor Paul Routledge, a long term participant, facilitator, and documenter of global justice movements in South Asia. In his article “Travelling East as Walter Kurtz: identity, performance, and collaboration in Goa, India” (2002), Routledge describes a foray into corporate espionage. Assuming a false identity, he willingly made use of his white privilege to enter a corporate industrial complex and seek private information about plans for a dam building project, information that would be extremely useful to the community of resisting peasants he was working alongside.

Inspired by this radical example, and having encountered a literature of feminist and engaged geography before my fieldwork, I continued to mull over the possibility of actively ‘co-constructing’ – rather than merely ‘seeking’ or ‘extending’ – solidarity, during my time in Nigeria. This struck me as being no easy task in a political culture as complex and distinct from my own, with its own patterns of violence and gender oppression. One of the simplest ways to heed a larger sense of moral responsibility was to redistribute as much of my material resources as possible. My commitment to giving in this way was difficult to enact on a shoestring budget, but it has always struck me as a direct and thus important method of reciprocity.<sup>41</sup> I also offered my services as an editor and researcher to friends engaged in grants or application writing.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> I hesitate somewhat in mentioning this detail for fear that I will appear to be boasting of my own generosity. My intention is, rather, to open a debate around this common, controversial, and – at day’s end – very important aspect of the field experience. I wish it were more often the subject of critical debate and engagement.

<sup>42</sup> After an undergraduate stint of fieldwork in Nigeria, I wanted to engage seriously with requests for assistance from Nigerian friends wishing to study abroad. I sourced grants to support the creation and circulation of a book promoting educational reciprocity between African and

My most satisfying experiment in co-constructing solidarity was a volunteer experience with a local youth organisation. The NGO was clearly an important meeting place for vibrant young community organizers in the neighbourhood where I was living, and I wanted to support its efforts even though its conservative politics disturbed my own leftist bent. After initial meetings, myself and organisers from the group arrived on the idea of my facilitating a one-day workshop training in direct democracy and consensus decision-making. We were able to develop common ground through engagement with political process, rather than content. The workshop was enjoyable and successful, and many participants wished to organise future events in other regions of Nigeria.

Part of the challenge of contextualising the production of theory with the production of power relations involves recognising that the written word, whether critical or creative, is not the only vehicle for the construction of solidarity (Routledge 2002). However, writing choices (including style, production, timing of publication, and circulation) do index important political manoeuvres within material as well as discursive spaces, and these choices may push the 'politics of representation' into more autonomous spaces, poised to support more radical commentary on contemporary political processes and structures. One has only to examine the history of Nigerian postcolonial literature, with its troubled past of exiled and even executed authors, to corroborate this point.

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American universities by compiling information and advice about the application process, sourcing for funds, securing visas, etc.

In situating text as well as other forms of engagement, one must continue to ask fundamentally ethical and moral questions. How do the risks associated with a particular research topic change according to location, time, and scale? When, and why, does one person's 'gist' become another person's trauma? Where, and how, does a familiar way of life in one geography (such as the 'setting' of campus cultism) become an exotic target of judgment in another (such as the space of a 'western' academic conference)? As geographer Hayden Lorimer, who graciously reviewed this material in an earlier form, has urged me to ask, "*what* does it mean to disclose the tight-knit geographies of association and dislocation created by campus-cultism? And, by association, *where* does it matter most that [you] will disclose these largely unknown worlds to a wider audience?"<sup>43</sup>

Though not unaddressed, these questions remain unanswerable in the sense that there can be no singular or correct response; context is everything. In order to enter the creative space necessary for writing the stories that follow, I needed to shelve some of these pressing issues and critiques, to allow myself some of the indulgences afforded a writer of fiction. I chose to do so out of a belief in the ethical value of the methodology itself, in the worthiness of this written experiment as a response to this particular geography. I hope that my abiding concerns with the moral position of my work have, as much as any other consideration, shaped the stories that follow.

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<sup>43</sup> This is taken from Lorimer's reflections upon his review of my ethnographic 'data'.



# **Part I: Blending,**

**the severance**

## Aluta

O ye ka binu  
O ye ka binu  
Garri won.  
Buredi won.  
Ebi n pa mekunu o  
O ye ka binu!

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We should revolt.  
We should revolt.  
Garri is costly.<sup>44</sup>  
Bread is costly.  
The masses are dying of hunger.  
We should revolt!

– Nigerian student protest song<sup>45</sup>

I know what you need to know. You need to know what it was all about.

But before I tell all this, there is something you must understand. There are two kinds of stories in this world. Some you may take freely. Others are told only for now, only for your pleasure. Do you understand the difference? The story I have to tell you is of the first kind. I do not mind. You can take it from me as you like and I will not care to know where you take it. Perhaps later I will share the other one. I have so many of those. It is a pastime of mine, gathering what I should

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<sup>44</sup> 'Garri' is cassava flour, a major food staple in Nigeria. The price of garri is a common measure of the health of the economy and the level of poverty in the nation.

<sup>45</sup> This song is a common adaptation of a popular Nigerian spiritual *O Ye Ka Dupe* (We should give thanks to God). I first heard it while attending a student union rally at the University of Ibadan in 2001.

not know. For your pleasure alone.

To begin with I should start at another time. Some years before. So that you will know why me, how far. I will start then. When I was still my mother's child.

If you are in politics, then of course looking back there will be one moment in your life that rivals all others. Sometimes it happens all at once and you know you will never be the same. Other times it happens first one way and then another, so that only later you see how it is that you came to know your own power by degrees.<sup>46</sup> For me it was like this, like both of these.

There was my senior sister in her first year at university. Then we were still with our people in the Delta, but somehow somehow,<sup>47</sup> they sent me to board at one government school in Ibadan. I had one auntie who was on staff there and like that I gained admission. And fortunately for me, my sister too was in Ibadan so I used to visit her for school holiday. You know it can be difficult when you are still a small boy and you now begin to board for school. More especially if you are far from home and you are not used to the people, to the kind of food they eat or the kind of local speech they use. You know my own people are not Yoruba. And when you are a stranger in a new land it is just all those small small things that

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<sup>46</sup> Soyinka (1989:17): "But one became a man in stages, not all at once ... At the time of the event, Yode had stored it away as an awesome thing whose real meaning he would demand as soon as he was old enough. After that, the only question that remained was: When would he be old enough?"

<sup>47</sup> 'Somehow somehow' is a common idiomatic expression in spoken Nigerian English. Words like 'somehow', 'something', 'small', and 'funny' are often repeated for emphasis in colloquial Pidgin, an idiom I retain in many of these stories. Because the double words function in usage as a single, unified expression, I do not use commas to break them up.

get to you.<sup>48</sup> Funny funny things. Like the way Yoruba prepare fish. All they know how to do is just fry and chop like that. Maybe eat it straight, maybe place it first between bread. There was one auntie who ran a canteen at school and she was famous for her fried fish and bread. They used to call her place Teri's after one big restaurant like that in Lagos. We were not allowed to leave campus very easily, so for us kids this woman's shop was like the best of the best. Everyone thought her fish was the tastiest thing around, but me I was never all that impressed. You see the Yoruba are very useless people when it comes to fish. It has to do I think with the way they are – landlocked. None of my Yoruba friends know how to swim. Can you imagine? But my own mother used to know so many different ways to prepare fish. Of course she can fry it but not just frying like that. First she would season it well. Then, she can roast it. She can make pepper soup. Dry, smoke it. Use stock fish for soup.<sup>49</sup> And for us it is not just catfish catfish catfish. Catfish from a concrete pond. No no no. We have so many different varieties. Fresh fish. Each kind has its own particular flavour for stew.

Let me tell you one story and you will understand about the kind of fish we have. When I was coming up there was one particular year when we lived close to my uncle who was a fisherman. Back then you did have all those problems with oil, but even with all that there were so many fish to go around. Every morning my uncle would go to the river and harvest as much as he could then take it to sell

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<sup>48</sup> 'Small small' is the Pidgin form of the Yoruba phrase 'die die'.

<sup>49</sup> 'Stock fish' is a form of dried fish that is re-hydrated in soup.

for market. By evening there would still be enough left for him to pass around the village. We had fresh fish to chop every night. Then, my father used to drive a bus. Night bus. Most nights he would come home very very late. Till morning. It was the hottest time of year and so some from the other end of the village used to come to our side and sleep out just to catch the breeze off the river. As my father came into the house he saw one man lying on the bench by the door. He greeted the man thinking he was one neighbour or other. But the man said nothing. Daddy thought he must be very rude or else very very drunk not to reply his greeting. He was annoyed because he could see in the moonlight that the man's eyes were shining and his lips smiling. *Wetin be dis?*<sup>50</sup> What is this man smiling for? My father resolved to yab my mother in the morning for allowing such a bad character to play at night watchman.<sup>51</sup> It was only the next day that he now discovered this bad man was in fact a giant barracuda my uncle left for us. It took enough laughter for Daddy to swallow his pride along with that fish. Luckily he was a happy man, my father, and my mother an excellent cook.

It was not for her own cooking that I visited my sister at uni. She had not inherited our mother's skill. I used to sneak into the kitchen on her floor at hall and add one or two Magi cubes to the pot of stew she left to boil. I knew I would be the one chopping later. No, it was not for the cooking or the comforts of home. Not even for the chance to be with the girls she had around her, although boys at school envied me for that. But I was not interested yet. Not for many

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<sup>50</sup> Pidgin for 'What is this?'

<sup>51</sup> 'Yab' can be glossed as 'tease'.

years to come in fact. The koko was that I always wanted to be there because I never knew what might go off.<sup>52</sup>

Then, uni was a very exciting place. Not like today. Today you have three kinds of universities in this country. First, there are the old ones that have now raised their school fees so that students expect something they are paying for. Still, in terms of the infrastructure, what they are getting is really not functioning. But because they have to pay they will not ask any questions. They will keep quiet, work hard, hope to leave on time. Then there are the schools where the authorities still do not have any control whatsoever. Like the ones in the East where cultism runs wild. Nobody even bothers to keep the secrecy or to push these things off campus. I do not even think we can continue to call those places institutes of higher education. And of late there is a third kind. Private universities all the way where you pay so much that anyhow anyhow, they will definitely graduate you, and you will go on to do those big things your popsy has in mind. These are not serious places, although you will always find diesel in their gens.<sup>53</sup> Whichever place you find yourself in now there is one thing that unifies all three: the death of politics. Students don't bother to vote at union elections. They know the outcome will be through the pull of one group or other.<sup>54</sup> So the place is just dry. Maybe you have Yahoo Yahoo.<sup>55</sup> But you do not have true unionism. Genuine struggle no longer exists for this country. We

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<sup>52</sup> In this context, 'koko' can be glossed as 'truth'.

<sup>53</sup> Generators – essential to the functioning of any university given the ongoing ineptitude of the power infrastructure.

<sup>54</sup> Here, 'group' refers to confraternity.

<sup>55</sup> 'Yahoo Yahoo' is a slang term for internet fraud.

are too new into this democracy thing. No one wants to be the scapegoat. And then, too, there are many many complicating factors. Issues I cannot explain just like that. It will take time for you to understand what I mean. For now I will just say that when I was coming up things were different. So different.

Some would say that during those years life was more desperate for Nigeria. I disagree. Yes, we had the military regime. But what was that they had on the news just today? Okada drivers using rubber tire for helmet.<sup>56</sup> Melon shell. And for what? To escape twenty twenty Naira at every blockade.<sup>57</sup> They cannot afford to buy the helmets, but I am thinking that even if they could they would be giving that money to some pastor. And they say that the riders do not want to wear helmet for fear of black magic. Can you imagine? What is happening in this country? Na only God know wetin dis world done turn to.<sup>58</sup> No how no how, a Nigerian man will never want to die. Nigeria is one place you will never have suicide bomber. Average Nigerian man values his own life too much to blow it up. And yet just last month I was in Lagos and I saw one lady for okada. The driver hit a hole in the road and pikin fell out the wrapper.<sup>59</sup> Wham, just like that.

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<sup>56</sup> Okadas are motorcycle taxis, a controversial form of transport that became popular around 1999/2000.

<sup>57</sup> Nigerian police are (in)famous for collecting 20 Naira tolls at arbitrary checkpoints. If the driver is not forthcoming immediately, the car and passengers are searched for any justification of a fine. Public transportation is especially targeted.

<sup>58</sup> Pidgin for 'Only God knows what has become of this world.'

<sup>59</sup> 'Pikin' is Pidgin for 'child'. It is important to flag and explore the etymology of this term. It is likely akin to the English 'pickaninny,' which has overtly racist connotations in an Anglo-American context. The Nigerian Pidgin usage, however, appears to have 'outgrown' or subverted any of the controversy associated with its (pre)colonial origins. Variations on the term are common across a wide range of Creole languages in Africa and the Caribbean. According to the online Wiktionary, 'pikin' is perhaps derived from the Portuguese 'pequenino', or 'little one'. (See the Wiktionary website, accessed 23 August 2009: <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/pikin>). The Merriam-Webster Dictionary proposes the same etymology for 'pickaninny', dating it at 1653. (See Merriam-

Its head was crushed under traffic. And what do you now see? Crowd forming, shock and awe. The woman is about murdering with grief. But still at the end of all of it everyone wants to board the next okada and hurry without helmet to one night vigil or other. Do you see the point I am trying to make? What I am just saying generally is that the consciousness of the people now is not very okay. Not very organised. Something has happened to the consciousness of the average Nigerian. Coconut heads. And if you want to know why that is, what is happening, then look at the state of education in this country.

I don't know if you are really following me. What I am trying to say... As you see me now you might notice that the place where I stay is very small. I am still not married, but I am also not young. I cannot afford it. I have written a book. A very large and interesting book all about the political history of this country. Events I not only saw with my own eyes, but that I actually shaped them. And it is not limited to modern history but in fact goes back all the way to before the colonial presence. Do you want to see it? Because it is sitting right here in this drawer. There is no money to publish it. I had one publisher but he could not afford to give a proper launch. There in the drawer, too, you will find the constitution for an NGO I head. We have everyone we need. We have all the contacts, all the experience. I know that if we were resourced we would be able to disarm the Niger Delta. Again, the money is not there to register it. So you see how it is. But still a person like myself would never turn to something like

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Webster Dictionary Online, accessed 23 August 2009: <http://mw1.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pickaninny>).



Yahoo. It is because of the education I had that I cannot do something like this. I do not just want to trouble my mind with it. It is not as though I am judging the youth of today. They have their own wahala.<sup>60</sup> But sometimes I do pity them. What do they have to fight for?

Abeg, free dat ting. Wetin we de yarn before?<sup>61</sup>

We were at the university. It was very late at night – to morning but still dark – when we now heard drums outside the hall. I was barely waking and my sister shoved a torch into my hand. *Point it there to the mirror so I can see.* She wanted to make up her face. I stifled laughter as I scanned the room and caught my sister in the act of casting freakish shadows, she and her roommates riffling, competing for combs and lipsticks, all kinds of magic fetish to transform their hideous sleeping masks. So like a scene of African witch doctors from an old oyinbo film.<sup>62</sup> I had no idea why we were awake and rushing, but it took double concentration to keep my heart from leaping loose as I fumbled for my own trousers, buttoned a shirt (no time to iron out the creases), and ran fingers through the little hair my school allowed me keep.

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<sup>60</sup> 'Wahala' is a Pidgin term that can be translated as 'trouble' or 'problem'.

<sup>61</sup> Pidgin for 'I beg, free that thing, what was I saying before?'

<sup>62</sup> 'Oyinbo' is a term meaning 'white person'. It is of Yoruba origin but used throughout the country. My first Yoruba teacher, the literary critic Frank Arasanyin, taught that the etymology of the word dates back to the arrival of the first Portuguese slave traders to the region. According to that story, it can be broken up as O (he) yin (shoots) bo (boom / gun). However, when I have suggested this to other Yoruba speakers most have disagreed, preferring to remove the word from any context that might be construed as politically charged.

Megaphone: *All wake and rise for the union! Aluta continua!*<sup>63</sup> Nigerian students, rise and march! Your President requires your attendance. All rise!

Instructed to march, we were running in no time. Hall doors slamming. Stairways slick and spinning. Where do I go? My sister and her friends abandoned me, rushed forward to chase a group of Kuti boys they had been eyeing from time.<sup>64</sup> And though I was used to being around the uni crowd, this time was different. I felt small, hidden, sleepwalking in the rush of students and the tricky light of dawn. I heard one boy yell *Trenchard Hall!*<sup>65</sup> I spun in search of landmarks. The campus was a wild bush. All torchlight and shadow, drums and confusion. Finally I got my bearings, stood still enough to gauge the vector of the faithful as one might the wind. And I raced. Not noticing anything again. Running to get as fast as I could to the place calling all of us. I remember at one point I fell, at another I shoved a young lady so she hollered and cursed me. I do not know if I can describe the kind of fervour we had in those days. A loyalty that now they will only give to Jesus. And only to Jesus as tithe, so he will in turn give back ten fold. But for us then it was not some pastor's bright future we were chasing. At least that was not what kept my own legs going. I did not know where I was heading – really, at that time I had no idea what we were being called to see or do. But I sensed strongly that I would find something very genuine at Trenchard Hall. Se you get? Are you getting me? This was the

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<sup>63</sup> A pan-African phrase of Portuguese origin, meaning: 'The struggle continues.'

<sup>64</sup> Kuti Hall is one of the male residential halls on UI campus. Named after the famous Kuti family, the hall historically housed upper class students and is still a coveted dorm assignment. Kuti residents are called Kutites.

<sup>65</sup> Trenchard Hall is the largest auditorium and conference venue on UI's campus.

education of my day. This was how I came up, and why even now I can hold my head up.

And then, wham, I stopped dead. I was overwhelmed. The crowd. The *crowd*. Enormous. Cheering. Deafening. Finally I caught my breath enough to shout at my neighbour. *Why are we here?* She pointed up at the roof of Trenchard Hall. There he was. President of the Union. On top of the Hall. A hundred torches strained to reveal him, but he remained in awesome shadow. He was a very tall man. Not just standing there like we would. He had this special stance, his right foot raised up and resting on a stone. I remember wanting to crouch or bow, either in reverence or for safety, expecting him to swoop down upon us at any moment. Up there, that man, he should be able to fly!

When he raised his hand everyone fell quiet and he spoke and in my mind I imagined it was me.

I doubt I remembered what he said even as he said it. That part is not important. What I do remember is the drugged way I walked around campus for some time after, as the sun was rising. Not just me but all of us. All of us high and at the same time moving very very slowly. Later that morning I now found my sister pressed up against one guy at the basketball court. When I called her name she laughed and swatted me away like she does a mosquito. The day before I would have felt somehow for this. But now I was a different man. I looked beyond my

sister to the one who held her. I recognised him from the rally. Deputy to the President. He must have seen something in my solid face to stop him laughing. He let go my sister. I held my hand up for him to shake as she leaned away to fret against the fence. So it was then that the order of my family turned on its head and the world of adults opened wide. Na die I de go.<sup>66</sup>

This story of mine, you can have it. Maybe you do not have one of your own.

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<sup>66</sup> Pidgin for 'It is there that I go'.

## Catfish

She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. Why then did women worship her?

— Flora Nwapa, *Efuru*

*I have gist for you.*<sup>67</sup> *I have gist for you oh,*

she said,

Beware the miserable aunties. The disappointed old hags who want your life to be as flat as theirs.

Her miserable auntie said, *Do you want to go out into the bush with them.* It was a statement, a pre-emptive incrimination, not a question, and at its end Auntie laughed with all of her outrageous shoulders. *There's nothing original in what they're doing, useless boys.* Auntie scratched her scalp so that the wig plaited fast to her own hidden hair bobbed fiercely up and down inside its head wrap. As the old adage goes, *Khaki no be leather.*<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> The Pidgin word 'gist' can be translated as gossip, information, or storytelling.

<sup>68</sup> Popular Pidgin saying that can be translated as, 'Khaki is not the same thing as leather'. Meaning, the imitation does not compare to the genuine article. This saying reflects the preoccupation with branding and with authenticity that pervades Nigerian culture as well as representations of Nigeria.

Tola tipped the drinks tray off her palms and onto the small faded table next to Auntie's large leather throne. The room's four sofas sat as if in counsel, casting elephantine shadows that encroached upon Auntie, her eyes narrowing with pressure headache. Tola retreated wordlessly. As Auntie measured shots of orange Fanta into a bitter glass of Guinness,<sup>69</sup> Tola took refuge in the company of Buki and the fish.

She blinked to accommodate the glare as she entered and crossed the kitchen. Her body relaxed, her arms now free of the tray and free at her side. The kitchen smelled of kerosene; some three months ago Auntie gave up paying for cooking gas. Mosquitoes hummed around the sink at the window and fed on Tola's wrist as she reached for the wire brush on the sill. She could see the little dog they called Padi on the path outside the window.<sup>70</sup> This morning Auntie had ordered him slicked down with engine oil to kill the fleas that kept him screaming at night, kept them all awake. Small thing lay there, his yellow pelt and whimpers drowning in oil in the sticky evening heat. Tola dipped a wire brush inside an open package of Omo and set to scouring a pot free of its crust of burnt rice.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Guinness sales are higher in Nigeria than in Ireland; the bottled drinks are also sweetened and served cold. Olly Owen's 2007 article in *The Guardian* attributes this difference in formula to both mercantile history (the need to have preserved the beverage during sea voyages) and Nigerians' fondness for syrupy drinks. There is a definite category of bitter-tasting foods and stimulants in Nigeria's gastronomical culture, but it never seems to include imported beverages. As a major fan of Irish Guinness on tap, I was rather incredulous at seeing many Nigerians, especially of the older generations, blending their "treacly" Guinness with Coke or Fanta.

<sup>70</sup> 'Padi' (Yoruba) can be translated as 'friend'.

<sup>71</sup> 'Omo' is a popular brand of washing powder, typically sold in small single use sachets that are stretched over a few washes.

In the near corner Buki sweated, leaning the weight of her shoulders through her palms against the gills of a catfish who was not giving up. Catfish are virtually indestructible. No creature on earth has such a will to live. For four days this fish managed half-submerged inside a bucket, a talking drum dancing to the tune of defiant muscle swimming itself to exhaustion. Tola thought of how she used to compete with other children over who would get to kill a chicken. What had so fascinated them? The power of swinging a body of feathers, discharging life in exquisitely hot and violet streams... Now she doubted she could do it at all. A good thing Buki wanted to be a doctor and so was naturally curious and not overly sensitive.

Tola thanked Jesus for more than Buki's nerves. Without her cousin this life of Auntie would be unbearable. Buki had been here six months. She was sent away from Lagos because Ibadan is a quiet town, a place where retirees once worth millions now sell eggs and biscuits to pay for a daily *Punch*, and Mr Biggs closes for eight.<sup>72</sup> She would be able to concentrate more on her schooling. Buki preferred to catch fun, gist, sneak around with friends, but she was serious about her future and so knew it would be better for her here. Better in the long run. Better in the short-term for her to keep her head low and her laughter in the kitchen. It was just for her to pass her Jamb and gain admission into Unilag and

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<sup>72</sup> *Punch* is a major Nigerian daily newspaper; 'Mr Biggs' is the original Nigerian fast food chain.

then leave for good, but at least until then Tola had someone in the compound.<sup>73</sup> Still, Tola was not sure how much she should confide.

Buki suspected that Auntie was disappointed in love. At night when the two girls lounged on the mattress they shared, the younger would invent wild stories about the time Auntie lived in London, when she had a fine figure and a tongue more like pap than pepa.<sup>74</sup> She caught the fancy of an Oxford boy she met in an underworld café. He was attracted to her stylish afro and honey brown eyes; she hung to his words thrown about in an accent that promised quite a future. For six weeks they rendezvoused every now and then for walks along the Thames. He took her once to the British Museum and later in the back room of a blues bar she took him pioneering to a place she herself hardly knew. After that night Auntie waited for days to hear from him and accept his proposal. She told her roommate she was going to live in Oxford and her roommate helped her pick out a lace negligee to surprise him with. Six weeks she waited before one day seeing him by accident on the way to her job at Kings Cross Rail Station. He pretended not to know her. At that very moment the honey in her eyes turned rancid. This was Buki's favourite explanation.

*How do you know if that will happen to you?*

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<sup>73</sup> 'Jamb' is the test administered to secondary school students for college admission. 'Unilag' is the University of Lagos.

<sup>74</sup> 'Pap' is corn porridge often served for breakfast. 'Pepa' is hot pepper.



Upstairs now, the bats having long since beaten their evening path in the skies above the washing line,<sup>75</sup> and Tola was asking Buki a question that she should already understand better than her junior cousin not yet out of secondary school. Tola had been given the chance to attend university. She had friends who were now married. It should be Buki asking her. But these days Tola felt unsure of nearly everything short of God, and Buki with her stories and her Lagos life seemed clever past her sixteen years.

– What now?

– How do you know? What that man did to Auntie?

– It's just a story Tola. Story story, remember?

– What if it was no story?

The sound of the generator sputtering off and the sudden loss of light emboldened Tola to turn and face what she could no longer see. The dog started whimpering again, softly. Night vibrated with insect life filling the space abandoned by the generator's steady roar. Buki exhaled a sweaty breath and placed a hand reassuringly on Tola's shoulder. Tola lowered her voice.

– I have gist for you Bukola:

You must not tell anyone, most especially Auntie. You don't know what it has been like living here from time. From eight years old. You've seen how this

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<sup>75</sup> From Soyinka's memoir *Ake: The Years of Childhood*: "Swarms of bats inhabited the fig tree, their seed-pocked droppings would cake the stones, lawns, paths and bushes before dawn" (1981:3).

woman has to put herself into everyone's business. Not to talk of me! Now she makes it so that I cannot leave the compound unless to buy phone card for her. And me? I cannot buy even 150 Naira credit for myself. And then, you see how when she brings lemon she insists to keep it upstairs with her so we won't take any. As if I would steal her lemon. She must know it is not lemon I am wanting. Sincerely, Buki, it is only God. If it weren't for Him...

Buki stretched and yawned and opened the window wide for air. Mosquitoes entered through holes in the screen so she fanned the cover sheet to annoy them. She had heard all this before. It was no secret to keep. In her mind she thought, *Why doesn't Tola just leave?* Run away to Lagos where after all she has some family. Find a job with a bank. She is pretty enough and she has her degree. It won't be long before she meets a man to marry. And if that doesn't work out, then it won't be the end of the world. After all, the world is changing. A woman from Nigeria is now head of the World Bank.<sup>76</sup> She, herself, will be a medical doctor someday. It is not all fetching drinks and scrubbing blouses. There is more to life; it is just to go out there and work hard, make something of yourself...

Tola sensed her cousin losing interest. She thought about just giving up and insisting they sleep off, but she knew that sleep would not come while this thing lay heavy on her mind.

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<sup>76</sup> A reference to the World Bank's managing director Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala.

– Listen now. A boy has been sending me SMS. Every day, at least every second day. For some two weeks now.

Buki sat up so the Mouka foam shifted beneath them and her shadow jumped across the room.<sup>77</sup> Who is he? Where did you meet him? The gist was going to be good after all. Tola covered her cousin's mouth to quiet her and pull her back down to the bed before she dared continue.

– Story story, Buki, remember?<sup>78</sup> This is only for your ears. I cannot tell you all about the boy just like that. First there are some things you must know, things you will get to know for yourself when you finish here and enter Uni.

– I know more than you think, Tolani. It's not everyone who spent her life in a compound in Ibadan.

Tola ignored the sting of her cousin's quip and leaned up on her elbows. She did not look at Buki but faced the night breeze through the window.

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<sup>77</sup> 'Mouka foam' is a popular brand of mattress ubiquitously advertised on billboards in Nigeria. As a bit of trivia, "Obama sleeps on Mouka foam mattress is the heading of a 2009 post created by a blogger based in Lagos. The post publishes an image of a newspaper advertisement for Mouka foam that appeared in Nigerian dailies in time for Obama's inauguration. Surveying popular and public culture was a major aspect of my fieldwork immersion, and I held a special interest in newspaper articles and advertisements.

<sup>78</sup> The phrase 'story story' is part of a common call and response trope in Nigerian culture. It alludes to the tradition of moonlight storytelling where the storyteller calls out *Story* and is responded by children reciting *Story story*. This pastime has been recently enshrined by Nigerian hip hop star 2face (Idibia 2005).

– I had one friend. At my school. Nice girl... Her family came from Calabar. You know those Calabari people, they are all very beautiful, and proud. She was not fat like people say about their women.<sup>79</sup> She was not traditional like that. She had a very fine figure, very fine. And intelligent. In the same course as me, Tourism. She always got high marks. And I don't think she used to get them by pleasing the professor. You know that's what it's like at uni? You have to be careful of that.

– Did you do that?

– Buki! You know I am a Christian. Just give yourself to Jesus and you pray well and there's no question he will protect you from every evil. Now my friend did not pray well. Somehow she did not sleep with her professor but in the first term she did have one boyfriend. Her first boyfriend. She really loved that boy. He was a 400 level student. You know what he did? He bedded her, and then he travelled. So you see it is just like your story for Auntie. She was a virgin before it happened. Then he never called, never mailed. Now he is in London somewhere. My friend became very bitter. Funnily enough, she started going out with different guys. All sorts. One day she told me she had decided to sleep with one hundred boys. One hundred, can you imagine? I tried to bring her to

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<sup>79</sup> The Calabari people are known historically for 'fattening rooms' where young brides prepare for matrimony. More recently, 'western' standards of beauty have taken hold among the younger generations.

Redeemed,<sup>80</sup> to turn her from all of that, but like I said she had a lot of pride.

Till tomorrow she is still working on that her goal. She has managed seventy-one guys. My count. Seventy-one. Out of which at least half of them are setting boys.<sup>81</sup>

*Tolani! Tolani!* Auntie's voice rushed down the hall and beat against the door of the girls' room. Tola sighed and rolled over so her hip landed on the cooling floor. She reached for the bottom of the mattress and dragged her wrapper round her hips.

– She'll be wanting me to find her sleeping drugs. Remember you must not tell anyone at school about this.

– And what would I tell? It's nothing you've told me.

– Go to sleep Buki.

Tola fumbled for her handset and pushed a button to bring up the light. The candle in the corner was too low to use again. She left the room, the door closing behind her as a glow faded from her palm.

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<sup>80</sup> An article by Ruth Marshall (1991) describes the origins and provides a context for understanding the Redeemed Christian Church of God, which is currently one of the largest Pentecostal denominations in Nigeria. Known simply as 'Redeemed', it has branches around the world and appeals especially to young people.

<sup>81</sup> 'Setting' is a euphemism for the world of the confraternities. 'Setting boys' are frat boys, cultists.

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The next day Buki left for school and Tola stood in the small room off the kitchen stirring a tin of corned beef into egg stew and planning her day. On the second kerosene burner slabs of yam buoyed in bubbling water. Peppery fumes wafted from the stew and troubled Tola's eyes, but she paid no attention because today her feet felt light like they wouldn't mind dancing. Tola had not often told her own stories. At OSU she had met girls who really knew how to yarn.<sup>82</sup> But she had always been a listener with little to tell. For the entire year of her diploma course this fact about her had not changed, and it was not by choice or lack of opportunity that she remained on the edges of things. For this Tola could hardly forgive herself. In life chances do not always come around again. Now, running errands at Challenge or Aleshinloye Market,<sup>83</sup> she participated somehow in the hustle of the city's life. She was not captive, exactly, but Tola generally felt that the world was swirling always around her and never sweeping her along. The Yoruba have one proverb: Ibadan lo mo oo mo Laipo.<sup>84</sup> And this was Tolani.

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<sup>82</sup> During the time of my fieldwork, Olabisi Onabanjo University (formerly and still commonly called OSU) held a strong reputation for cult activity in the southwest of the country. The university is located at Ago-Iwoye in Ogun State. About an hour's drive from Ibadan, Ago-Iwoye is a much smaller principality with a very different town-gown dynamic. One of my 'key informants' had transferred from the University of Ibadan (UI) to Ogun State, and she noted that the relative 'dryness' of town life there was compensated by the exciting opportunities for cult-related gossip on campus, which had by then been largely exiled from UI proper. Her narrative voice inspires the stories "Jazz" and "Bonus Track", below.

<sup>83</sup> Challenge and Aleshinloye are two busy shopping districts in Ibadan. Challenge is a cluster of shops, internet cafes, and fast food restaurants at an intersection of major roads in the south of the city. Aleshinloye is an outdoor market near a high end residential community in the northwestern part of the city, and it features clothing and household goods.

<sup>84</sup> Yoruba proverb that can be translated as, 'You know Ibadan, but you do not *know* the heart (the interior) of Ibadan.' Ibadan is an ancient and sprawling metropolis occupying more surface area than any African city. Challenging to navigate, it is famous for a densely populated interior featuring old colonial buildings, unmarked roads, and rusted iron roofs.

Twenty years growing up in this town and she would never be omo Ibadan;<sup>85</sup> she could not find her way through to its heart.

But, today, never mind her regrets. Taking Buki into her confidence, even fleetingly, had cheered her. And then there was the matter of the morning's SMS. She fished out two slices of yam with a fork and spooned the savoury stew. She added this dish to the tray with Auntie's tea steeping in its steel pot. Auntie had been an addict of tea ever since her years in England, and it was not Lipton she liked. Crisp imported boxes with old-fashioned pictures of Englishmen burned too much into the allowance she gave Tola every week to buy provisions for the kitchen. She placed the tea box also on the tray. Auntie kept it, bags all counted, up in her room. Tola cast a reluctant glance at the still sizzling stew in the pot; she would eat her own after carrying the tray upstairs, and after anything that came after.

But Auntie was not upstairs. Tola left the tray on her dressing table and covered the pot with a cloth to keep it warm. Out of Auntie's window Tola saw her over in the corner of the yard. Dressed in only her wrapper, she stood by the fish pond, a concrete box brimming with murky water. She was managing a fistful of cow's brain in a nylon bag, her hand outstretched to lure the happy pets. (Her own

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<sup>85</sup> Yoruba phrase that can be translated as, 'Child of Ibadan; Son or daughter of the soil'. The City of Ibadan is one of the most ancient in Africa. With an official population of three million (likely to be at least double that, in reality), it is the second largest city in the most populous nation in the continent. It is both sprawling and, at its heart, extremely dense.

were not the fish they ate with ewedu,<sup>86</sup> for the same reason Auntie could not bear to kill the household chickens). Above the compound wall, a view of the White Garment Church:<sup>87</sup> its ghostly faithful walking barefoot out of morning worship and up the road to the land beyond; the neighbourhood of Felele sprawling out towards Express road, ringing Ibadan. How easy would it be to slip her hand now into Auntie's pocketbook? Slip out while the fish were feeding and past the watchful neighbours, cross the Express, stand and wait and call a conductor to take her all the way to Agbowo and to this boy?<sup>88</sup>

But the Express would give her pause. Tola remembered the morning some six months back when she stood just here looking out the window. It was harmattan then and the air drifted thick with haze, cut through with chill.<sup>89</sup> The season when hair breaks off the scalp and skin peels off lips and fingertips. The season that smells like Christmas. Then, the view is often very strange. So strange that when she thought she saw a crowd gathering down on their side of the Express,<sup>90</sup> Tola at first felt nothing except perhaps the blankness of delay. Of course there must be some crisis unfolding; everyone knows the dangers of this road. Ordinarily she would have wanted to go and see, but the powdery white

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<sup>86</sup> A local vegetable used in preparing soups and stews.

<sup>87</sup> 'White Garment Church' is a stand-in name for the Celestial Church of Christ, which is an African Initiated Christian sect that draws from Yoruba as well as African Christian sources. Religious practices emphasize purification of satanic influences. Worshipers are recognizable by their white clothing and common practice of walking barefoot in public on holy days. See Adogame (2000) for a discussion and analysis of Celestial cosmology.

<sup>88</sup> Agbowo is a highly dense neighbourhood across the street from the main entrance to the University of Ibadan. In recent years it has been known for cult activity as confraternities have been forced or motivated to move their activities off campus.

<sup>89</sup> Harmattan is part of Nigeria's dry season. Occurring in the winter months, it is characterized by cooler weather and ubiquitous dust, remnants of Sahara sands that have blown southward in wind storms.

<sup>90</sup> The Express is a major road connecting Ibadan to Lagos.



light would not allow her to identify a route between herself and them. Until a neighbour's wail. It was the old woman down the way, and Tola shuddered when she heard it so her wrapper loosened around her waist. Downstairs were sounds of Auntie rushing out the door to the aid of her friend. That old woman was the mother-in-law of Mrs Sunday, the neighbourhood's talented tailor. Mother of two small girls, she knew how to cut ankara so the final garment hugged the wearer's body like another skin.<sup>91</sup> So flattering. When Tola wore Mrs Sunday's handiwork to a wedding or a funeral she always received compliments. And Mrs Sunday, despite her inflated prices, was also a friend.

A wave of stinging sensations flooded Tola's dusty nostrils and floated upwards towards her cheek bones, downwards through her chest to churn at last in her belly. All afternoon these feelings followed her from chore to chore, sensations coagulating in her core, indifferent to her determination to evict them as she tied and re-tied her wrapper tightly. Later she would learn, from the many visitors Auntie entertained through evening in her parlour, that Mr Sunday had wanted at first to murder the driver of the lorry. It had taken many men to restrain him until they determined without doubt that the culprit had been thrown through his own windshield and also killed. There would be no fine outfits made for Mrs Sunday's funeral. Hers had been a bad, untimely death – no occasion for boiling moin-

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<sup>91</sup> Ankara is a type of fabric popular in western Africa.

moin or dishing jollof rice.<sup>92</sup> Auntie bought a bottle of Tanqueray and advised the widower to make sacrifice to Eshu so that justice would come with time.<sup>93</sup>

A frenzy of fish attacking the water's surface pulled Tola's gaze down to the compound and back to this day. Auntie had dumped the last of the pale meat from the dripping nylon bag. As Tola turned back inside, Nepa brought the light. She hurried down to the kitchen to find her phone's charger and see if time had brought more treasure. As they passed on the stairs, Tola murmured that Auntie's tea was waiting and the woman returned a kind word. Feeding the fish always left her happy for a time.

The truth was Auntie had been disappointed in love. More than once in fact. Buki was not far off with her fantasies. What Buki did not know was that she, being a girl soon to become a woman, had the same lot in store. But Tola, having lived longer and with more silence, had begun to strongly suspect her own future, and that was where all the trouble lay. Unfortunately or fortunately for her, Nepa was playing games today. The light disappeared before a text arrived.

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<sup>92</sup> 'Moin-moin' is a bean cake traditionally steamed in folded banana leaves but also in nylon bags or aluminum molds. The bean puree is often mixed with fish or egg. 'Jollof rice' is Nigerian party food, rice blended with spicy tomato sauce.

<sup>93</sup> Eshu is a Yoruba deity often equated to the Devil, but more accurately understood as a harbinger of justice. Sacrifices to Eshu are a common sight in Yoruba Nigeria, and they typically consist of bowls containing foods with palm oil that are left at intersections.

## Beans

We all went down to the great valley. It was an immemorial day of festivals. Wondrous spirits danced around us to the music of gods, uttering golden chants and lapis lazuli incantations to protect our souls across the interspaces and to prepare us for our first contact with blood and earth. Each one of us made the passage alone. Alone, we had to survive the crossing – survive the flames and the sea, the emergence into illusions. The exile had begun.

These are the myths of beginnings.

– Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*

Perhaps it was his own fuller belly that started all the trouble. Kunle had the good fortune of having a father in the school canteen. And not just a worker there – his father ran the kitchen. Kunle slept in the boarding halls but, unlike the other wards, he was just a few minute's race from his mother's moin-moin. There were many things some other boys had that Kunle never dared ask for, the most important being a new set of after-hours clothes each term. When the others were away for school holidays, Kunle would take a torch at night into the dormitory and search beneath the beds for forgotten shirts and trousers or, best of all, fairly new jeans. After a thorough wash and iron they would be good as new. As for another uniform, Kunle was always hunting but never holding his breath that he would actually find a castaway to size him well. His parents could only pay to sew one uniform at a time, which was a problem mainly because school policy required it be clean and freshly pressed every morning. The boys with spare uniforms could always take twenty minutes of daylight to scrub for the

upper next day, and in no time the sun would dry everything. Most times Kunle would feel free to iron for the upperclassmen, a service duly paid for with amnesty from the regular beatings any junior is accustomed too. Like that the arrangement worked well for everyone outfitted at the school, but it still did not solve the primary problem of Kunle's single threads. He, himself, would have to wait to wash until he was changed into his night clothes, and by then there was never time before the warden took the lights. Even if he managed to lobby for a little leniency from the authorities, he would most likely be too worn out himself to care whether or not he got demerits in the morning. Through some months of struggling within this bind Kunle now found an ingenious solution. Of the many good fortunes bestowed on this government school, the privilege held in greatest esteem was the unbroken flow of electricity to not just official buildings but also staff quarters. Kunle discovered that he could steal away to home very early in the morning, borrow Momy's Omo powder and scrub away, then wring well and hang his uniform behind the family's refrigerator where hot blowing air made quick work of drying. Then there would still be time to eat home-cooked yam, iron out the remaining damp, and join the others for morning inspection. The regimen worked perfectly so long as Kunle never overslept. Luckily, there had forever been the morning whistle that each day at 4:30am called one hall or other to early drill. Running laps around the campus and other callisthenics. Most times the other boys slept through the whistle if they knew it was not their turn to drill or do their morning duties. But Kunle listened for it every day so as to have enough time. And on Mondays, the day before his own Tuesday drill, there was

nothing left but to be extra careful not to dirty the uniform; there would be no time to clean it again. Like this he managed, small small.<sup>94</sup>

Kunle liked the other boys well enough. He would like them for years to come. He would later – much later – come to know them again, after some had made it big and most were still trying, in the internet of unforeseen reconnection. Many were the children of big big men: colonels and even brigadiers. He had Abacha's son for classmate, although that one did not friend him then or later. Yet in the universe of this government school – and it was a universe unto itself – the rules applied in a backwards fashion. It was military school. The students were children of soldiers, and so soldiers themselves in training without leniency. Perhaps their fathers and themselves in turn would later buy out of corruption tribunals, but first they were required to learn the discipline of waking before dawn and cleaning a plate on time, without complaints. Then there was another group to which Kunle belonged: the children of staffers, of cooks and teachers and security guards. And it was this latter bunch of nobodies who knew how to get around the strictness of the place. From when he was a toddler Kunle had mastered the trick of sliding the lid – then bigger than him – off the bulk supply of tinned milk kept in the canteen. He knew how to reach into the vat, vast as an oil

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<sup>94</sup> Consider the following excerpt describing a bygone era of a different sort of hardship. It derives from Soyinka's memoir *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years*, where he reminisces on his own experiences boarding at a colonial government school in the city: "One cold wave of the Harmattan merged into the next, yet the school did not even consider varying the morning routine. It was up even before it was properly dawn, into special shorts for Physical Training or some form of sports, then the cold shower, or, more accurately, the cold jet from overhead pipes that had long abandoned their perforated caps. Lips, palms, skin, soles of feet were all capped. Mugs of tea froze as they were passed down the table at breakfast. The first classes of the day, before the sun fought its way through a stubborn haze, were torture, especially when the wind vented its spleen upon the school compound" (1994:119).

drum but brimming delicious, and scoop a cup of milk with no one noticing the drop in level.

Kunle had been a baby and a boy at the government school before he now became a cadet. Though near the city, on its outskirts in fact, the campus had around it a very large and bounded space of bush. A wonderful spot for coming up. The non-academic staff families lived all in one area set apart from the rest, and everyone knew themselves well. Their children moved in fantastic gangs, eating when hungry from the pot of any auntie who had built a fire and cooked a pepper soup on time. Being a cook of some importance, Kunle's father knew the value of food, and so his own house was always generous and often host. It was an especially wonderful place to chop because one never knew what interesting item would be on offer. Kunle's father was best of them all in bagging bush meat. He had a very clever method for laying traps, and as soon as he was old and strong enough Kunle became his father's helper. They would go into the bush with machete and track until they found a clearing where the animal came back, day after day, to defecate. There would always be a big pile of dung. Then they would set off into the forest in the direction of the tracks and begin to cut through a very narrow path leading up to the clearing. They used palm frond and all sorts to block off any exits from the path, so that the animal would have no other way to follow. Like this they would corral him into a booby trap. They built it with sticks they bent and arranged to snap, to wrap around any animal that stepped just so. Sometimes the trap alone would kill it, but most times Kunle and

his dad found their prey struggling the next day and used machete to finish it off. Then they carried it home for Mummy to prepare. And they chopped, oh they chopped.<sup>95</sup> Of course they would have grasscutter, antelope, monitor lizard, rabbit... And bush rat, so many bush rats. Bush rat was for Kunle and his friends to catch and kill. But also, every now and then, they would trap monkey. And once or twice they brought home crocodile. For that, especially, Kunle's place was famous in the neighbourhood.

The only kind of bushmeat the family would never want to eat was snake. It was not that his father feared them. Although of all Kunle's childhood memories, the most vivid was the time in the forest when they were clearing a small path and his father, from up ahead, yelled back, *Ere-ere!*<sup>96</sup> Kunle did not wait to understand but turned and tore his way back through the bush. When Popsy too arrived home, panting, he told of his encounter with the largest black mamba he had ever heard of, let alone set eyes on, in his life. It lay directly across his path, its head raised some feet off the ground and the black mouth open for a strike. So big was the snake that Kunle's father had no thought even to kill it. So enormous was the mamba that it would make small work of swallowing a boy.

But this experience did not stop his father from waging war on the predatory snakes that came into the compound. Pythons were fond of raiding the chickens. They were used to coming at night and helping themselves, gulping the eggs

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<sup>95</sup> 'Chopped' can be glossed as 'ate'; to eat with gusto.

<sup>96</sup> Yoruba for 'Run run!'

whole and crushing them with the muscles of their bellies. Kunle's dad discovered a solution. He would take one or two eggs and boil them until hard then leave them out for the night. When the python came to feed he would now discover he could not crush the egg inside him, and he would be forced to lie there digesting slowly, waiting patiently for morning, discovery, and death. Like this they dealt with many pythons. And they had one neighbour – a military man with a son in the school – who used to enjoy eating snake, so they would always take whatever one they caught and give to him.

Because he had grown up like this, Kunle was not scared of the bush the way some city boys can be. For him it was a small thing to hunt, to kill a wild animal or slaughter a goat. Thanks to the vast grounds of the school, he was used to the hard work of a more rural life. He used to join his father in farming their places in the forest. They took small footpaths that would be invisible to most and followed them far to where his father had cleared land to cultivate cassava. Right before the rainy season, or sometimes just after the first rain, they would go straight to begin preparing the land. They used hoe to build heaps of earth. After a week of that, it came time for planting. His father took machete to chop the cassava sticks, six or seven sticks from each cassava plant. And Kunle would go from heap to heap stabbing these seedlings slantways into the soil. Later there would be weeding and waiting – waiting for some six months – and the time to harvest. Each harvest served to measure Kunle's growing strength, his steady march from child towards man. It is a difficult thing to harvest a



cassava tuber. First, you take machete to the stick of the plant and throw it away, leaves and all, on top a heap at one corner of the field. Then you squat down, grasping the remaining stick, pulling and rocking against the earth and sweating and sputtering all the while, until at last the roots now snap and the cassava groans free of its growing place. Unless you are unlucky and the rainy season was short, the ground too dry, and the stick snaps. Then it is just to take machete and dig and hope you will not damage too badly the fruits of your labour. But the most difficult part for Kunle was hauling the harvest to the road at the edge of campus. Broad baskets piled high with bundled cassava, one load after the other. His neck and back ached for days from those weights, so that he used to beg a taller friend to hold him up by his head and swing him above the ground, gravity snapping his spine back into its place. A truck came to cart it all away. All the cassava gone, just like that. Gas to the engine, and six months of living – of growing and labouring – vanished. But there would be money coming in at least.

It was not just cassava. The family planted all sorts. Garden egg around the house,<sup>97</sup> along with tomato and pepper. Green vegetable, pumpkin, melon, yam, and maize in the fields. There was one particular time when Kunle was still a novice helping with the farm and decided he should have his own garden. He planted sweet potato in one small area like that near the house. He cut it like he knew to do cassava, and he planted each piece in a heap of soil. Then he left it, not knowing what to do again. It seemed that in no time the whole place became

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<sup>97</sup> Aubergine.

covered with a very lush, very thick carpet of vine and leaf. Kunle just left it to continue. But when the thing had really gotten out of hand and it looked like a jungle was taking over the yard, then his mother now ordered him to take machete and go clear the place down. She said she wanted that spot for chickens. Kunle could not think of any good excuse, so he obeyed her. But, really, as he stood there by his sweet potato garden, he did not know how to begin. He thought of his father hashing through cassava sticks and decided to mimic as best he could. It took him the greater part of three days to clear. Then he had to burn the brush to satisfy his mother, and at last there was nothing left but to harvest. It seemed unlikely to Kunle that they would really and truly be there, sweet and swollen, buried in all that soil.

For thirty minutes of breathtaking pushing and yanking the first tuber refused to budge. Kunle took machete to loosen the earth's grip. He did not want to ask his father for help. When he noticed that a crowd of his friends had gathered round to watch, Kunle announced that he could tell the time was not ready for harvest, and like that he swung his machete once or twice for show and sauntered off, his hands secretly quivering from the sheer effort and near humiliation of it all. It was late, by moonlight, when he now came out of the house and back to the work of digging. Easier now without the hotness of the sun or the gaze of others. After some minutes he had loosened enough around the potato to wiggle his hands down around its middle. It felt rather enormous. Kunle planted his feet firmly in the garden and pulled ferociously. The liberation of the sweet potato sent him

tumbling back over his own shoulders. When he gathered himself up and found his crop, which had rolled some feet away, Kunle was frightened. He had never seen a sweet potato half as large. Not even a third the size of this one, the first plant he ever tried grow. And round like a football! What had happened? Kunle feared the recriminations of his mother should she see this monster he had raised in her own yard. He took his machete and crashed it down upon the beast. It took several tries to hack it unevenly in half. Perhaps she would not notice his awkward remedy. He prayed she would accept the harvest as a normal one, not think her son somehow possessed of powers he should not have. Kunle could not sleep that night for his all his fearful wondering about those powers.

These were the beginnings Kunle had as he was coming up a boy at the government school. A seed ought to grow into its nature, but the character of Kunle's childhood could not explain his eventual behaviour on the day of the beans. Was it shame or solidarity, boredom or thrill? The beans had been watery, that much is known. Far too watery. Of course, watery beans is a key feature of just about every school in the nation. Eating watery beans in boyhood is a part of becoming a true Nigerian man. Although Kunle's father was head of the cooks, Kunle knew it was not his father's fault the kitchen was under stocked and so he did not take to heart the occasional snickers on the part of his peers. What he did do on a regular basis was sneak away home and eat proper beans, delicious beans, which his mother saved for him. If he went hungry for a time –

an afternoon – he knew it would not be long – till evening – until he could be full again. If not, there would certainly be a revolution in his father's home. In all his growing up, even though the family had very little to claim, there were only one or two periods when they went without eating three meals a day. Two weeks this year, another month a few years later, when there might have been only one or two meals to dish. Not enough for more. Those were very low times in the spirit of the family. Interestingly then to Kunle how his classmates, sons of military men, important and rich men, were finding themselves in a constant situation of hunger. For many adults food is somehow less important than shiny things, and now was the time for the children to learn this lesson.

It was probably the disappearance of the dining hall warden, who had started holding a series of meetings with the gardener's eldest daughter, which really started the whole affair. He was a frightening senior with a reputation for serious bullying, and it turned out that grumbling tummies translated into grumbling mouths more easily in his absence. So it was this day that the students really started to complain. They were fed up. Watery beans with not enough salt to flavour the broth. Not enough bread to sop it. Not enough milk to wash it down. They were fed up, but they did not know what to do with the energy of their distress. As they were humming and clattering spoons, something was rising in Kunle, something that would lead to two weeks' suspension with hard labour. He mounted his table. He raised his fist in a stance he had seen in the daily papers when they covered the student riots. *Enough*, he said, and when not everyone

had noticed he then shouted: *Enough! Let us take our bowls and march! Let us march to the Principal's house!*

A pause.

Then cheers, roars. Just like that, Kunle's classmates were scrambling over their seats and falling into a mob eight hundred strong.<sup>98</sup> The students were becoming the masses before his eyes, but Kunle had been left on top his table. It was then that he learned a very important lesson about leadership: it is easier to stir up a crowd than to control it. He followed, nearly floating off the table, trying to find a way through the force that had gathered and was now moving onward. Shoving and pushing and cheering, they somehow exited the dining hall and made their quickstep march across campus to the side where the academic staffers have their homes. Kunle ran to keep up and then tried to fight his way to the front. At times someone would notice and say, *Make way for our leader!* The crowd would part and he would get ahead but then lose them all again. They were running by this time. Racing. Bowls in hands spilling watery beans over legs and feet, splashing stains against eight hundred neatly washed and pressed uniforms. They were shouting, fists upraised: *Principal's house! To the Principal's house!*

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<sup>98</sup> Soyinka: "From all nooks and corners, like worminfested firewood when the heat has reached the hollows, they scurried out, calling on God, Allah, Sopona, Sango, fleeing in a hundred directions, falling into ditches, stumbling over cement blocks, over surface pipes, culverts, scrambling over low walls, diving under hedges and crashing their way through like the Gadarene swine in diabolic possession" (1994:234).

When they arrived the mob fell suddenly silent and searched for its leader. Kunle was scared, more so than he had been the day he ran from the black mamba snake. More scared even than the night he harvested his first sweet potato. He had started this, and there he was surrounded by all his junior and upperclassmen, actually standing there at a place few of them had ever dared even spy upon: the Principal's house. He walked to the front and faced his troops and waited as long as he could before he felt he was going to lose them again. When he heard a voice behind him the muscles in his body tensed into a force Kunle had never known. Somehow the fear fell away and a boldness remained. He climbed up on the fence and faced the Principal. Kunle faced him well. Even if he could not manage to hold the eyes of this man who had known his father and his family from time, Kunle locked his hands behind his back and found his voice. *Sir, these beans are too watery.*

Cheers, *cheers* ... and Kunle felt himself as if from outside himself, opening his arms, winding them back to the crowd and around to the vast building before them. Pointing with all of his fingers. *Pour the beans on his house!* Eight hundred boys flung the contents of their bowls onto the face of that white house. They splashed and streaked, filling their hands with beans and flailing, flicking colour with impressive abandon. Eight hundred students turned the heart of the campus red. The principal was shouting at Kunle to calm them down and Kunle, staring at that red-washed building, overcome with the manifestation of his spirit, grew frightened once again. Coming to, he wanted earnestly to subdue the

power, to become again an obedient boy, but he had no idea how. What happens next? A memory bubbled up into his mind – his father slicing onions and singing the songs from his own coming up, from the time of Independence and later of Biafra. In those moments his father took on a voice like a mother's, a voice meant for lullabies and praise songs rather than justice and war, a voice irresistibly soothing. Somehow Kunle turned and knew what to do. He began to fill the air with the notes of his father's militant youth. In short time the masses joined in what lines they knew, and eventually the boys had quieted down enough to retire to their showers and their sleeping quarters. Kunle was left alone with his power.

They beat him that day. The house had to be painted. It was a serious offence. They beat him silly. His father nearly lost his job and the beans became more watery still. No other incident followed. Kunle's mother continued to dish moin-moin and egg stew for her boy when he came home to eat. His father continued to enlist him for the harvest on school holidays. But the family never knew again quite what to make of this their boy. Somehow somehow, Kunle had been anointed with the spirit of the Union.

**Blend**<sup>99</sup>

After I had travelled sixteen miles and was still running further for the fearful noises, I did not know the time that I entered into a dreadful bush which is called the “Bush of Ghosts”, because I was very young to understand the meaning of “bad” and “good”. This “Bush of Ghosts” was so dreadful that no superior earthly person ever entered it.

– Amos Tutuola, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*

Yahoo holds more appeal than ever before. Lights behind his eyes flicker like Internet Explorer running on generator diesel. He could be at Ella’s right now with the boys patiently refreshing their pages, waiting for downloads of handsome men to attach to hotmails bound for lonely white women with dollars to spare. Truth is, though, Dayo does not admire it. So much 419 again, and for what?<sup>100</sup> For a Hummer if you hit it big? Meanwhile every honest African man is caught in a visa queue. He himself had once been at the American Embassy for four am. His uncle in New York agreed to pay for his visit. Perhaps he could make one or two contacts, come back later to study. At least he would have a good time. Truth was this uncle owed a favour or two to his family and payment through the eldest son would do. When Dayo heard the news he was excited as

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<sup>99</sup> A slang term for Cult Initiation.

<sup>100</sup> 419 is the number for the clause in the Nigerian penal code pertaining to fraud. For years it has also been used ubiquitously as a colloquial expression indicating fraud or fraudsters. A recent slang adaptation is 19.



the next boy. What Nigerian kid doesn't grow up dreaming of Yankee?<sup>101</sup> But he had been wise not to wear his enthusiasm in public. It was a tourist visa he applied for and intended abiding by. Paid in his \$133 application fee at the UBA branch in Dugbe.<sup>102</sup> Spent long hours at cybercafes to book the appointment. He did not hire an agent but booked himself, which meant he had only one half hour of every week in which to try and secure a place through the website.<sup>103</sup> If Nepa was down and the gen dry than what can you do? And then after all of that, what happened on the day? The visa officer did not even look him in the eye. He had been prepared by his boys the night before that he must by all accounts look the official squarely in the eye; a firm handshake was out of the question because of the Plexiglas between them, but the absence of opportunity to catch the man's eyes threw Dayo more than all the rest of it. But no matter anyhow. This guy did not even read his letter of invitation... Spent the whole time gisting with his computer screen. Maybe appraised him up and down from the corner of his eye and then that was that. Rejection without explanation. His uncle could keep his New York. Dayo would never go back to that Embassy. For what? To be treated like a criminal? To be robbed?

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<sup>101</sup> Yankee is a slang term for the United States.

<sup>102</sup> The United Bank of Africa is one of the older Nigerian banks and, although it is a less convenient service in the current era of consumer-friendly banking, it remains the required mediator for visa fee transactions with the American Consulate and Embassy. Dugbe is the central business district of Ibadan.

<sup>103</sup> The American Consulate requires visa applicants to book for appointments online, using a first come first serve basis. As an attempt to control demand, the website is only made available for a twenty-minute window on one morning of the week. This proves a hardship for people trying to access the site in a country endemic with power outages, and so most applicants pay hackers with inside connections to book for them.

But then, that is the trouble with Nigeria today. He had been heard to proclaim this once or twice over a third round with the Keggites.<sup>104</sup> No dignity. Every girl wants to take her chance with visa lottery. Every boy wants a laptop for Yahoo. Everyone eager to leave. Everyone running around like headless chicken. There is no dignity in labour. No dignity in labour; no respect for the culture. Two sides of the same worthless Kobo coin.<sup>105</sup> And when was the last time we even saw Kobo for market? Antiquities by now, flooding the altars where before there were real objects of value, fetishes and sculptures now lining the museums of the West. These Yahoo boys have no political ideology. That is the problem. If they did then they could take some pride in what they are about. Global redistribution of wealth back to where it came from.

But how his palmwine theories of neocolonial underdevelopment had brought him to this tree, Dayo could no longer understand.

He remembered the first tree he every properly climbed. Never had he remembered this before. That day he had been with his friend Jonas who came from Freetown where they had war. Jonas could run up a coconut, not to talk of using stepping rope. He said in Freetown they take coconut green, not like these Yoruba who want everything so tough. Probably you have been enjoying barbecue fish and the pepper has burned your mouth, so you just buy one green

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<sup>104</sup> The Keggites are members of the Palmwine Club, a social club formed in celebration of palmwine at the University of Ibadan. Members sing, drum, and talk politics over intoxicating calabashes.

<sup>105</sup> Kobo is the Nigerian cent. In the last decade, Kobo coins have devalued to such a point that they are no longer in circulation.

coconut and drink the milk with straw. That is why they were climbing the tree. Jonas was sad, missing his family and decided he wanted green coconut. He said the Yoruba man was so lazy as to wait for the rains to come and the old ones to fall, husk and all. Perhaps Dayo was just another lazy Yoruba, for his feet that day felt unschooled, slipping against the trunk, which spat husk around his ankles and down to the bush even as it stretched impossibly higher, heavenward. He struggled to use the stepping rope for leverage and balance, and at more than one dangerous moment his body fell too far back and nearly flipped around itself as the ground danced up against the sky and set him spinning. All the while Jonas perched grinning in the highest branches and dropping green coconuts, one by one, narrowly missing the climber's head. *Dayo you bush boy!* And Dayo, too breathless to match the insult, even to laugh. But how like a man he had felt when he reached the lowest branch.

*Ahoy!*<sup>106</sup>

Pieces of Eight are falling from the canopy.<sup>107</sup> He hears a branch rip against the back of his neck, the cracking sound at the force of a cascade of debris from the trees all around, showering across his body as the ground leaps up to crash into his hip, his shoulder, the temple of his face. Before he can raise himself well, the slapping now continues. His legs are kicking into something soft and screaming. Drums keep time for the purple pulsing in his eyes. Shouts as boys drag him to

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<sup>106</sup> An idiom used by the Pyrates Confraternity.

<sup>107</sup> An early cohort of Pyrates – the original seven with another member included – called themselves the 'Pieces of Eight', an allusion to the Spanish dollar in European piracy lore.

his feet and push him back onto the canvas of the tree he has again to climb.

Welcome to the fifth and final blend.

On this round Dayo's arms are heavy with hot tides of blood, his chest pumping its charge in full recognition of this emergency the prideful self refuses to escape. He manages to reach for the next grasp, to heave his pelvis forward against this tall shadow – friend or foe – darker than the night and more rough. There he feels his arms drape uselessly, his thighs tighten their grip.

In Africa all these stories begin at bewilderment. We find ourselves astonished, amazed, angry, then through enough repetition of the usual we become locked in that famous display of cheerful acceptance the whites admire so much. Here, in this very land, were people not playing at masquerade while Europe was destroying itself? Yet who became the baser race?<sup>108</sup> The blackest, most violent, most evil, most backwards, least civilized, in the eyes of the thieving world? All his life Dayo has been beaten, and to God he does not know from which direction the beatings come. Are they foreign or native? Spiritual or man-made? He knows only that he is not the worse for the blows he has received. He knows they are not there at the shocked centre of things. The centre may be full of politics or God or farming or fucking or nothing at all, but not violence. That wahala is for aid workers, never for prophets. It cannot be. And so the blows themselves mean very little to Femidayo, aside from the sinking feeling that he

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<sup>108</sup> This alludes to the argument made by Graeber in relation to the Tiv (2005), which is discussed in the Prologue.

may as well not subject himself to something so hardly worthy even of his curiosity, and at the same time very capable of landing him in hospital. At any rate, he knows this time will end no worse than an average day for government school.

There is Jonas again. Jonas climbing coconut in his short sleeve.<sup>109</sup> Jonas with his fantastic stories. Dayo especially liked the one about the Americans who became wealthy trading diamonds for visas long before the war.<sup>110</sup> Now the Embassy sits further up the lion's mountain,<sup>111</sup> high so it cannot be reached by just anybody anymore.

The boy who started at his right, he will end up in hospital in Lagos for a week. And later he will readily kill then die for the comrade who put him there. Dayo's mouth is full of blood. He swallows once then leaps deeper into the bushes, canes cracking against his thighs then up against his backside. How many are they? Fifteen, twenty? He tries to see the faces of the boys who started with him, to name them one by one, to name the whirr around him: those who started

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<sup>109</sup> Reference to the wartime practice of amputating hands (long sleeves) or arms (short sleeves).

<sup>110</sup> Reference to a scandal described to me by a Sierra Leonean family now based in Ibadan. In the 1980s, two American consular officers were caught operating a longstanding and lucrative business trading visas for diamonds. Both were jailed. Strangely, I was unable to find publications referencing this scandal, but it is widely known about in Sierra Leone, and its fact was confirmed to me by an American foreign service officer who was based in West Africa at the time.

<sup>111</sup> 'Sierra Leone' means 'Lion Mountain'. The following explanation of the etymology is taken from the website of a tourist agency: "The name Sierra Leone dates back to 1462, when a Portuguese explorer sailed down the coast of West Africa. There seems some dispute whether it was the shape or climatic conditions that influenced Pedro da Cintra to come up with 'Sierra Lyoa' meaning Lion Mountains. Some say the coastal regions looked like 'lion's teeth'. Others suggest he thought the thunderstorms over the mountainous peninsula sounded like the roar of a lion. Sixteenth century English sailors called it Sierra Leoa which evolved in the 17th Century to Sierra Leone. The British officially adopted the name Sierra Leone in 1787" (accessed 31 August 2009).

as recruits, and those who form the gauntlet, now one bloody tangle in the bush. But his nose is filling his mouth again, his brain no longer capable of counting down.

In Sierra Leone they ran reels of *Rambo* in the jungle. Rebels took their names from white men darkened by camo. Now Dayo will become a pyrate. Shipmate on a phantom boat. Speaking the Queen's English and wearing the robes of the ancient juju priests.<sup>112</sup> The nation's greats out there on the horizon, exiles in ivory towers, white sails flapping in the shock of the wind. Before passing out at last, he imagines Jonas on Lumley Beach, there sitting at the edge of the waves, watching the ship come in. Watching the rescuers skim like happy white stones across the sea.<sup>113</sup>

Later, till midnight, he comes around to the sting of palmwine poured across his face, sensations like soldier ants alive at his nostrils. Heat slipping through the

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<sup>112</sup> I am grateful, again, to Willy Maley for calling my attention to a fascinating piece of historical trivia. The first Shakespeare play performed outside of Europe was a production of *Hamlet* performed aboard the ship the Red Dragon as it moored off the coast of Sierra Leone in 1607 (Taylor 2001). As Maley speculated in a correspondence about my thesis, "[The play's] opening line – 'Who's there?' – must have resonated then."

<sup>113</sup> This is a reference to the US evacuation of American citizens and other foreign nationals as the war in Sierra Leone spread to the capital Freetown in 1997. According to a white paper I found freely available online (a master's thesis in military science), "On the 3rd of June, the final U.S. evacuation took place from Freetown. Detachment members went ashore at Lumley Beach with a Marine task force to evacuate an additional 1,261 people from Freetown. These included twenty-one Americans, 194 British citizens, and the British and Nigerian High Commissioners and their staffs. The DoS stated, 'We do not anticipate any further evacuation from Freetown, because we think we've got all the Americans out who want to come out'" (2001:39). During my fieldwork I heard eyewitness accounts from a Sierra Leonean citizen who was trapped in the city. According to him, locals turned out on Lumley Beach to try and gain a seat on the rescue ship. Nannies of children who were American or dual citizens instructed their wards to beg for their accompanying transport. One imagines the grand entry of the US marines, decked out in full gear, as a stark visual contrast to the many people on the beach who were waiting, hoping, and who would by and large be left behind.

coagulant against his throat. For the first time this evening, Dayo cries out for help. Hands reach beneath his arms, bring him to uncertain feet. The men have formed a corridor in the bush. Torches cast a glow over the little he can see through the purple in his eyes. The hands are kind now. Embraces ease him forward step by step through this passage to Victory Island, where a circle opens to fold him safe inside.<sup>114</sup>

Bodies breathe and sway, resting dreamlike one against the other. At last, at the end of all these rounds, here finally comes the scroll. Each recruit must produce his own blade. (Hygiene above all else). Dayo feels his neighbours pocket jumping against his thigh, and so he too fumbles for the razor he bought just this morning. This morning that now seems years and years ago. He feels his mind waking. He finds the blade and holds it in his palm. All across the circle, the faces of his comrades are alive with faerie lights, tiny mirrors for the marks that they will make.<sup>115</sup>

Something in Dayo recoils, and he spits phlegm onto the razor in his palm, an act to make his true self known, if only to himself, to be very clear that this is the limit to the level of respect he will muster for what they now do. Curiosity is all, he tells himself. This history in blood is not the centre of why he has come to the

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<sup>114</sup> Code used by the Pyrates Confraternity. See Appendix D for details.

<sup>115</sup> According to one 'informant', most confraternities avoid exacting initiation wounds that will leave scars. The Pyrates, however, will sometimes scar the hands of initiates. See Appendix D for details.

bush at night, again and again, to be beaten by his friends. When his turn comes, his heart nonetheless saps itself into the ancient rag.<sup>116</sup>

Shouting and dancing and drinking ensue, round and round in circles in the bush, with fire now roaring to trace the gaps in soldiers' teeth and the gashes in their skins, warriors all. *Papa pa pa papa pa pa* go the drums,<sup>117</sup> and Dayo spins round equally lost and drunk with all of it until, without foreknowledge, he now discovers himself slipping away unnoticed, crawling among the creepers, reaching for the canvas, climbing once more above the scene. Dogged arm over arm, foot above foot until finally the stars are all there is. Dayo stands there hugging branches close. Eyelids opening by degrees to the orbiting sky. There in the moonshine he feels himself letting go, falling, flying, slowly filling into the warmth of a boy's first kiss, high among the green coconuts, far out of sight.

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<sup>116</sup> The official description of the Pyrates Confraternity, for example on the website of the National Association of Sea Dogs (graduated members), describes the Pyrate's scroll as a document on which member names and organizational rules are recorded, according to the conventions established by the original founders. To the extent that Pyrates are currently active on and around campuses, however, I have been told that it is more likely that they now use the scroll object in the same way it operates for Buccaneer, Eiye, and other rival groups' initiations. In this practice, the scroll is a cloth upon which each new initiate bleeds as part of a culminating solidarity- and identity-forming ritual. I have not been able to confirm this definitively and so I may be taking poetic license here, but I do not think it is farfetched to evoke this latter practice in this story.

<sup>117</sup> Confraternities have unique drum beats used for ritual purposes. According to one 'informant', this beat is used by the Pyrates. See Appendix D.



## Cigarette

The congregation drew in a collective breath, some sighed, some had their mouths in a big O. They were used to Father Benedict's sparse sermons, to Father Benedict's pinch-your-nose monotone. Slowly they joined in. I watched Papa purse his lips. He looked sideways to see if Jaja and I were singing and nodded approvingly when he saw our sealed lips.

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*

We were a Christian family.

My father was a genius. He spoke fourteen languages. He became a lecturer when he was twenty-three. He knew everything. He knew how to build the engine of a car. He knew who was winning the American election. He knew the insides of every coup plot the dailies uncovered. He knew who stole a sip of his Baillies the year I was eleven. He knew the neighbour's boy had not died a natural death. He knew more than any man I have ever known. But he did not know how to treat little children. He was always paying school fees. We went to good schools. We had new clothes to wear. But at home he was distant to us. He was distant, or else he was beating us. I don't know why my father had so little love in his heart. Until tomorrow I will never know the answer to that.

My mother, she worked in the school. Transcription. In those days there were no computers, no copy machines. She had her own typewriter. She paid for it out of her salary when she used to work with the other women on campus. Then when she had her own she was able to stay at home. Typing papers, books, all sorts. Political manifestos. 25 Kobo a page. This was 1983, 84. Around those years. She said it was her education, reading all those things. Engineering, English, Geography... She said Nigeria was becoming a great society full of scholars and scientists. That it was only a matter of a little time before we became fully developed and caught up with – even ran past – the rest of the world. When she ran out of ribbon she would be annoyed until she found the money to replace it. Those times we children used to eat at one auntie's house. My mother was disappointed that she never had enough saved to keep a good stock of those ribbons. She was a fairly beautiful woman. Even now she knows how to dress well. She could cook, too, although she doesn't enjoy it.

My sisters are tough. They take nothing from no one. They know how to fight with a man.

There were five of us children growing up. All of us educated. Well educated. The junior brother is finishing his papers now. He is into computers. I tell him he should travel out of the country but he is not interested. He says he will go to Abuja or to Lagos, that Nigeria is going to be a great nation. It is just time. All the money is here. America is declining, Nigeria is emerging. Nigeria is the

place to make millions. I think he may be right, but still he is a foolish boy. He is smaller than me. I am taller than him.

I was not always tall. In school they used to call me Antelope. Not for long legs. It's because I had a tendency to always be running away. Any little thing and I would turn the other way. I am not ashamed to say this. It was because I was smaller than the other boys. And then there was the money thing. We always had enough for good clothes, new clothes for school. There was the envy thing. Then, I was a dunce. I did not know how to fight for anything. I could never fight for myself. There was one time I was holding a cassette player. The tape it came with was MJ's *Bad*, the single. I used to take it to the back of our house where we kept the washing line. I would rewind again and again to practice my moonwalk. More than anything back then I wanted those red roller skates the guy used at the end of the music video. The cassette was not mine. I was borrowing it. These bullies at school collected it from me. Because of that the school said I had to pay for this thing. 200 Naira. This was 1987; 200 Naira no be small pikin money.<sup>118</sup> My father paid but then he said that was it for me. He sent me to another school.

This school, it was not as good as the first one. But I was happy there because I met one group of boys. I started moving with them. They were doing their runs in the neighbourhood. Stealing small small things and selling. They had one or two girls they managed. Or else on a seasonal basis they were trying to lease

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<sup>118</sup> Pidgin for 'not a small amount' or 'not a child's amount' of money.

themselves to the local politicians. I guess you could call them Area Boys, though not really.<sup>119</sup> They were just very very junior boys. But to me they were big boys. They were always fighting. Warring between themselves. I wanted someone to fight for me. That is how I joined them. I started rolling with them. But these ones, they were different from me. At school holidays, anytime, I could easily leave them and go back home. These boys did not have anything like home. They were all dropouts in the end. It was just them, themselves. I was stealing money from my father to give them. This is why they liked me okay, but also why they did not really like me. It was from them I learned how to join something but at the same time remain alone.

*Like today. I feel like I am punishing myself. I am drinking alone.*

It was through those boys that I then began. I entered university and for a time I needed money to pay for things at school. Either my father didn't give or he didn't give enough. You know at university it is more important that you look neat, that you have one or two things. No problem if you go without feeding or you just take ground nut for one or two days. But your clothing has to be neat. And then you should try to have one or two things, like sound system. This was before handset but still you need money for pay calls. Just small things like this. I didn't have. I needed them. These boys now approached me and told me I should start selling drugs. Indian hemp. They would give it to me and I would

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<sup>119</sup> 'Area Boys' is a catch term covering a wide range of 'local thugs', who can be engaged in various kinds of criminal behaviour (from voting fraud to armed robbery).

sell for them. That is how I became a baron. And this is how it goes if you are a baron:

*Somebody wants to know you.*

*Somebody wants to cheat you.*

*Somebody wants to oppress you.*

*I fight my way through.*

All sorts of people came to me. Students, mostly. Some professors. Some were from inside, others were from outside. All different kinds of customers. And some were even more different. Say I have one customer who has been buying from me for sometime. You know I was doing this thing for a long time, for many years. So, I have one customer and he gets to know me. Gets to trust me. I go to his place to make a deal and I end up staying, gisting, maybe he gives me something. Then later if he is in trouble he will call me. Just like that. That is how we do things. You don't have any contract like that. No formal arrangement. It happens over time. Like this I became a kind of bodyguard. All these things, die die, small small.

I had one customer like this. This kind of customer. I would do him favours and he would call me back and do me favours. It had been going that way for some six months. Nothing unusual. I thought he was just some rich boy, that probably his popsy was into something big time and so he caught himself enough wahala.

I never asked any questions about that. And then one night he called me to one bar. He booked private room. Everything as per drinks: Star Lager, Harp, Guinness Stout, Smirnoff Ice, Jack Daniel, even wine. Enough of everything. One or two strippers giving lap dance. I remember one of them had woven red hair, the other blonde. I fancied the blonde but she was occupied all evening. He invited me to stay. We drank, smoked Mary Jane. There must have been fifteen boys there that night. We had quite a lot to drink. As you see me now, I want to drink, get high even before I start telling stories. But then I was still learning somehow. I thought I was one bad boy like that, but even at that time I had so much to learn. I was not very okay at the end of the night.

This guy, he is not very tall. Small guy. You can imagine my surprise when at the end of the night he handed me 20k. This was around 1995. 20k.<sup>120</sup> He told me to go buy myself some new clothes. He told me they wanted me to join with them. Until that moment I had no idea he was a bereter.<sup>121</sup> Things were really secretive back in those days. Not like now. Not only a bereter. He was the number one. The Eye.<sup>122</sup> I never knew such a little boy could be so big. I had a lot to learn.

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<sup>120</sup> 20,000 Naira, which at that time would have been a handsome sum.

<sup>121</sup> 'Bereter' is another euphemism for cult member. Each cult has a particular colour that can be paraded by wearing beret hats or other accessories; for example, the Pyrates sport red berets. 'Beretta', after the firearm, is also a code name for a hit man in some contexts; one of my contacts believed it to be used particularly by the Mafia Confraternity, though I was unable to verify this.

<sup>122</sup> 'Eye' is a status term used by many cult groups to signify the leader, the number one man in the hierarchy. Interviews in my fieldwork suggested that the Eye, relative to other key members, is often quiet, conservative, unassuming, the kind of person one would not suspect. His ability to blend into the background helps to ensure his security and the secrecy of his band.

I took his money. I did what he told me. I went to the market and bought clothes. But I did not join his side. You see from time I had always wanted to join one of them. My problem was that I never knew which one. This was the beginning of how they all then started courting me. I became a Jew. You know what is a Jew? A Jew is one who is in the setting somehow but he does not belong to anyone.

When I took the guy's money and I didn't enter his side, he and his boys then started chasing me. Hunting me down. I was still selling ganja now and then, but I really had to scale it back. Besides I wanted to get out of that business. One rival group then took me in. They didn't force me to join but they offered me protection. And I found that I wanted to be inside. It actually started like this. Back when the guy gave me his 20k, my uncle then arrived from Uniben.<sup>123</sup> It had been some time since I had seen him. He greeted me, took me to one bar. Bought drink. Food. It was asun, especially delicious asun that night.<sup>124</sup> After we chopped well, he told me how he heard about one bereter like that who was courting me. I wondered how far, but I said nothing. My uncle then told me that I should not join that group. I must know I am a black man. I said, *What do you mean I am a black man?* He laughed and told me I would know soon enough.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> The University of Benin, located in Benin City, Edo State in the eastern region of Nigeria, has been a hothouse for cult activity for several decades.

<sup>124</sup> 'Asun' is a dish of barbecued goat meat.

<sup>125</sup> A 'black man' is a member of the Black Axe Confraternity.

This group that wanted to protect me, they were black boys. So I knew. I now joined. But the way I joined was not very usual. I did not have any links man.<sup>126</sup> No boy to link me into runs. I had to ask my own questions. So you see like that I was still a Jew.

I suspect my father was recruited as well. But unlike my uncle he did not join. And why, I do not know. Back in his day when the whole thing was still very very pure, why would he not join? Or perhaps he wanted to but he did not last to the end of initiation. It is not a nice thing to think about your own father. But I have wondered. I, who did survive initiation night. And the nights before Ini Night, as well.<sup>127</sup> You have to be beaten many, many times before you can become one of them. On the night itself you are beaten silly. At the end you take knife and each of you cuts your hand. We use rag to wipe the blood. That is what they call the scroll. I did all those things. I did them very willingly. And just like that, I was now inside.

When you are inside, it is difficult to know when a thing will happen. Of course you know more than if you are on the outside. But sometimes the thing just happens.<sup>128</sup> Myself, I was coming back from hospital. At Ini I had broken my leg so I left for Lagos the next day. You have to disappear and not return until all

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<sup>126</sup> A 'links man' is a mentor in the setting. He provides orientation for a new recruit.

<sup>127</sup> 'Ini Night' is the final and most brutal initiation event in the blending process of many confraternities.

<sup>128</sup> I am minded here of Bill Buford's *Among the Thugs* (1990), a journalistic account of British football fan violence. Buford constructs a thesis that this form of rioting violence appears to 'go off' almost without cause or context; it is the product of the unpremeditated energies that gather and circulate through the spontaneous movements of crowds.



wounds are healed or else regular civilians – or, worse, rival members – might suspect who you are. On my way back I stopped home to greet my mother. It had been months since I saw her. Back then, before GSM,<sup>129</sup> there was no way even to call home, no way for her to keep track of me. I never knew if I would find her at home those times I came to try. But this time something told me I must try.

I entered in the back way through the kitchen, which was just to surprise her but turned out to be the luckiest decision I ever made. Before I appeared I heard that she was arguing with someone in the parlour. She was pleading, pleading. I knew immediately that they had come for me. Boys sent from that first group that wanted me. I had to hide in one cabinet. My mother, they gave her a dirty slap. I heard her fall to the floor.

*You are making me remember what I do not want to remember. You are taking me back.*

I hid. I don't know how long. Not very long. But till tomorrow I have never counted so many slow seconds. They gave my mother a dirty slap. You have to understand that if I had come out they would most certainly have killed me. The inside of the cupboard was small and smelling of powdered milk and garri.<sup>130</sup> For

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<sup>129</sup> Mobile phone.

<sup>130</sup> 'Garri' is cassava flour, the major food staple in Nigeria.

two days I had not eaten. While they slapped my mother in the next room, I tried to disappear myself by noiselessly dipping my hands into the tins.

Later, they left finally. I came out. I found my mother. When she saw me she bursted into tears. She bursted into tears, my mother. She told me they came to kill me. That two of their own had dropped the days before. Those days I was hiding in Lagos. It was black boys who did it.

Just like that my mother came to know what I was. Just like that the war is started.

You know that I started smoking when I turned eleven? This is the most important story of all. My mother caught me with a pack of White London, and she herself beat me silly. She told me to go tell my father. It was the next day that my father now called me into the parlour. He was reading his paper. He did not look up. He just asked me, from behind the newspaper, he asked me, *So I hear you have started smoking cigarettes?* I said, *No Father, I do not smoke. I just pretend. I do not suck in.* He said, *Do not be stupid boy, use your head.* And that was it. Nothing more. No beating. No punishment. For the first time in my life, nothing. Na story man. Na fucking story.

## American Rock

I open my eye I see for my land  
(CHORUS) NA WRONG SHOW O  
Everywhere you dey  
Everywhere you go  
Everybody want do power show  
(CHORUS) NA WRONG SHOW O

– Fela Kuti, “Power Show”

What happened to me? It was a normal evening. I was just there hanging out. Myself and my roommate and some boys. Some junior boys. Jambites.<sup>131</sup> It was House Week, our week at the hall. There was a lot of celebration, dancing, music. We were playing the sound system in my room. Loud. It was about 5pm. You know the interesting thing is that those small boys were already telling me about the guy. I don't know how that happened. It was just coincidental they were telling me all about him. Myself and the guy, we actually got into school together. But he was a diploma student. In Statistics. He was a really big dog. Huge. He could take me down. Those junior boys were just complaining about the guy. How he had been harassing them, taking their money, their phones. How he was frightening them. How he used gun. I was an old Staylite on

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<sup>131</sup> ‘Jambite’ is an expression for incoming first year university students, fresh out of there Jamb exams.

campus.<sup>132</sup> I told them that, no, that could never happen to me. If he comes up to me I'll just deal with him. You have to understand these were little boys, new students. I was trying to talk to them as if I had power, strength. I was an old dog. I was just trying to make those boys feel I had those things. But it's true that in my head I couldn't picture myself fighting with Segun. I thought that I would just talk it over with him if it ever came to that.

We were playing American rock. Back in those days anyone could come to my room for a jazz record. Ella, Louis, Miles Davis. I was the kind of guy who wanted to listen to whatever nobody else had. Everyone wanted hip hop, so I listened to jazz. After awhile I was starting to get into my rock phase. Anything I could find, and my favourite was Matchbox 20. I was playing Matchbox that day. It was really loud. I had this old system. I stepped out of the room. That's when I saw him walking into the hall. It was Kuti Hall. He had two boys with him. Bodyguards. Skinny boys. I knew they weren't Uites.<sup>133</sup> They were too scanty for UI boys. No UI boy would dress that way. At UI, even if you don't have money, you try to look as neat as possible. These boys were rather unkempt. Poly boys.<sup>134</sup>

He was just coming. My room was downstairs. He walked down the hall. He got to my room and he stopped. He spoke:

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<sup>132</sup> 'Staylite' is an expression for upperclassmen.

<sup>133</sup> 'Uite' is an expression for student of the University of Ibadan.

<sup>134</sup> Students of the Polytechnic of Ibadan, a trade school with a campus adjacent to UI.

– Na your room be dis?<sup>135</sup>

– Yes, na my room.

I knew Segun. He used to stay two rooms down from me in my 100 level. I thought we were friends. I thought I could talk to him.

– Na you de play dat music?

– Yes.

– Go kill dat music.

– Wetin be dat? Why you go tell me say make I go off my music?<sup>136</sup>

The two boys, the junior students, they ran. At that moment I discovered something. Everyone had disappeared. A lot of people had been at the hall walking around, celebrating. Now everyone was gone. Segun's boys, the bodyguards, they wanted to go into the room to turn off the music. I said, *Wetin be your problem now?* I placed my hand to block the doorway and I shoved them back.

– So you want to show yourself?

He now came and shoved me. He pushed me three or four times.

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<sup>135</sup> Pidgin for 'Is this your room?'

<sup>136</sup> Pidgin for 'What is that? Why are you telling me to turn off my music?'

– Off your system.

I said, *Take am easy, I no wont yawa.*<sup>137</sup> I pushed him back. I gave him a very very strong shove. He stumbled across the corridor and slammed against the railing.

– You feel say you strong, abi? I go show you. Tonight. I will light you.<sup>138</sup> I go make sure say you no see tomorrow. And if you see tomorrow, na hospital you go de to see tomorrow.

He was wearing a white shirt. A long white shirt. A tunic. He pulled it up. There was a gun, a short gun, in his trousers. A short pistol. In my mind I thought, this is something else. All the while I was thinking he's my friend, I know him. Now I knew this was something else altogether. My heart jumped beat.

My roommate was just there. He had been there all the while but he wasn't doing anything. Segun kept telling him, *This is not your problem. This not be your wahala at all. Just free us, me and this guy.* Then one of the two boys, the junior boys – you know they had run into my room and hid themselves – went and turned the volume down. Segun was all like, *You don't know who I be for this school. I will show you. I will make sure the hospital rejects you. I will mess you up that bad. I will finish you.*

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<sup>137</sup> Pidgin for 'Take it easy, I don't want war.'

<sup>138</sup> 'I will shoot and kill you.'

The place was dead. All the students were in their rooms. All the doors locked. I was scared but I stood my ground. I just stood there. My legs shaking. Segun walked away. *Before the end of tonight...* There and then I realized that all the stories about Segun terrorising people were true. It was like I was the only one who hadn't known what he was capable of.

I left my room. I went to check a guy. My former roommate. He was a cult boy. He said, *Where is he? Let's go see him together.* We found Segun at the buttery. I said, *Take am easy, take am easy.* My friend told me to go beg him. So that's what I was doing. I went outside with my friend. Segun followed. He said, *Go bring beer for me and my boys.* I brought. He said, *I will still kill you.*

I left the place. I didn't go back to my room. I went to where the others were lighting fireworks. So there was a crowd. Interestingly, everyone knew what had happened, but they were staying out of it. They were scared. Segun was at the other end of the crowd. He pulled his gun. Three shots in the air. He was communicating to me. He wanted to confirm that he had a gun, what he was going to do with it.

I left my room that night. I was in B block. I moved to D block to stay the night with a friend. I told him what had happened. In the morning he took me to see a

guy. We went to Mellanby Hall.<sup>139</sup> They called the guy Bros. It turned out I knew him from way back, from when I was little. He was a friend of my elder brother. I never knew this was the Bros everyone talked about. The popular one, the strong Bird Boy.<sup>140</sup> He saw me and he was like, *Hey I know you, what's your problem?* I told him about Segun and his promise. I watched him collect a phone from one boy like that. He said, *We need your handset. And you better not dare to ask for that phone back.* I was just watching. He called his lieutenant. He said, *Someone came to report Segun again.* He said, *I am tired oh. I am tired of this wahala.* He turned to me. *You know what? Go to your room. Leave your door open. Nothing will happen to you.* He told his lieutenant, *Track Segun down.*

I went to Jericho to visit my uncle. He was alone in the house so I spent the night there. I didn't tell him why or he wouldn't have slept that night. The old man is afraid of everything. He goes to his bank in Lagos and he is afraid the buildings will fall and crush him. Not to talk of armed robbery, assassination. No, I didn't tell him nothing. We just took two two bottles of Harp, and we slept off. The next morning I returned to school. I met my roommate. Do you know what he said? Six boys came to the room that night. They were Bird Boys. My roommate was scared. He thought they had come to kill him. They asked, *Where is that your friend?* He said I had gone. They said, *Okay, everything's alright.* Bros had sent them to make sure I was okay. Can you imagine?

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<sup>139</sup> Mellanby Hall is a male dorm named after the first Vice Chancellor of UI.

<sup>140</sup> Bird Boys, or Airlords, are members of the Eiye Confraternity, a cult group that defines itself around bird imagery.



I moved back to my room. Everything was fine for me after that. Next I heard Segun had been arrested by the police. There were some club boys involved. They call them Tropicals. They have a club night every Friday at the Cocoa House. Segun harassed them, so they set him up. One Friday afternoon they called him in to save one of his boys. They said one of his boys was being messed up by a rival cult. So he left school. He was heavily armed. Guns strapped all over his body. The police were waiting for him. They picked him up. He was interrogated. Tortured.

That was the beginning of the end for Segun. He started singing. They even showed him on TV. They paraded him. I saw it. He was naming names.<sup>141</sup>

A week later I saw him in school again. I was confused. I thought he had been arrested. I guess his boys pulled some strings and got him out. But they dealt with him. They dealt with him seriously. In house. They beat him silly. Later he came up to me and apologised. Not like a straight apology. I just saw him one day. He was walking and I remember I called him, *Psss pssst*. He looked up. He said, *My guy, so we're alright, abi?*

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<sup>141</sup> As this story suggests, there is a sense in which cultism, which originated in the Independence period that sought national unity as a way out of the colonial preoccupation with 'tribalism', has become an archetypically 'tribalist' institution, characterized by these kinds of micro power plays, negotiations, rivalries, and conflicts across these especially imaginative divisions.

That was the last I saw of him. I heard later he had been killed. He was involved in a robbery and he was killed by policemen. It was Bros who told me the story. For a top bird guy to tell me that, it must be true.

Let me tell you something about Segun's story. He had a very interesting one. How he rose through the ranks to become their pointman. Their hitman. Very fast. It was funny. Eiye had a clash with a rival cult. Bros told me this story. One afternoon they sighted a guy from the other cult at the UI main gate. They started chasing him down. They wanted to rough him up, to send a message back to his boys. Just to beat him, maybe break a leg. Segun was new to the Eiye then. Just initiated. He was faster than the others. The group chased the boy to Agbowo but then Segun took the lead. He had a gun. He was trigger happy. He caught up with the guy at a fence. He shot him over and over again. In cold blood.

The others were angry with Segun but at the same time they saw that he could be useful to the group. He was heartless. They could see he was capable of anything. So they made him their pointman. He became an officer immediately. He was just fresh. It happened so fast, the thing went to his head. I'm just telling you a short story of how Segun got to be where he was.

But, man, it was a crazy and chilling experience for me. It was my first encounter with a gun. It was the first time anyone wanted to tell me to my face that he

would kill me. The other day I met one guy who got born again and renounced the whole setting, but still he claims to be in possession of his people's scroll. He told me all sorts. I met him in his office. One office like that next to a church. He works with the church doing all sorts of small small things to get boys to turn over their guns. You know, like every Sunday they have a service to bring boys into the fold. Make them renounce publicly. They are the ones who did that exorcism for campus a few years back. I went to meet him because I wanted to know one or two things about what I had seen when I was in school. This guy is no joke. He used to be a very very big dog. Now he doesn't mind singing. He said Jesus made him fearless, but I think it has more to do with everything that came before. He showed me a photograph of his last hit. The last hit before he renounced and turned to God. And you know what he then told me? Segun is no more dead.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Idiomatic way of saying that Segun is still alive.

**Part II: Setting,**

**the threshold**

## Manifesto

I sing  
of the beauty of Athens  
without its slaves

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I sing of a world reshaped

— Niyi Osundare, “I Sing of Change”

Every man must have a cause for which he will die. Don't you agree? Justice. Truth. Equity. That is it. Justice. Truth. Equity. That is my cause.

The British. They ran this country like you run a business organisation. They ran it well. And so there was a minority in the country who believed Nigeria was not yet ready for self-rule, who wanted the British to remain a bit longer. But the majority of the people believed the speeches of the other camp. We got our independence amidst worldwide acclaim and high expectation. Even the British, they believed as they were leaving that Nigeria would become a model in Africa. But after six years of governing ourselves, it became obvious to the average Nigerian on the street that the promises were empty. Did people blame the British? At all.<sup>143</sup> Today you hear some say that the British wanted to create

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<sup>143</sup> Idiom for 'not at all'.

chaos in the country. Listen. Politics is actually a game to control resources. Power that is not given is fought for. Those in the campaign for independence did not have political education. There's something called negotiating at the barricade. You beat a child with your right hand, but you use your left to pat him. Do you follow me? We should be grateful to the British. Their coming to Nigeria was a blessing. In the time of our grandparents, even, Nigeria was a primitive place. A primitive place. The British were a blessing on us.

Political education. There's no school where it is taught. Northerners had better political education. It is not that someone – the British – gave it to them. Power is fought for. They schemed for it.

1960 to 1966. Turbulence in the country. Dishonesty, disunity, nepotism, corruption. Corruption is not new in Nigeria. In 1966 there was the first military coup. People felt it was a tribal one. Most of those killed were Northerners. So later in the year there was a counter-coup. Or should I say a massacre. A retaliation, only even more brutal. So in just six years the nation was in ruin. So many divisions. The antics of the ruling class. Behind it all – religion, tribalism – was politics. Nigeria's problem has forever been a class problem. Have you read *Das Kapital*? Have you read the *Communist Manifesto*? Marx is like a source. Everything political in this world can be traced back to him. He's not God, but he is a source. I used to believe in equality. But I have come to see that in every society, all fingers are not equal. With effort comes promotion, with

promotion comes wealth, with wealth comes class. It's a difficult thing to accept, that there cannot be equality. It's a very difficult thing to accept. But equality does not exist. I believe in dynamism. I believe in change. There is no pure system in the world. Even Britain is not a purely capitalist system. Systems must evolve, must adapt, to survive. If not, you get communist Russia. Stalinism. Collapse.

The history of weed is the history of man. Why? Because the history of weed is the history of agriculture, and the history of agriculture is the history of man. Just so, the history of student movement in Nigeria is the history of education. And of courage. And of the true nation. Education makes people easy to lead, difficult to rule.

After the 1966 massacre there was serious indiscipline in this country. There used to be a popular adage back then: 'Not all military men are saints, just like not all civilians are devils.' There was a time in this country when people loved the military. It was the civilian politicians that the people blamed for the corruption, the violence. The military unified the country. No tribalism. No religious hatred. You put on the green uniform, and you were the same. But the politicians broke into the rank and file of the army. Suddenly there was fighting in the barracks. Southerners versus Northerners. Christians versus Muslims. It was obvious to the average Nigerian on the street that the country was heading for doom. Because of what was happening in the rank and file of the soldiers,

the army began to lose its air of holiness, the holiness that hovered over the idea of a united front. It once also belonged to the Zikites, the independence activists. But the only ones of that generation who maintained their innocence were not useful to the people. After independence they retreated, they sat on the fence. Anyone who, after victory is won, retreats to sit on the fence is either a traitor or a coward, or both. For those who continued, there were scandals of course. Awolowo went to prison on treason and misappropriation charges.<sup>144</sup>

So at that time the public looked away from the politicians and turned to the military. There was a time in this country when people trusted the military. Believe me. The military was genuinely left-wing at a time. Murtala Mohammed was a socialist. But when the politicians infiltrated the military, the people needed a new united front to represent hope for the nation. The students were perfect. They are independent, they have nothing to lose, they are unified. They became heroes.

People started speaking from the University of Ibadan, calling for a national body. In 1978 they formed the National Union of Students, later called the National Union of Nigerian Students. The Union was strong then. Very strong. Students were calling for free education. In 1979 Obasanjo became head of state. Obasanjo is a person who has no respect for public opinion. Unlike Babangida, who cared so much for what the people thought, Obasanjo is not emotional. He

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<sup>144</sup> Obafemi Awolowo was Nigeria's first Premier under British colonial rule. He was also a prominent independence activist and early national political player.



is not moved by the tears of the people. He is just hungry. It is like our man Achebe's said, that some bellies are hungry for the suffering of the people.<sup>145</sup> This is why when Obasanjo came into power again in 1999, there were some of us who knew the mess he would make of the country. It's not just that he was a military man. It's in his person. He was doing it back then, and people like that don't change. He banned NUNS because they were overwhelming him. They were criticising him, speaking out against corruption. Soldiers opened fire on press conferences. Students died in prison. Babangida had a 'dialogue table'. No one spoke of dialogue table before IBB. He had a listening ear, which is very important in politics. You don't have to do what they say, but you have to listen because you lead them. Obasanjo just woke up one morning and announced he had banned the student union. Just like that. Students were shot at demonstrations. Others were arrested and died mysteriously. Others were kidnapped. The khaki boys were doing him a lot of good. All you have to do is issue a part one order, and the soldiers can effect action without the command of a general. Anywhere, anytime. The khaki boys did Obasanjo a lot of good.<sup>146</sup>

NUNS was illegal now, so the students went underground. In 1979 they were holding secret meetings on campuses. They did a nationwide tour to check the pulse of the movement, to consult with students at the key universities. And they

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<sup>145</sup> In Achebe's *A Man of the People* a palm-wine tapper says, "Some people's belly is like the earth. It is never so full that it will not take another corpse" (1966:85-86).

<sup>146</sup> 'Khaki boys' is a reference to the military. Even though this was a democratic government, the point is that Obasanjo continued to deploy the soldiers against the military.

were lucky because Obasanjo's DMIs could not detect it.<sup>147</sup> Which was amazing because the DMIs were everywhere on campuses. Then in 1980, at the University of Ibadan, at a table in the cafeteria at Azikiwe Hall,<sup>148</sup> students formed the National Organisation of Nigerian Students. Obasanjo had made NUNS illegal, so they formed a different group. Then somebody said, why not the National Association of Nigerian Students? Like the associations they have around the world. So it became NANS. There were eight schools involved at the beginning. The first convention was held at the UI student union building. Why UI? Because it had a reputation of struggle. Anything that emanated from UI had legitimacy. NANS became the voice of the voiceless, the megaphone of the oppressed. All of this is the reason our generation will be more sound politically than the current generation of politicians. Because they were ethnic chauvinists, something we detest. Our only line of difference is belief.

Murtala Mohammed was a socialist, but his problem was rigidity. This led to his assassination. After him, General Bohari was celebrated as someone with a good track record. He had sound ideology, a socialist orientation. A powerful blueprint for the nation. And he represented a deviation from the military norm. He was not corrupt. Initially student union movement celebrated him, but at the tail end we were criticising him despite his good programs. It was because of his

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<sup>147</sup> Operatives in the Directorate of Military Intelligence.

<sup>148</sup> The UI dorm building 'Zik' Hall is affectionally termed the 'Zoo Annex', both for its proximity to the campus zoo and its historic reputation of housing rough and ready radicals. Interestingly, some veteran activists I met referred to a new wave of underground organising happening in the present day as a response to the crippling effects of neoliberal democracy (and the restructuring of universities) on what was, ironically, the 'pro-democracy' student movement. See Appendix G for a discussion.

crackdown on the press. And because he was a racist. He became like the pigs in *Animal Farm*. But he did have good programs. It was under him that we had the War Against Indiscipline. During that time there were trucks patrolling the road. If you threw a piece of litter, they would stop you and make you pick it up. Then they would make you do frog jumps through the street, and they would whip you. Nigeria was very clean then. If you steal, you were shot. If you give bribe, you go to prison. If you sell drugs, you are shot. It was then that we had the highly celebrated Bar Beach Show in Lagos where they went to shoot armed robbers. They would tie them to drums and set them on fire. People loved it. Bohari would have won the 2003 presidential election if not for his record in opposing freedom of the press. Otherwise, people would say he was Nigeria's greatest leader. He asked me to serve on his 2003 campaign. I declined. I can't work with a racist. If you work with someone like that, you have to share his defeats as well as his victories. Suppose he won, and later there had been a scandal? Can I then say that I am not a racist, after having benefited from his power? So I declined. Knowing that – knowing how to turn down an offer like that – that is political education. This is what I am explaining to you. The education of the students is the story of this country. And my own education is the story of the truly anointed Nigerian student.

I had just become a Uite. On my second day I went for a swim. You know the swimming pool is in the student union building. I was swimming, and I was also looking and listening. I could feel something special about the place. Power. I

knew I wanted to join. I wanted to work in that building. But then I was just a fresher. I knew I could learn fast. I was looking for a way in.

It was later that week that there was a conference at SUB. The president was due to speak. I made sure to get there on time. I wanted to sit in front, to study him carefully, to see if he really was human or not; we heard all sorts. As he spoke to the people, I began to think to myself that I am a better orator than this man. When he had finished I stood up and said I wished to speak. His crowd shouted me down, but others called that I should be allowed to mount the platform. So I gave my speech, and even while the president's loyalists were calling for me to stop, I was drawing my own crowd. Can you imagine? A fresher? When I finished and went back to my hall, one student said to me: *You have gone to step on the tail of the viper. You will be killed in this school.*

It was a few nights later I was asleep in my room. There was a knock on the door. A voice called my name. Who is it? *The President.* I never told anyone my room. He must have sent someone to follow me. My roommates begged me not to open the door. But I told him I was coming. I put on my jeans, and I had this leather jacket. You see I didn't know what was going to happen to me that night. I opened the door. He was there, towering above me. He said, *You spoke at the conference.* I said, *Can I help you?* He said, *May I enter?*

So I invited him into my room and showed him to my corner. We each had our corner then. Do you know where the others were? They were hiding under the bed. We sat in my corner. He said, *I admire how you spoke at the conference.* I couldn't believe what I was hearing, but I was playing cool. *You can draw a crowd. What political groups are you involved with?* Political groups? I knew nothing of political groups. And so I said, *What political groups? What is your interest with me?* He said, *Are you with the socialists?* I did not know what to say so I said again, *Look, why have you come here? To discuss political groups? What is it you want with me?* He said, *I want to know you.* My heart was leaping. *Good,* I said. *What can I offer you? Have I got something to bite?* He said, *No, nothing.* I had some coke. No, I had some juice in the fridge. The kind you mix with water. So I said, *Please let me offer you some juice.* He said, *Okay, I will stay for a drink.* I was very happy that he took juice with me. He said, *What political ideology do you espouse?* Political ideology? I was just a fresher. I knew nothing of such things. So I said, *I am a free thinker.* He nodded. *Ahhhh...* He finished his juice. He left. I walked him down to the courtyard. It was then I saw the Zikites had gathered outside to defend me. I realised I was living in a powerhouse, a zoo. I said goodbye to the president. I climbed the stairs alone, and I slept off.

I then discovered something. How the union politics works. I read the constitution. Nothing said a fresher could not contest for office of departmental union president. All the other offices – vice president, secretary, treasurer – said

you must be 400 level. But not president. They said I was crazy to run. I won. At my 200 level I contested for president of the faculty. I won. I was a good orator. I could draw a crowd. I could get things done for the students. I cared about their interests. Then, too, I brought good people around me. Talented people. Like the boy who did my propaganda, he was very very good. An expert at mixing truth with spices.

It was then that the Enlightenment Campaign approached me. The group of the president who had met with me in my room. They had a credibility crisis. One of their members, Revolution, had been accused of corruption and removed from his office. They needed someone to perfume the group. To wash it clean. I joined. That was the beginning of my political education.

After just two weeks they made me secretary. I didn't know they were grooming me. Revolution was not attending meetings. My old socialist friends, they called me a traitor, a capitalist, for joining EC. And then, too, I began to quarrel with EC because I wanted to do things above board, no scheming. Looking back, it makes me laugh. I was still just an activist. I believed in the cause. I had no understanding of politics.

But at least I had my crowd. I continued to do my own campaigning. As president of the faculty I set up a committee to investigate corrupt practices by the Dean. We discovered receipts with huge funds credited to a printing

committee that didn't exist. The Dean refused to respond. We demanded he come before the congress and give account. He did not even reply our letters. Back then it was still military. Everything was military. Us against them. It was just war all the way. We planned a demonstration.

It was around that time I discovered something about EC. The candidates they put forth always won elections, but they were weak. They had one boy who was going to contest for student union president. They called him Africa. He was spending his time wining and dining with the Dean. The same Dean we were investigating. I saw that the socialist candidate was stronger. He had real ideology, real integrity. I wanted to bring him over to us to replace Africa. But EC said no. I asked why? They said because the beliefs of the two camps were different. I said what beliefs? We both want the same thing. We are both in the struggle. I didn't know anything then. At that time I was controlling four faculties plus Zik Hall. EC told me: *We don't want you to ask these questions. We just want you to deliver your group.*

Africa won the election. Even though he was speaking in favour of tuition fees, behaving like a fool, still EC supported him. I lost confidence in EC. I thought I could break off on my own. I set up a council of faculty presidents and speakers to rival Africa. It became powerful because I could forever pull the crowd. The school is afraid of the group that can pull the crowd. Back then it was a federal offence to demonstrate without permission from the authorities. You were

supposed to write a letter requesting permission to hold your demonstration. But how can you wait to demonstrate until you have permission from the very authority you are opposing? So we held our demonstration against the Dean. There was lecture boycott for two weeks. The Dean was removed. Major victory.

That was what I later learned in politics is called insubordination. I was purely an activist. I didn't understand politics. I ran out of favour with EC. Not because I set up the council of faculty presidents. EC was willing to support that. But they wanted it to negotiate with the president of the union. They wanted to persuade him to come back in line with the struggle, to give up his support of tuition fees. I used the council to badmouth Africa. Management picked up on this. It was classic divide and rule. They began to recognise the council over the union, to recognise me as the legitimate president of the union. Because they wanted to weaken the union. That's why they expelled the Dean. They wanted to chase away Africa and gain control. All these things, when I think about them now, I just laugh.

But, then, I was high. Power goes to the head. I believed I could stand on my own. I was no longer working directly with EC. But they would sometimes send members to me to give advice, offer this or that strategy. One time they sent someone who suggested I start using mobilisation officers to help my campaign. I was known for personally going from hall to hall with my megaphone, pulling my



crowd. EC said, *Orisha, you're so big why not use others to do that job?*<sup>149</sup> They offered their own people to support me. I agreed. I thought I was a big fish. All of this was political education. I was learning on the job.

EC called me for a final meeting to demand I relinquish power to Africa. I refused. Do you know what they told me? *No matter how long the neck becomes, it cannot be on top of the head.* They suggested a day of action on the tuition fee issue. One day for me. One day for Africa. Their date came first. EC used the mobilisation officers they had given me to draw my crowd to them. They sent them around to the halls and had them announce I wanted everyone to gather at SUB.<sup>150</sup> They had Africa prostrate before the congress. EC re-packaged him before my crowd. That was my first political lesson. Later, I drew my crowd again for my date, but there was already confusion. I started losing strength, little by little.

There was more. I had been using the council that the university legitimated to go and demonstrate against Abacha outside campus. The management had turned sour towards me because of this. Back then I was just raw. All I knew was the will of the people. I had no regard for the source of my power. I thought my mandate was from the students, from the masses, from the struggle. Management and EC now colluded against me.

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<sup>149</sup> 'Orisha' is the word for 'deity' in Yoruba, and it this character's political name.

<sup>150</sup> Student Union Building.

Every week we would protest against the military leadership of the university. Every time we demonstrated in Ibadan it was an embarrassment to Abacha. On my birthday, I had my first arrest. They charged me with disturbing the public peace. I called my lawyers and was released the next day. For the next Saturday demonstration the police were waiting at the UI gates. We threw stones at them and we passed through. We made it to our demonstration at the Secretariat. Then when we were returning the police were ready with tear gas at the campus gates. This time Africa had joined us. It was the first time any of us had seen him there, and we had been demonstrating every week. I was arrested again. But Africa was also arrested. And not just arrested. He was severely beaten because he fought with the police. He resisted arrest. Me, I was not beaten because I expected to be arrested. I just went peacefully. Africa did it to get legitimacy. EC told him to join the demonstration, that I was going to be arrested and he should make sure that he was arrested alongside me. But he should make sure he was beaten well, so that when we were both released and returned to campus he would look like a martyr and I would look weak. Having suffered, he won their hearts back. He was not the good guy, but he had learned politics.

After that, management dropped the tuition fees thing. Africa and I continued to lead the weekly demonstrations. But the students began to lose interest in me. Then the Vice Chancellor sent a letter to me concerning the demonstration against the Dean I had organised the previous year. The letter said the

demonstration was illegal, that we had not received written permission from the authorities. And the penalty was two sessions' suspension. Management knew they couldn't go after my anti-Abacha demonstrations because Africa was involved in those as well, and now they were supporting him against me.

There is an adage about a frog. If you leave a bucket of water outside your door, the frog will always jump inside it. All night long, jumping in and out of the bucket, the water feels cool. The frog enjoys it. One night if you put boiling water inside the bucket, the frog will still jump. Not until it experiences it will the frog know that water can burn.

I went to EC for help. You know what they said to me? *It's judgement day.*

That's when I knew EC sold me out to the school. Up until then it had all been like a game to me. I enjoyed it. The people had needs and I struggled to meet their needs. It was fun. When I heard the response of EC, that's when I knew the dangers involved in unionism, the sacrifices. There was no one left to fight for me.

You see the British were a blessing to this country. But they failed to leave us with political education. That has always been our problem. Lack of patriotism. Lack of national unity. The Nigeria Project failed. It has failed. Now we are just trying to pick up the pieces.

**Jazz**<sup>151</sup>

Ti a ba pe lori imi eshin ke shin a maa ba ni nbe.

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If you linger too long after shitting in the bush, all sorts of flies will meet you there.

– Yoruba proverb

We met when I went to photocopy some papers. He asked where I stayed. I said not far. Then he came the following day. He said he just needs a friend, that he doesn't have a friend. He told me straight about his cult whatever. But I did not tell him my own.

It was earlier this same week that one other friend of mine attended a party. This particular friend, Sade, she likes guys and girls, most especially girls. In fact there was one time when she was even trying to arrange me, though I told her I was not interested at all. So she started going out with one blue boy.<sup>152</sup> I asked her why, and she told me that though she did not really like the guy she was starting to enjoy what he could bring. These boys, they have power, money, car... There is really nothing that they cannot get. I told her she should be careful, that in no time he will come to her place asking to store weapon. She

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<sup>151</sup> Juju.

<sup>152</sup> Member of the Eiye Confraternity; also, a 'bird boy'.

didn't believe me that I knew anything special, so I left it. And anyhow, she said it was too late for turning back, which I tend to want to believe. That is how it goes; you can't just back out like that. So she went to the party. She went with her bird boy, but as soon as they passed through the gate he abandoned her. Later he came back with one drink and said they should dance. I think she must have known wetin time de talk,<sup>153</sup> but it's possible this was the start of Sade's education. The drink he gave made her weak and she was now raped by four separate guys. Then they used this kind of video – phone video – to send pictures of it all around school. And on top of that her bird boy started flying down to Express side to see one girl like that. Sade was disgraced. She became exceptionally annoyed.<sup>154</sup>

So when I met Seun, although I kind of liked him, I did not let him know me. I knew better than that. But he, he had all sorts to sing. He told me he was not recruited in the normal ways. What happened to him was that the cult boys wanted his girl. To keep her he had to join. He said he stayed because he liked it, then. Now he no more likes it. I don't know if this is really true. Any of it. But something about him strikes me as very sincere. Perhaps the way he swings his long arms and smiles with his eyes watching invisible things.

Seun reminds me of my first boyfriend. From when I was still in secondary school with my low cut hair. Then my senior brother lived with us, though he had

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<sup>153</sup> Pidgin for 'Knowing what time it is; knowing what's happening, what's going on'.

<sup>154</sup> This is, admittedly, a serious understatement. It is also very much in keeping with the narrative style of a particular contact in Nigeria who inspired aspects of this character's voice.

plans for other things. My brother is a very intelligent guy, and he likes living large. Just like every one, he wants more. He wanted all those flashy things. Cars, designer clothes, a ride to Yankee. Our mother wasn't sure of what he wanted, but she believed so much in him. Everywhere people could see something in him, something about his stand well well. Now he is in London. Yahoo. He started with generating credit card numbers, and like that he worked his way out of Naija. Mumsy's not very proud of how he got there, but she holds her head up when she goes to collect Moneygram.

As for me, I am happy enough that it was Yahoo Yahoo my brother chose. It could have been Axe. They were supposed to recruit him. Bayo was the one they sent. But the first time he came to our place he met with soldiers outside. This was the military regime when army patrolled everywhere, anyhow, and then our uncle had been staying with us for a few days, and he had his men around him. So Bayo was frustrated and had to turn back. He tried again some days later. We were about sitting down to eat when we heard somebody coming up the stairs to greet us. A tall young guy. He said he had just finished seeing a snake at the back of our place somewhere around the cashew tree. He killed it straight away, but then he just wanted to let us know. It was a strange story. I remember he looked very shy, though he was trying to hide it well with a big foolish grin as he leaned to prostrate, touching the ground fully with the whole of his bare palm, his foot brushing easily away from our floor. Mumsy liked this about him. The way he could be easy and clumsy at once. She liked him

immediately and invited him to sit and eat with us. This was always her way. Never suspicious of anyone. She said you can't live that way, no how no how. Nigeria is a troublesome place, far too troublesome to live as one in trouble. She used to complain about the compound walls. When she moved to Ibadan after the war, she said you would hardly see gate let alone bottle or barbed wire. The people had more trust then. So this is why she invited Bayo straight to eat with us. She had one proverb she used to use a lot. *Ti a ba so oko si oja, ara ile eni ninba.* If you throw stones in the market place, you are sure to hit one of your own.

I was about rinsing a plate for our guest when he motioned me to stop and now started singing. He said he couldn't sit and eat with us. He told it all. How he had been sent by his cult to take my brother. The plan was to drug and kidnap him and like that force him to become one of their hit men. They had been noticing my brother from time and felt he would make a very good number three. But Bayo did not want to hurt my brother again. He said his heart was not in it to begin with, and now that the madame of the house was being so kind as to invite him to sit with us, well he couldn't conscience it at all. Mumsy got up herself to serve this young man a plate of stew. She praised Jesus for turning his heart away from the evil set before him. Then Bayo warned my brother he must not leave the house, he must travel out of the state. And Bayo ate with us that night.

My brother waited three days and left for the North. Bayo kept coming round to visit. He always brought us something. Orange, ground nut, sometimes small money. We grew more and more fond of him. I became fascinated by his stories. How he got initiated. Something like what they had planned for my brother. They invited him to one party. They do this a lot. They offered him food to eat but he said he was not hungry. Only that he would take Star. They gave. Of course there was something inside it. He drank without knowing. Then he was only first year, barely out of secondary school himself. Later they took him outside and they beat him with barbed wire. The next day they treated his wounds and gave him N50,000, told him to go to Aleshinloye and buy clothes. Like that he joined. Became their mark man. He told me how at first they gave him drugs before sending him on a mission. So that he wouldn't hesitate or remember too clearly. I asked him why they wanted him. He gave me a very yeye reason.<sup>155</sup> Told me it was because he was handsome. I didn't believe that but I kept it to myself. And he told me all the reasons why he stayed. The good and the bad.

To me, Bayo was not so very handsome. But his long legs, and his smile, and his story... all of it made him somehow difficult to get out of my head. Eventually I noticed a serious change in myself. I began to feel bored at school. The boys I had known from time, there with their clumsy lines, could no more captivate me. All those almost men had become children again. I began to feel somehow. I

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<sup>155</sup> 'Yeye' can be glossed as 'stupid'.



began to notice small small things, the coconut smell of this tall man's skin. At night it took time to sleep off. Mosquitos troubled me less.

Some weeks later Bayo met me outside our place. Late in the afternoon. I was on my way to buy pepper and tomato for stew when I now found him at the bottom of the stairs. Waiting. He said he wanted to give me something. He brought out gold and leather wrist watch, wrapped it round me, holding my eyes up with his own, slipping his fingers down into my hand. He did not have any line for me. He just asked me out straight. As hot as my cheeks felt then, I hesitated. I was still in secondary school. I did not know what to do or what would be coming next. So Bayo took care of it, there in the shadows against the cashew tree.

Like that it started. I became Bayo's chick. For me, I was so young that it was love. Till tomorrow I am not sure what it meant to him. I want to believe there was something real between us. I have no stones to throw. He began taking me everywhere with him. Most especially to school. He went to Poly. At first it was exciting. I was rolling with an older crowd. Though we really didn't do much, still I had enough stories to make my girlfriends jealous. I begged him to take me to Mr Biggs, to take me to parties. I begged Mumsy to allow me weave my hair over school break. I became somebody in a hurry.

One time he came over to my house only to go straight away. He left a bag with me. Told me not to open it. Not under any circumstance. He left a smell of sweat around me, and a pounding in my chest. I was a girl who knew how to mind. Maybe that is what he wanted with me. Maybe not. All I know for sure is that this particular time I felt I would disobey. I left it like it was till morning, and then the feeling was just too much. I opened the bag. I found shirts, and underneath, ammunitions. Guns, cutlass, all kind of local guns, bullets. A giant heap of all these things. I zipped the bag immediately, pushed it deep under my bed.

These were the days when we still had landline phone. I found 50 Naira in my sister's bag and I rushed out of the house. Down the way from where we stayed was one booth where you can buy phone card. I bought card, slotted it into that our public phone, dialled the number he had left for me some weeks before. My first time dialling it, Bayo picked the call. I think I woke him or something. His voice sounded very funny and far away. I told him I know what is inside his bag and he better come collect it immediately. He told me not to worry, to just wait and he would come. The credit finished and the line cut.

These days you see cultism spilling into secondary schools. Not just spilling. It is there already. Now it is even into primary schools. But for me, when I was coming up, these things were just uni tales. Pyrates and Buccaneers. Soyinka's games. We didn't see it for ourselves so we didn't really have to ask any

questions. Even as the girlfriend of a member, I did not see the thing as real. I was like a child enjoying the moonlight. Story story. Opening that bag changed this for me. It was like my own private ini. I became part of the setting.

Bayo had a lot of explanations. He was sorry. It would not happen again. He only left it because he trusted me, he loves me. When I did not forgive him he told me the story of why he left the bag. He believed that what I wanted most was to know those deep truths. To learn the koko.<sup>156</sup> Perhaps yes. Perhaps no. The koko was that I, myself, did not really know myself on top these things. But he told me anyhow. The day before they had killed a man. Rival cult. The guy wanted to arrange the girlfriend to their Eye. He couldn't take the weapons home so he had to leave them with me. I would be safe because nobody knew where I stayed. He told the whole story with that big smile on his face. His hands swung to grab my wrist and shake me playfully at the best parts of the story. He talked like he was catching fun. I felt my anger pass away, and I tried to laugh and smile along as he pressed me close. But the fear never left my chest.

Foolish girl, I thought I would marry Bayo. I thought it was just the two of us. Eventually he left me for a friend of mine. He then married her. Years later I asked him why. He said it was me he really loved, but this girl knew how to protect him. She took him to those deep market priests. The babalawos.<sup>157</sup> She

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<sup>156</sup> The 'koko', here, is akin to the secret or the 'heart of the matter'.

<sup>157</sup> A 'native doctor', herbalist, or 'juju man'.

had PhD in African Science.<sup>158</sup> She knew how to make jazz for him. Me? I could not even keep his bag.

If it was only the scar Bayo left me that I had to hide, then perhaps I would give Seun more chances than I do. The guy is okay. Really okay. Although he is inside, I can tell that he is just searching for a way out. And he has all those qualities I admire. Like my brother, he lives as though he has already made it. But Bayo was not it for me. Like I said, I had become somehow a setting chick. By the time I too passed into university, although I did my best to avoid all those boys, our local terrorist now began to notice me.

Deji. Let me tell you one thing about Deji. The people love him. They love him and at the same time they fear him. So many of these cult boys, they give away what they take. He was like a saint around the neighbourhood. If someone's child is sick, Deji brings drug. He was the kind of guy to spend all night as assassin, then go all day for church vigil. You know what you do? Say your fridge is broken and you take it to one shop in the market like that. The mechanics are very useless. They will keep it for you for weeks if you are not careful. You have to be going back everyday, harassing them somehow. Or you have to dash them.<sup>159</sup> Let me tell you, the best thing you can ever do is to say it is Deji's fridge you are repairing. It is only to say it is Deji's own and they will do it for you straight. They will even give discount. He had everyone confused, not

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<sup>158</sup> Euphemism for 'juju'.

<sup>159</sup> Bribe them.

knowing how far to fear, how far to praise. Mumsy, my friends, all of them. Only I would not give him what he wanted. And for that he wanted me.

First time I knew Deji we were together in school. He was a year my senior. Then, he was not yet a member, but he was already in the game. This was some months before I started knowing Bayo, although I later told Bayo all about Deji, and I think that is how he eventually got found and recruited. They say Deji is a fake student at UI. He bought his papers. I don't see why this isn't true. Deji can do worse. Far worse. The famous story I know firsthand was the time his teacher wanted to fail him. Deji went straight to Agbowo and traded for one of those our local guns. He came with it the next day and shot the teacher. Walked away and no one saw him again for that school.

The next time I saw him. Some years later. Back in our area. I was walking home from the bus stop and I saw him preaching to the neighbourhood children. In my mind I knew him immediately, and I wanted to ask what was all this that he was now teaching kids about Jesus. But I thought let me just free that thing and leave before he sees me there. Although still I did not expect Deji to recognise me. I had been his junior in school, back then with my skinny legs and low cut hair. Before the cashew tree and the coconut smells made me a bit famous for that school.

The next day Deji arrived at my house. I came home and found him talking with

Mumsy. She reached for her bag and told me to take 70 Naira to go buy Malt for our visitor. I could feel his eyes follow me out the house and down the stairs, all the way to the shop and back.

Later it was me who served him Maltina on a tray. Walked him finally out the house. I am not very sure why. I would be a liar if I said it was expected of me and that's why I treated him as a special visitor. Many things were expected of me, and by then I had given up on enough of them. I guess I was just curious. I walked him all the way to the bus stop. I kept my walk a bit fast although he refused to fast his own. At the end of it I made to turn back, when he now caught my arm and slipped his hand up to my shoulder. Then again, like Bayo before him, he had no clumsy line for me. It was only: *I want you*. Only this time my head was woven by my own design, and I shook him off. *Maga! It be like say I have no choice?* I stared him down then, though all the while I wanted to pee my pants. I was that uncomfortable. Do you know what he then said? He just smiled and said something in my ear. He whispered: (*mugu*).<sup>160</sup>

What anyone can tell you about Deji is that he gets what he wants. The more I refused, the more he insisted. Just like Bayo before him, Deji could not stand not knowing my every move. He had people following me. I could not go to my school without looking over my shoulder. One time it became so much that I even travelled to Ghana to visit my sister. I stayed for some weeks. I was

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<sup>160</sup> 'Maga' and 'mugu' are slang terms describing the perpetrator and victim of fraud or crime – fraudster and fool. They are also common, everyday insults, often used playfully.

confident that he would have forgotten me by then. When I returned finally I found him in front of my place. Smiling. He held out his hand to greet me, and he pulled me close. *Did you think you could get away like that?* Let me tell you, I have never been so frustrated.

I don't know how he knew I would be coming back that day. Deji knew things. He used to tell me all sorts. Stories. For some reason these people tell me their stories. Perhaps they know I will not speak. Or perhaps they hope I do. I studied mass comm for my school. Mass communications. We used to have these assignments that we must give speeches in our class. Everyone knew me for all those cultism stories. It was only for me to change the names, and then it was never a problem. Everyone enjoyed my turn to speak. But Deji's own were not very comfortable to hear. He would come to me and brag about the latest guy he killed. One time, it was quite awhile ago, he beat a boy dead just in front of Agbowo. I remember the story too well. I knew the guy. Friend of my junior sister, I think this name was Femidayo. Crazy part was that Deji was just disciplining the boy, just a junior boy from his own side, and the thing now got out of hand. Deji always knew how to take it too far. These things were not news to me, but from Deji I did not want to know them.

He came to me with gifts. Most especially money. Deji had this way, this funny funny way, of knowing just when I was broke. He would show up with 500 Naira, 1000 Naira, 2000... One time he gave me a hundred dollar bill. US dollar. I

always took. When Deji started to want me then all my other boyfriends stayed away. Nobody came to visit me. Nobody offered me anything. I did not like it, but I took what he came with. And like this, eventually, I guess you could say we became somehow friends. Even Mumsy began asking me why I should not give the guy a chance? He was not letting up, and then again he was helping me in these small small ways. Perhaps there was nothing else for me. My girlfriends, though they knew something of the life, they had long since taken that particular view. Give the guy a chance. Wait it out and he will surely grow tired of me and find somebody else. Deep in myself, I began to reconsider. If it had just been the visits and the gifts, perhaps I could have looked past how Deji made his way, past the obligations in store for me, the weapons in my bedroom and the girls in his own.

Though never girls overnight. Deji's priest had forbidden this. And Deji's priest is why I kept as much distance as I could from him. Though I must confess the juju stories were the best of all.

He had one ring he kept on his left hand. He said that it would glow to fire if anyone tried poisoning him. I made like I didn't believe, and so he told me to go bring coke. I brought. He told me to add rat poison. I handed him the drink and as soon as he took I saw the ring turning red on his finger. I tried to touch it and it burned. He put down the glass and it was silver again. Then I believed. Deji had so much jazz, so many laws to follow. He could not take ordinary chicken



egg. He had to take those small local eggs they have. Guinea eggs. Then, he couldn't cook them but was required to swallow them whole. He must sleep with girls, but he could not sleep off in their rooms. Each night he had to sleep at his own place. They forbid him eat alligator pepper. They forbid him take beer. Then, there were the marks on Deji's head. He liked to show them to me. Nine marks, each the size of a match stick. Right across the back of his head to his neck. Deji always kept a low cut so you could see them clearly. They would guard him against bullet. He tied juju on his ankle for protection from blade. And he told me he had swallowed ring so that in any danger he could become invisible, the evil deeds against him turned back on his enemies, his own escape certain.

It was after he showed me these things that I now began to dream of Deji at night: I am lost in a thick bush, searching for a way through the jungle. There now appears a chameleon on a branch. Cashew branch. Breeze tipping it back and forth, a pregnant belly weighting it down on the wood. It says my name. It is Deji speaking. Then, like overripe mango pecked by bird, it falls – plop – and bursts. I think it is finally dead. I poke its belly with a stone and the baby spills out. It starts crawling up my hand, my arm, to my shoulder. It pulls out a giant prick and drags the point against my skin, marking me with those our local tattoos, cashew acid ringing my neck and trailing up to my lips. Its eyes spin round and round and round again, seeing everything about me. Its head glows red like fire, the tail fanning flies. In my sleep I cannot move to wake...

I am about transferring from this school. I just want to abandon this place. Seun should look somewhere else if he needs a friend.

## Palmwine Lectures<sup>161</sup>

The drummers took up their sticks again and the air shivered and grew tense like a tightened bow.

– Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

What I see first is bottle falling from the sky, crashing on the Professor's roof. I don't mean one and then one. I mean continuous bottle. Like rain. Like rainy season had started. Bam bam ba ba ba ba ba bam bam bam. Star, Harp, Cola, Fanta... They took crate from that woman, the one who used to store weapon for those boys. They used to have one or two aunties like that. They must have had so many of those crates. All different kinds of bottle. It lasted for hours. Colours flashing in the sky. Green, orange, purple glass against the sun. Light flickering like pink and blue butterflies on the road below. Again and again and again. Crash, the broken glass! Can you imagine? Enough so that if later you try to walk out to see better for yourself what has happened, it was like the the street will bite your leg. Oh no, no, you wouldn't even try that. It was just to watch from the window. From the window the day before and for the next day as well.

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<sup>161</sup> This story is based on an actual event, the UI/Poly cult clash, which occurred in October of 1993. I was unable to verify the exact date, although one contact remembers it as being the Monday of the third week in the month.

Most people had even left by then. I don't know why we stayed. Probably Popsy thought he could do something to bring the peace. Then, he was an ordinary lecturer. Department of Theatre Arts. He had energy for these things. Every year he coached his students towards another stand up performance of *Death and the King's Horseman*, his favourite by far. He watched that play entranced, every time, just like I watched the quivers in the back of his neck from my seat just behind him, my place in the second row. He once told me he envied the play's courage.

I, I was a boy. What did I know? All I knew of that day was the sound of those bottle. Deafening. You could not hear yourself shout. If you wanted to talk – and of course you wanted – you had to yell in your padi's ear and wait and shout again. For us, we were not sure if we should feel fear or catch our fun. So we were mostly quiet, waiting for the next one to go off. Shouting only to ask, *Did you hear that one?* And other questions you wouldn't bother answer. The day's heat was impressive, the parlour fan dead without power to fuel it. In time our sweat hung on our skin so that we fell to itching ourselves, no other gesture more absurd that day. The air had come to smell, almost taste, of sugar. Sugar syrup dripping from the roof drew ants in thousands, blackening the Professor's yard. Ants for whom human catastrophe was no more no less than a friendly come chop.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> A 'come chop' is a party, an invitation to feast.

I remember this all very clearly. Very clearly. It is what I think of first when I remember. The strange rain on the roof that day.

Those boys were managing to hit the target from far. What I don't know is why that particular Professor's house. The man lectured for Geography. Probably it was somebody just started it and the rest followed. Or probably it was something about his son. The guy was deep inside. We never knew until that day, until that happened. The Professor's son now started flying his colour. Red bereter. First time we saw that. Back then they kept all those things to themselves most times. They used to be more secretive than now when any guy like that can pull out his gun at main gate and collect your phone.

They called the Professor's boy Ghost. It's a funny thing how he got that name. Not be setting name be that.<sup>163</sup> It hailed from his first year days. My brother said one time they were all brand new friends, just hanging out for hall when Nepa struck. They strike all the time. This guy was so dark, boys said that when he smiled it was only his teeth they could see. So they started calling him Ghost or Casper or Jasper, all sorts of names like that. It was Ghost that finally stuck. All of his boys had their own names. There was Inspector, so named because he walked with a case like a government official. My brother became Slim, very tall and skinny guy. There's Gamsy, though I don't know why they gave him that name. Lately you see cult boys only rolling with their own. Since there is no more real secrecy like before, it has gotten to be this kind of gang thing. In

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<sup>163</sup> It's not a setting name.

Ghost's days it was a different case. They let you have your own crowd. No wahala. It was even recommended, to help protect your real identity. So in peace times it was very okay for you to be rolling with civilians, even jew men. You could see Pyrate taking Star with Buccaneer. Small thing. So I want to believe that Ghost's friends were not necessarily in it with him. They were just a very tight group of comrades. Any small chance when I get to hang with them de make sense die.<sup>164</sup>

Ghost had been in Ghana visiting his sister. The sister de Yankee,<sup>165</sup> but her husband hails from Accra. He was there some three weeks. He came back with a new car. Exceptionally lovely car. Honda Prelude. Cha cha, tear rubber: brand new car. Green colour. Sony stereo inside.

Of course Ghost's car actually belonged to his popsy the Professor. First thing it arrived, Prof invites his friend to help wash his new car.<sup>166</sup> Me and my guys were there, excited cause boys know say na Ghost go steal cruise the car last last.<sup>167</sup> We were just waiting on top that one. So the Professor then calls Ghost to go buy gin. And pick up small goat head while he's at it. They all went. Slim, Inspector, Gamsy, Ghost. I wanted to go but the Professor kept me back helping him wax the Honda. They returned from Agbowo with four bowls of goat head and a bottle of Seaman's Aromatic Schnapps. By then the friend had arrived and

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<sup>164</sup> I loved hanging out with them.

<sup>165</sup> The sister lives in the US.

<sup>166</sup> In this context, to 'wash' the car is to bless it.

<sup>167</sup> We knew Ghost would get to drive the car.

those old men were retired in the Professor's library. It was till dark before they appeared again to wash this car. I don't know what they were discussing all the while, but I suspect it had something doing with politics. My own popsy had mentioned strike, maybe even rampage among the student union something something. When the two came out they looked a bit like characters in my dad's plays.

You know for here we don't chink our glasses when we take beer. It's not a common practice that people say 'cheers' before they take the first sip. But you do still have those who will pour libation. Ghost's popsy was a long time member of the Keggite Club. He was there along with my own dad. When he had a calabash of palmwine in his belly, he knew how to sing all sorts. Palmwine lectures. How the West Underdeveloped Africa.<sup>168</sup> Dreams of one day retiring back in his Igbo village, where he remembers as a boy walking to market with ejema in his bag.<sup>169</sup> Though of course he speaks the Queen's English for school.

The friend told the Professor to open the bonnet of the car. He poured Schnapps on top the engine, shining it well. *Oh Lord, we are asking you that this car will not crash, that the enemies will not get to this car, the robbers will not remember this car, and this car will not run on the road when the road is hungry. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen!* At the same time he poured one on the ground. The

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<sup>168</sup> Reference to Rodney's 1972 book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.

<sup>169</sup> 'Ejema' was the traditional currency still used in some parts of eastern Nigeria. It resembles a heavy, horseshoe-shaped ring.

Professor opened the driver's door and invited his friend to sit inside and start the engine. He revved it well, and many praises followed. *Man, my friend, you have eye for all these big boy's toys.* In no time the two old friends were on their way back to the library to find glasses for the gin still left in the bottle, and Ghost was left with the keys.

We never got to ride in it though. My brother did. He was co-pilot number one for the first and last ride for campus in that car. Me and my friends had to stay in the house and study, then say our prayers and sleep. I had dreams of a brand new green Honda on the free jungle roads of our school.

Next day was Sunday. We had light and no class so after morning service we were just watching TV.<sup>170</sup> Mummy was frying dodo for us. I remember how it burned my mouth. Outside the sun was high, even the flies searching for somewhere cool to rest. I fell asleep on top the puff, the chatter of oyinbo cartoons and Mummy's BBC chiming round in my head. When I woke to the sound of smashing glass, I thought at first I was in a Tom and Jerry chase. I saw Mummy at the window with her hands over her ears and I knew at once this was Nigeria after all. I ran to hug her and to look at what she saw. First thing, the side view mirrors went flying across the Professor's yard. Then a dozen sticks hammered the windshield, dented the bonnet. Blades plunged into the brand new tires, ripped across the seats inside. A dozen boys jumped up on the roof and started dancing to their own rhythm. Ghost's Honda Prelude sighed and

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<sup>170</sup> To have 'light' is to have electricity.



sank into the grass. I could not see my brother Slim inside or outside the house. I was too frightened to ask Mummy and see her weep.

These things always go off over one girl. At the time I was still in primary school, a very junior boy, so although I heard stories about what caused the war, it wasn't till later that I really came to understand. Slim got all the gist. He said that some Poly girls came into our side and then a group of boys actually raped them. It was the day before the Professor's Honda was inoculated against destruction, and two days before its own annihilation. That was what they said anyhow, that the boys raped them. But unfortunately for those boys one was the girlfriend of a very senior cultist in Poly school. You can never rape the girl of a cult boy, not to talk a senior setting boy, and expect to get away with it. It is not done. So that girl's boyfriend, he got his own together. Found their suspects in one zoology lab. Used pliers to tear out their fingernails.<sup>171</sup> After that, war. Bigger than any cult clash. Poly came to our side and just started attacking. Rampage. Burning cars. Breaking water coolers. Civilian, Setting, no matter. Anyone could be a victim. Anyone could join the fight. Anyhow.

By next morning we thought the war had come to an end. Or at least ceasefire. We actually went to school that day. It felt very strange to be sitting in class trying to focus, but we didn't meet any problems there or even on the way back home. I still had not seen my brother though. Probably he was out with Ghost

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<sup>171</sup> I heard one other explanation of the catalyst of this war, which is that boys were caught using equipment in a zoology lab and assumed to be in the act of stealing it – the torture with the pliers set off the following chain of events.

trying to see how far. Little did we know it was only God who saw us safely back that day. By evening boys from our own side were ready to strike back. As in guns, cutlass, machete, everything. These days were before we had GSM. It was Ghost who borrowed one of his group's rides and started cruising all around the school, flashing his white white teeth, spreading the word. *Look, they are attacking our friends.* He would offer lift in the car, but only on one condition. If you want passage to the front of the battle, you must carry gun. Again, my brother was his co-pilot number one. And that's how all of them started rushing down, rushing down to Poly Gate. As in, everyone for the school was there. Every man at least. And on the other side, through the bars, you could see another army to match.

That night it was houses that burned. Houses on fire and water tanks broken in half, reservoirs spilling into the ground. We watched everything from that our window. There was nothing else we could have done. Till tomorrow I don't know how they left us out. Later I heard Mummy thanking God for those people not coming to our house. She put it down to the snake we had found just the week before. Very tiny baby snake. Size of a centipede. Writhing round on itself in circles on the concrete floor by our toilet. Actually it was me who found the snake. I told Mummy and she was very annoyed, called Slim straight away. Had him kill it with a broom. Then she went to her room for her anointing oil. Took the snake to the edge of the compound, smothered it in sanctity, brought fire for the cremation. I heard her say the devil could no more enter our home.

They called in the Governor of Oyo State. This war was too much for the VC. But before the troops arrived, the battle now spilled outside the school. Families were running from their houses. I remember they were using louver plates. These kind of window slits. Guys took them from the homes and snapped them in half and flung them down the street. Glass smashing, slicing, splintering where it landed. Blood poured and ran in streams along the gutter that night, and for days after it left its trace.

Back before this time you never used to see guard at that gate where the bottle rained. Why have guard at Poly Gate? My boys and me, we used to walk most days through the opening in the fence and down the hill to one eatery for that side. Chop amala, ewedu.<sup>172</sup> Best stew in town. Poly boys entered anyhow to play ball, hang at SUB, freely like that. The gate was just there... I don't even know why, just to show where one place ended and another began. After this storm, they put guard for Poly Gate.

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<sup>172</sup> 'Amala', the quintessential Nigerian dish, is a starch made from yam flour and eaten with various kinds of stew. 'Ewedu' is stew with a leafy great vegetable base.

## Peace and Reconciliation

But because academic freedom is rather fragile, it must always be protected from attacks by extremists of whatever persuasion which would negate this essential freedom of inquiry by their coercive and disruptive actions which interfere with the rights and freedom of others.

– University of Ibadan, *Student Information Handbook*

Some of us are beyond whatever they can do to us. If they try it, anyhow anyhow, we go see. That is the kind of fierceness the setting brings. There is a road at UI that takes you past Obah Dam Reservoir. One long straight road like that. Paved road. As you stand at one end, you can see some one mile down Sokoto Street. Very beautiful place. Trees everywhere. Ten years ago if you had come to that road, then definitely you would have seen bodies. Dead. Most days. Many of them.

I remember one evening I was supposed to write exam but I could not because of war. I had an extra year. The next time that happened, I paid okada to wait by my hall for three hours. My third year exam. GEO 301. I even remember the examination question. *Elaborate on how you would measure the rate of infiltration in dry versus moist surfaces.* It was a tricky question. A trick question. The reason is that it's all the same, it's the same way you would measure both of

them because the system they use... I've forgotten what they call that system. Bottle... bottle something ... the system is the same anyhow you want am. But man, that gist not be the koko. The point I am trying to make generally is that I remember this question for a reason. I was just sitting there in the examination hall. Some two hundred students there with me. My biro was messing up, and in my mind I felt frustrated to have to write this yeye question. Frustrated, kind of, but at the same time I found the whole thing funny. At a point I was about forgetting the situation I found myself. I was halfway through the answer. I heard the door slam. Man, that noise brought me to my senses in a hurry. I could feel my legs tightening around the wooden chair. You see, when a setting boy comes for exam, he must always keep two minds with him. Fifty percent of his attention is on the paper he is writing. The other fifty percent must be watching, waiting for the hit to come. I heard the door slam and my face broke out in sweat. I did not want to, but I found a way to look behind me. I was convinced of what I would find. But it was only the invigilator who caught my gaze and moved my seat. I resented the extra visibility. A guy in my shoes, it is best that he blend into the crowd. After that point, man, I no send the exam again. I just rushed through the thing sharp sharp and slipped away to meet my okada. Like that I escaped, however narrowly. Or else I would have become one of the dead for that road. Most certainly.

My padi fell that night. My very very good friend from 100 level. We were malu together, crowned together.<sup>173</sup> Not only that, we also sat the same course for school. Funny guy, he had those kinds of rasta dreads. He had been growing them from time. Everybody called him Marley. We got into all of it mainly just to catch fun. We were interested in the women, the drinking. It was just a kind of child's play. Of course by that time we knew more to it than that, but somehow Marley had this way of keeping the fun in the game whenever boys got too down. Like there was one time he chartered a taxi and we went to Leki Beach.<sup>174</sup> It took all day to pass through the traffic and we didn't care. He knew one eatery on the water side where he wanted to chop barbecue fish. He said the place was just so chill, so relaxed. You know one of those reggae places. He said, *Have you ever been to Leki?* It was my first time seeing the ocean at all, and when Marley heard that he just called for the cab right then. He grew up down there. He used to talk about those days, back when all the water washed up was seaweed. But even with the piles of plastic bottle, the place is just too much. Steep sand banks drop you down into rough, rushing waves. Marley knew how to swim them like the local boys. It was already to evening by the time we got there, but he didn't send. He just stripped down and dove. His dreads were shining like fish in that water. For me it was enough to keep my eyes on the horizon and my feet on the sand, my lips close to a bottle of Star. At a point I

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<sup>173</sup> We were nobodies together, initiated together.

<sup>174</sup> A public beach in what is now an upscale part of Lagos.

took off my shoes and let the water sink my feet into the ground. That was heaven enough. We stayed out past dark passing bottles round a fire. A sound system nearby was sharing Femi tunes with the sky.<sup>175</sup> Marley had a girl to be with that night. Beautiful lady. She used to cook for that place, and she had a little boy who knew the sea. Marley loved the pair of them, loved them to the point of forming plans.

Marley. They dumped him like some refuse on the bank of Obah Dam. The crazy thing is that, till tomorrow, when I remember this time, it is only that yeye exam question that comes clearly to my mind. I have forgotten the flow of my padi's gist. I have forgotten the name of his love.

I won't lie to you. The life of a setting man is not always easy. Nine times out of ten, it is pretty okay, but you will find these sad stories anywhere you ask. As you see me now, I have stories to tell. Many many. Stories you would not even want to hear. But I have never regretted being one despite the fact I don't like what I've done. Membership gave me a kind of boldness. When you are a part of something like that, every other thing becomes a simple thing. Nothing can affect you, not to the point of real fear. Not even where you belong. This is how it is when you are like me. You stay inside it for long. Like me, some ten years I

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<sup>175</sup> Femi Kuti is the legendary Fela Kuti's son and an astounding musician in his own right.

was there. But if you join and then after six months you now try to leave, well then you de craze. They will forever want their pound of flesh back. No one go send you. It is just to run, to keep running. This is why it is better to just wait. Chop what life you can on top this ship, and wait for your time to come.

After graduation you become a member of a new setting again, this thing they call the 'world'. You hear of world-steering, world-sailing. Different groups have different ways of calling it. But the koko is that you can now decide your level, your level of involvement. If you want you can still hang with your fratmates in school. Advise them. Help them enjoy onje o rita, tarmac food.<sup>176</sup> Prey at will. Chop all sorts of small small fish. But they cannot force you. It is only as you like it. You have become an elder. In Africa this elder something is still with us. If you were once a Pyrate, now you have become a Sea Dog. There are certain benefits to the position, privileges you have earned. You can call on your boys when you are in need, when you decide to enter politics, or when you require special assistance in pulling a crowd.

I learned these things firsthand. Long before I left for the world, I danced the politics dance. When my opportunity came it felt like a chance to make some kind of difference, to bring some hope out of the world I found myself, and of course a way to feed well. They nominated me. Management, I mean. The

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<sup>176</sup> 'Onje o rita', or tarmac food, refers to petty criminal practices such as stealing and selling the phones of underclassmen.



school authorities. They nominated us. They called it PRC, Peace and Rec Committee. Of course they did it indirectly. They never said they knew a member of PRC was a cult boy. But they knew. To get into PRC you have to pass a test. You must deny being a member. So take my own case, I denied. But I knew they knew I was lying. I knew they knew. Reason I knew for certain was that sometime before I had been arrested and locked up on suspicion of burning the car of my hall warden. It wasn't me, but immediately they suspected me. I was the Eye for my group so they were watching me from time. They knew.

Management had a grand plan. We frat men were there to discipline the student union. The unionists were in conflict with the VC, and the interesting part is that they weren't doing much better with their own people. They had lost what purity they might have once enjoyed, lost control of their own crowd. You had union leaders conniving with boys. The union wanted protection, power, the means to create some show from time to time. The frat boys wanted money, our share of the booty. The student union gets a lot of resources from the government, or from foreign aid, and they don't share it with the students. They keep it for themselves. Old story. We had the whole thing functioning fairly well. But the problem with student union government was that they wanted all of this on top the struggle. They were chopping life, and at the same time they were agitating for general strike. Management was worried, so they stepped in to cause a war. That was the origins of PRC. We were called to diffuse the situation. We did.

We dealt with those union boys, one after the other. It was fun for us. We exposed them. We did funny funny things to them. We beat them, marched them naked around school. We did this even to their leaders. Most especially their leaders. The one they call Orisha, he used to be like a hero for that school. He was like a god, insisting that nothing could touch him. I remember way back, back when unionism was still alive for UI, Orisha was just coming into his power then. I remember he rallied the students to kidnap the vice chancellor. This was just before Obasanjo's return. They went to his house and beat up his security. Twelve midnight. They took him to Zik Hall, tied him to a chair, displayed him on top the roof. They drew a crowd. Every student was there to witness it. There were shouts that night, oh. You know at that time there was never regular power at the school. The water supply was not very okay. The students had so many issues, even more than now. Of course they blame the VC. They see the corruption in the system. Then, Nigerian students were very aware of all these things. So they stripped him down, tied him up on the roof, poured pepper on his body. Three professors had to go to Zik to rescue him. One was a reverend so he came as himself; everyone respects a pastor. The two others had to dress like students and go through the back to meet the student union president in private, to arrange the release of the VC. These were professors, well respected men, and they had to sneak through the back in the night. Students were angry in those days. Their leaders had real power. So you can imagine what it meant that we broke even Orisha. We humiliated him, paraded his bruises on campus.

This was like a golden age for setting boys. We were beating the union, and at the same time we had become the union.

We had a lot of influence in the PRC. We made sure our boys were among the executive branch, and once we got there we started to think towards how we could help the students. There were many of us who were able to push positions for some good things. Like me, I was a serious footballer then. I became Sports Secretary. I thought, let me use this power to improve things from the inside. You know the confraternities were not always troublesome like today. I have an uncle who travelled to London. He's been there for some twenty years. I remember when I was a boy he used to attend the University of Ife. He would come to Ibadan to visit on holidays, and he always had one or two stories about the Pyrates, the Bucca Boys, that kind tin.<sup>177</sup> I think back then it was more a social thing. Like they would go up into the mountains around Ife campus and just drink, get high, laugh, parade around. But then the papers ran a story. It was my uncle's final year and I remember he was like a celebrity to me, not that he was in it at all but just because he went to school there. I don't know what the story was exactly, but there was some girl involved, and Mafia burned down the bq where one boy was staying.<sup>178</sup> A bunch of them were expelled. Ife has never tolerated these things on its campus. They are strict to the point that they can even do witch-hunt. But that thing, that fire they set, it made serious headline. It was like a turning point to the kind of serious wahala we have today.

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<sup>177</sup> 'That kind tin' is translated as 'that kind of thing'.

<sup>178</sup> A 'bq' is a 'boy's quarters', coveted campus housing derived from colonial architectural forms.

When I became Secretary I thought about so many things like this. The history. The roots. What happened. I thought about my uncle's own time, not to talk of Soyinka's setting. Why couldn't it be like that again? I organised football matches where different groups competed against themselves. It was not to advertise us per se, but at the same time we wanted to bring some fun back into the runs. People came out for the matches. Average students. Civilians. We didn't announce anything, but people knew wetin de for ground. It was like boys were coming out into the open, small small. We hosted a football match between the Black Axe and Eiye, and we had Buccaneers versus Pyrates. You know that kind tin. It was a good thing for peace. It felt important. I felt important. The whole thing was just interesting. That's unionism. When you are there you believe so much that you are witnessing the beginning of real change. Not just change for your department or for your school. This is Nigeria. You feel that the change is happening across the whole of the society. We started to see ourselves as rising stars, climbing mountain tops like the magnificent seven of yore. Every boy was going to be the future president of a democratic nation...

Of course, looking back, I want to laugh. What can you do with the power the Oga gives? There is one saying that no matter how high the ochre tree grows it can never be taller than the farmer. Do you know why? The farmer can always bend the branches and pluck the fruit he wants. Small thing.

Last week I was passing through Ibadan and decided to go and visit Obah Dam. I walked down Sokoto Street. The reservoir was green and blue and purple, peaceful. The place was shaded, quiet. There was a man in a boat on the water. I sat and watched him pulling hyacinth. It was like he was painting on the water, gathering the colour so the eye can rest. I was supposed to meet one or two boys for beer at Cee Cee,<sup>179</sup> but I didn't leave on time. I just stayed there watching. Watching the flowers come in.

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<sup>179</sup> 'Cee Cee' is the nickname for the Conference Centre Bar at UI, the drinking venue of choice for upperclassmen.

## Dove

With this the Dove swallowed the Spider and it is why the Biroms say “Never receive a debt that you cannot pay.”

– Okechukwu Njoku Ihekole, “The Dove and the Spider”

Tejiri stood, advanced into the embrace. He grabbed the veins of his comrade’s arm, pulled his hand back to meet the other’s claw, reluctantly bowing his thumb in deference to his number one. The gesture’s ambivalence not unnoticed, Tejiri flashed a smile and, bending forward, reached out his free hand to call the boy to bring more beer.

It had been some six days since he returned to perch on Araba.<sup>180</sup> Six days of drinking in the cool blue den of Cee Cee and waiting for the peace talks.<sup>181</sup> His presumed responsibility was no secret. Tejiri had left for Delta seven weeks ago. His mother’s funeral, and circumstances kept him there. Somewhere in the meantime his boy fucked up.

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<sup>180</sup> ‘Araba’ is the Eiye’s code for UI, named after the tallest tree on the campus.

<sup>181</sup> Cee Cee is the university’s Conference Centre bar.

It was Tejiri who blended Deji. Bayo had told him about this young guy who did not hesitate to shoot his own teacher for school. As luck would have it that gist was the night of the Tropicals. They were all out to catch a bit of fun. Of course Segun had two too many. He saw one guy like that, dancing with Yewande. Very very good dancer, that girl. She knows how to dance the African something something. So Segun shoved his way to them and gave the guy a dirty slap. Bayo, he used to be a setting boy but he now left it to run this club. He was upstairs. You know the upstairs of the club is glass. He saw the whole thing happening. Bayo's first strategy was to try and appease Segun. He took them all to the VIP lounge. Bought a round of drinks. Segun called for Goulder and lit up his cigarette. But when the drinks arrived he did not move to open his. He stood and dropped his smoke and coolly raised the bottle high to smash the guy's head. You know what happened next? One thing one thing, the police were called in. Of course this was just formality. Segun would be free in twenty minutes. But Tejiri sensed that Bayo was genuinely annoyed, that he would stop at nothing to keep this clown out of his club. And of course Segun would be back again tomorrow to take his own revenge. So just before they were taking him away, Tejiri settled Segun and told him he should just free this small thing. No look uche face.<sup>182</sup> No real expectation that Segun would hear sense, but Tejiri had enough loyalty to try.

The police marched Segun through the club doors and down the spiral stairs; in the lot outside they would beg their 500 Naira and be on their way. Tejiri then

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<sup>182</sup> Don't look for trouble.

took Bayo a bottle of Guinness and poured it well. Over sweet and bitter sips the club manager calmed himself, forgot Segun, began to tell other stories. By the end of that night he was singing all sorts, most especially about the wife he never married. About one young guy like that who was the villain of her primary years, a character in the tales she told, long since moved away from the side where she stayed. Boy by name of Deji. Tejiri enjoyed what he heard about the boy who could carry gun for school. It was true Segun's days were numbered. His temper too ferocious. Wise to start looking for who would come next.

Tejiri wanted to believe so much he had found a perfect match for the flock. He travelled out to OSU to locate the boy. What he discovered was enough wahala for that school. When he saw Deji out on the killing field, Tejiri felt certain he had come too late. Another group would have already blended this one. But he decided, why not ask the kid for drinks, make doubly sure? As he poured out two cups of Star, Tejiri asked him straight. *Na who be you?* When Deji didn't answer but somehow grinned, Tejiri knew. He pulled out a UI letter of acceptance, told Deji just to choose his course of study, sign at the bottom, and be on the next bus to Ibadan.

Deji had a way about him. The others thought it was just the ignorance of a fresh recruit that made him so earnest and likeable. But Tejiri knew more. He took care to bring the boy into his nest. In time he was able to swap advice for confidence. Truth was UI was Deji's third uni. Third, at least. At OSU he had



remained a Jew. But at his first place in the East, Deji had begun initiation. Before passing through the Devil's Passage, entering the Room at last, the soldiers busted in on their bush.<sup>183</sup> Deji and his comrades flew away. For a while he hung around the school hoping to get the chance to repeat. Guess he wanted more of jaw-jaw.<sup>184</sup> In the East they are exceptionally brutal, and so Tejiri knew Deji had liver.

What he didn't know was how dangerous a hawk on the fence can be. Deji fooled even his Dove.<sup>185</sup> To know initiation, to know even the hit, is not at all the same thing as knowing setting. This had been the problem with Segun. His cruelty impressed too much, went unchecked too often. They never really bothered to school him well.

The cause of the war was so small as to nearly be forgotten. A single incident. Deji had enrolled in biochem. His lecturer had a problem with the SVC – his international passport stolen, and they were refusing to give it back.<sup>186</sup> Wanted the lecturer to give them their marks. Surprisingly or unsurprisingly, Deji had a genuine liking of that his prof, or maybe he just wanted to test his strength. He decided to help, rounded up a few young ones from his own side and went with guns to threaten the Vikings. Turned out the boys were about settling the whole

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<sup>183</sup> The 'Devil's Passage' and the 'Room' index demarcated spaces in the geography of Eiye initiation.

<sup>184</sup> 'Jaw-jaw' is another term for initiation.

<sup>185</sup> In the Eiye Confraternity, the Dove is the second in command, the man who forms the group's strategic plans.

<sup>186</sup> The SVC is the Supreme Vikings Confraternity.

matter in house when Deji now showed face. It was a case of two pack of rat eager to snap necks. The veteran members would never have taken that passport something so far.

All this while, Tejiri was in the swamps.<sup>187</sup>

Nepa gone, the bar boy propped open the front door to let in the air and the flies. Tejiri covered his cup with a coaster, pulled his cap down over his eyes and made that he would sleep off. In his mind he was back in hospital, running from the direction of supplies shop, racing to the intensive ward. His feet slipping round corners, stumbling against the cold clay of the balcony floor, the hospital full of echoes and birdsong bouncing from one courtyard corner to another, spinning round this monument of colonial breeziness and unrelenting Nigeria factor.<sup>188</sup> Everything was exceptionally slow, except for his own heartbeat and the thoughts of futures in his head. Bursting into the room, now there by her side, pouring tablets onto her palm, catching breath and wiping sweat, winding down, collapsing further down on the borrowed chair, praying these last magic somethings will take the pain. He now noticed the other patient in the room, her visitors gone, staring at him from above the ballooning tumor that eclipsed her neck. Her buried eyes met Tejiri's fear. He slipped his arms across the bed as if to shield its hidden wounds from the gaze of this strange girl. Startled again, how

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<sup>187</sup> The Niger Delta.

<sup>188</sup> 'Nigeria factor' is an idiomatic expression that gestures to the tendency of things to break down, to fall apart – everything from a knock-off watch bought at a market, to the oil economy itself. The phrase 'colonial breeziness' indexes a style of well ventilated architectural design for this federal hospital.

had he forgotten? His grip weakened. Underneath the sheet he'd bought the week before, his mother's leg gone, its green ghost ripening like plantain.

Tejiri sipped his Star and remembered the very first time he entered this school, some six years back. He was a Jambite asking direction to his hall, looking for a room to claim stake. Boom. Just lying there. In front of Mellanby Hall. Dead. A man. A big, strong, healthy looking man. Not boy, oh, man. From a clash the night before. As in, fresh. He ran back home, afraid, but his people boomeranged him. His mother: *Why? Are you a member? If you are not a member then what do you have to fear?* So he returned, but now too late to find that place to stay. All rooms had already filled to capacity many times over. He met one guy in one bar who had things to offer, promises to make. The gift of a rotating foam,<sup>189</sup> trap door into the career.

In the setting there are two major rules. The first: you are sworn to protect lives, especially the lives of women and children. Being sworn to protect others, then by extension you are not out to destroy them. So far so good. And the second rule: you have a divine right to protect yourself. That is the place where the circle curves. This world is like a ring. As the fresh recruit grows older, comes up in his education, his involvement begins to grow in rounds. By the time he is lord in the band, well it gets to the point where any simple misunderstanding can lead to the spilling of blood. The place where the second and the first rules swirl together, out and up into the slice of a cutlass, that is part of a path Tejiri had

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<sup>189</sup> A shared mattress.

learned to map out well. Most times he kept it folded away as best he could.  
Keeper of the guide until the flock must fly.

The Ibaka stood,<sup>190</sup> crossed to open the door, called for suya.<sup>191</sup> He looked slight in the doorway. Small man with a voice to match, but possessed of a skull unusually large for its shoulders. Two orders of suya. Tejiri's belly leaped in anticipation of the onion and pepper that would soon be slicing through the sediment of beer he had been laying. One or two mosquitoes took their opportunity to enter the blackening blue of the bar. Nepa brought the light. The bar boy plugged in the television set.

It had been from television that Tejiri learned of Segun's fate. The police were marching him in circles like any armed robber. The same police he thought he had in his court. What happened to Segun, some weeks before, is that they dealt with him. They dealt with him in house. After the night of the Tropicals, he fucked up with the dancer. Tracked her down and did all sorts to punish her for turning Black.<sup>192</sup> Rather than go to war, his flock handled it their own way, enough so that the other side was satisfied. But Segun was not broken. He now went on a rampage. Started singing all sorts. In the end the Ibaka was forced to withdraw impunity for this number two. A disappearance was arranged.

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<sup>190</sup> In the Eiyé Confraternity, the 'Ibaka' is the Eye, the commanding officer.

<sup>191</sup> Roasted and spiced meat served with slices of raw onion, suya is a northern delicacy popular throughout the country.

<sup>192</sup> Punished her for going out with a boy from the Black Axe cult.

Segun reappeared a few weeks later, his head electric blue and beaten into the box that sat atop the receptionist's desk in the pharmacy where Tejiri waited for many small bags of white tablets. What pained him was not so much the fresh and deep marks on his old friend's body, but rather the fact of his obscurity there among so many thugs. There would be no place to tell the impressive stories of the bus conductor and the first fearless hits, or the stories that, after all, none of them really knew about the person he had once been, a boy possessed of a mother and a God. Segun deserved greater notoriety, greater notice. Tragic for him to end as just one in a parade of boys not meant to last to trial. Perhaps, in other circumstances, Tejiri could have stepped in somehow. But there, in the hospital, one could only wait... wait and manage, and run back and forth, and wait for more tablets, and wait, and run them back again.

By the time Tejiri had returned from his journey south, one had already been killed. A junior recruit in the clan, a boy barely out of his final jaw jaw. They found the body down by the Viking Aqua,<sup>193</sup> the Obah Dam. The body was marked with the signature of the Vikings. One had taken the head, another the stomach, a third the legs, a fourth the arms... As they did in the Assembly of Rivers State and in the creeks of their creation, these diasporic Vikings liked to share their loot.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> A reference to Viking territory.

<sup>194</sup> This is in reference to the rumoured presence of Viking cult members in the political assembly as well as among the militant organisations operating in the Niger Delta.

The Ibaka had been angry, but he refused revenge. He said the cause of this thing was not worthy of war. He wanted Deji to go ahead of them and offer a pledge of peace. They would bury their fledgling and forget the rest.

There in the darkening Cee Cee, the blue bird boys were waiting, as instructed, to take down their guards. During peacetime, members from all bands can get together. Smoke, drink, gist. They go to each other's birthday parties. They can even share a room. One will say to the other: *You! If I catch you, I woe!* Fun, they have fun. But when there is war, lines are drawn. The Airlords did not want war, but they had drawn their own just in case, and within the out-of-bounds they built a nest for the protection of their Ibaka and their Dove. No time to hideaway, but this territory remained well guarded, boys perched in every corner. A place to take refreshment and to pass the time. Waiting, as capone commanded, for the baby bird to find his wings or fall.

And so Deji was alone on a mission for peace. He had left his pistol and his blade with the Dove. He was walking on the other side of campus, beyond the teaching fields of the agric students and past the brimming fishery ponds. He followed a shadowed path where he could; the sun was hot and high. He knew he would find them in the eatery at Poly Gate. One auntie like that, she had been storing the Viking's weapons there from time, guns and cutlasses stashed in the shadows of the pepper soup pots. They paid her with cash and other nice things.

Deji entered through the doorway, a dusty wrapper hung with tacks. He had been told he would find them here, but on first glance the place was just like any other spot for lunch. One group of women stood ready by the door to dish up stew. Another group of girls sat on concrete blocks in the back courtyard where they worked through tall stacks of plastic bowls for washing. The tables were full with students, staff, and faculty. The room hummed with chewing and swallowing sounds. Deji hesitated. He scanned for signs of the Adventurers, but aside from the usual parade of green he did not know what he should find.<sup>195</sup> For all his fierce beginnings, Deji was still a baby for the setting. *Ki ni E fe je?* asked a woman with a spoon.<sup>196</sup> Deji turned his eyes to her face and stared into its roundness as his hand fumbled for a note. She handed him a serving of hot amala wrapped in nylon and a bowl of beef soaking up palm oil. Deji found a seat in the far corner of the room. He made sure to have his back close to the wall, to keep a view of the entire place. He waited. His amala remained well wrapped.

Tejiri abandoned his beer and started pacing the doorway of Cee Cee. He had been back for a few days now, but he felt more absent than before. During his last night on hospital vigil, Tejiri slept off on a metal-backed chair and had a strange dream. He was making love with the cancer patient in the ward. When they finished, she told him to run and buy a clean scalpel from the store room.

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<sup>195</sup> The 'Adventurers' are the Vikings, who parade the colour green.

<sup>196</sup> What do you want to eat?

Sweat beaded on his face as he raced through empty corridors and moon flooded stairways. The moans of his lover filled his mind. The store room was miles away across the hospital campus, and when he at last arrived there was no one there to serve him. He was there for some time, pacing, waiting, and then he took to banging on the door. He could hear the medical supplies within the store room rattling in tune to the crashing of his knuckles. He went after the door until it broke, but once inside he discovered a darkness so thick he could not see to search. He stood still and lost until he heard his mother scream. Running again, straining his muscles to reach her. Halfway back up the stairs he collapsed in exhaustion and was forced to crawl. Like that he inched down the ward and fell over on his back into the open doorway of the room, lit up now by the green glow of an electric lantern. *You were taking too long*, his lover said. She stood over his mother's bed and appeared to be massaging the absent leg. His mother smiled and sighed. The young woman's tumour was gone and in its place a giant wound bled out her neck. *We had to use your mother's nails to cut it out. See?* Tejiri ripped off the sheet and found the cancer's yellow flesh moulded into the shape of a calf muscle and sewn crudely onto the stump of his mother's thigh.

He jerked away from the dream and into a morning of chills. The nurse found him racked with fever and sent him to the pharmacy to wait for Primaquine.<sup>197</sup> He was glad of the excuse to avoid the patient who had visited his dreams. He dashed the nurse to have her moved next door while he was gone. Later that

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<sup>197</sup> Anti-malarial drug.



afternoon, in privacy with her son by her side, his mother asked for people far off in the land of the dead, and she reached her arms forward, and quietly she passed away.

*I am going after the boy*, Tejiri said to no one in particular. He felt young Deji's weapons heavy in the deep pockets of his trousers. The Ibaka motioned that his men should block the doors. Tejiri turned to face his command. *The boy be hawk, no doubt, but na still my blood.*<sup>198</sup> *I am his Dove. I do not trust this game.* The Eagle Eye drew a gun, ordered Tejiri to sit and drink.

After some twenty minutes of waiting for nothing, Deji began to suspect his circumstance. A man who is not on time for a peace invitation is not serious. He left his cold food on the table and walked out the back way. There he gave a girl some cash in exchange for the knife she was using to peel yam. He slipped it inside his sleeve. He left at once, preferring to walk directly to his fate. He retraced his steps for some time before meeting five green bereters with faces he did not know.<sup>199</sup> They were waiting in front of the path that leads through the bush to the catfish ponds. As Tejiri sat nursing the bottle given him by his Ibaka, the young hawk drew a kitchen knife, reached out an arm to meet the band of cutlasses flying in the sky.

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<sup>198</sup> The boy is a renegade, true, but he is still one of us.

<sup>199</sup> Green is the colour of the Viking Confraternity. University confraternity chapters often call upon members from other institutions to do make their 'hits', a practice that helps to protect identities and avoid consequences.

The peace talks would have to wait. Yawa done gas.

## Aso Villa

Once upon a time, there lived a hunter. He was a very brave hunter who used to go into the forest of ghosts and strange animals to hunt. One day, he went to tell the king of his country that the next time he went into the forest of ghosts and strange animals to hunt, he would bring the king a monkey with sixteen tails. "What! A monkey with sixteen tails?" said the astonished king. "Whoever told you about such a creature?" But the hunter kept on promising that he would bring the king a monkey with sixteen tails. So the king said to him, "Very well then; if you bring me a monkey with sixteen tails, I shall give you half of my kingdom; but if you don't fulfill your promise, I shall behead you, for coming here to tell tales."

– Kemi Morgan, "The Monkey with Sixteen Tails"

Revolution must have nine lives.

He easily shows his scars. He smiles with few teeth. He lifts up his shirt and points where the blades cut deep. He used to carry photographs to prove he had been tortured during the military years. He used to tell of the days he hid in the bush. In one pocket of his jalabiah he kept these photographs.<sup>200</sup> In the other, thick fistfuls of cash. Ready like a wedding groom dancing down to his engagement.

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<sup>200</sup> The 'jalabiah' is a northern style of male dress, resembling a kaftan and also the traditional Yoruba dress for a wedding groom. In this context, both the photographs and the cash are meant to be used for political leverage, for bribes of different sorts.

The MTN boys came for him one night.<sup>201</sup> They came with twelve round shotguns. They crawled in through the window. They told the others to lie face down on the ground, not to look at them. They kidnapped Revolution. They said to him, *Call for the Eiyee. Ask the Eiyee boys to come and save you this night.* They shot him. The bullet grazed him in the thigh. They wanted to teach him a lesson. They macheted him in the head and in the back. They wanted to punish him. They didn't want to kill him. For a cultist, it is forbidden to kill a unionist. They are afraid of it. Even though Revolution had been disowned, they did not want to kill him. They were afraid, too, always, because he was an authority boy. Afraid of investigation from The Villa.<sup>202</sup>

So many stories. But to really explain Revolution, his psychology, the way he could be transparent and mysterious all at once, well then you have to go back. During Abacha, Revolution wanted money but he also wanted popularity. He wanted both. He used to complain that the human rights community was always getting international funds and people were using it to enrich themselves. That was true. Within him, there was one side that wanted to resist this, to march tall in the movement, and then there was always another side that wanted to be among the benefactors. Eventually he went to Aso Villa to collect.

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<sup>201</sup> 'MTN boys' is an innovative reference to the Buccaneers. The signature colour of the MTN telecommunications company, an African-based corporation, is also the colour of the Bucca boys: yellow.

<sup>202</sup> The Villa refers to the Aso Rock Presidential Villa, the official residence of the head of the Nigerian state.

Abacha gave instructions that Revolution should use the money to run a presidential campaign for UI, that there must be a spy, a pro-Abacha leader, at the heart of the student movement. He agreed and took the funds, and he went from godfather to godfather adding to his coffers.<sup>203</sup>

The purpose of this money, that was something only Revolution knew. He couldn't tell anyone. Still, somehow, rumours started to spread. It became difficult to show his face for school. So the part of Revolution that delighted in shouting with the masses, in pulling his own righteous crowd, this aspect of him now went and told the human rights community that he would do an anti-Abacha rally. Even so, he had become scared of the government. He needed to protect all his interests. He went to Agbowo to find thugs, area boys. He gave them two two hundred Naira to do the pro-Abacha rally. Then he used some of his money – the cash he collected at The Villa – and printed posters and fliers for the Abacha Must Go thing. He arranged everything just like that.

On the day of the rallies, Revolution wanted to go into hiding, to disappear. The students would not let him. They dragged him, shouting, *You have to be in front!* They forced him to the head of the crowd. They marched him through the streets of Ibadan, onward to the Secretariat. It was there on the steps of the Secretariat that he now met one of his godfathers, a man who was then as ruthless as

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<sup>203</sup> Godfathers are political patrons, and in this case they would be capable of exerting influence at local, regional, and national levels.

Adedibu is now.<sup>204</sup> It was from this very man, ally to the regime, that Revolution had collected funds for his efforts in support of Abacha. When the man saw Revolution leading the anti-government rally, he took him and slapped him straight away, right there in front of the students. This godfather had so much boldness, and so much anger. He didn't care about the crowd. He beat Revolution, used his heel to mash his head in. Forced him into the boot of the car, which was no easy task because Revolution was at least six foot. Ordinarily, the masses would riot. But it was clear they had been deceived. No one tried to defend this leader. The godfather drove away with his prisoner. This is how Revolution received his torture trophies, wounds to display in the time of second Obasanjo.<sup>205</sup>

Obasanjo. He deceived the students. Before the elections he called a meeting with NANS and told them he had been invited to contest for the presidency. He said it was not his dream, but that he wanted to redeem himself. He told them he had been to prison, he had suffered as they had, and he had emerged a new man. He wanted to right the wrongs he had done to the students, to all of the masses. Those in his audience, they were carried away. They had tears in their eyes. Even though he had once abolished the front of the Nigerian student movement, still they wanted to forgive him. Nigerians are very forgiving people. If a leader takes 200 million from the coffers but then returns 100, and at the

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<sup>204</sup> Alhaji Lamidi Ariyibi Adedibu was the most prominent godfather in Oyo State until his death at the age of 80, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of June 2008, during my period of fieldwork.

<sup>205</sup> In the time of Obasanjo's tenure as 'democratically elected' President, forums like the Oputa Panel provided opportunities for Nigerians to discuss and display wounds from the past. In this story, a student politician is able to use this public orientation as an opportunity to gain legitimacy.

same time he succeeds in building the roads and lighting the streets for one or two housing areas, well then his people will proclaim him a great man, a fabulous success. The martyrs of NANS wanted to believe in this fallen general, wanted to trust his resurrection. They told themselves that, after all, he is a comrade too. They had all suffered. They were taken in. So they delivered the student vote. Like that, Obasanjo won the national election.

Two months into power and the students knew he had betrayed them. They knew because of Odi Village. In River State the people were protesting the environmental degradation. This was the Niger Delta, where they drink acid rain from their water barrels. The common people were suffering. Obasanjo said the village was a hideout for terrorists. Soldiers were sent in one night. Massacre. They killed everyone. They raped women and children. They raped girls before killing them. That was when it became clear that nothing would change. That was when the students realised the struggle had just begun.

He ran the government like a man who is confused. Nigeria. All the potential to become a model for Africa. Expectations were high. But just six months in and democracy became unpopular. Na democracy be dis?<sup>206</sup> Like Moses' children in the desert, the people started looking back and thinking of the cucumbers and onions in Egypt. They began to miss the military years, to say that the IBB regime had been better. At the same time, the movement could not rally. It is difficult to criticise democracy. Then, too, the people needed rest. But

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<sup>206</sup> Is this democracy?

Obasanjo, he was just a chameleon. He was just a leopard who never changes his skin.

He tried to ban NANS again in 1999. The student exco went for a meeting at The Villa.<sup>207</sup> They were intent on discussing the issue of tuition fees. He said that was not on the table, but he promised instead that under his leadership the University would regain its lost glory. During that meeting at The Villa there was one boy who was rude to Obasanjo. At a point the boy started banging on the table in the centre of the room and shouting, *We will never take this*. Obasanjo ordered the press to put down their cameras. He stood up and slapped the boy, a dirty slap. But the boy was very sharp. He saw it coming. He blocked Obasanjo's arm. The police took him away.

NANS became divided. Obasanjo gave funds to form a parallel structure: one in Lagos, one in Ibadan. Obasanjo would only negotiate with the president who was loyal to him. He gave his funds to one cadre. He asked them what a NANS president requires. They said he should be known on campus. They also said he should drive a flash car. Four Peugeot 504s were given. Also, that he should have police security. That he should have access to NTA.<sup>208</sup> Gifts procured, the puppet administration then went like a coup and announced themselves as NANS leaders even while the scheduled convention to determine the new exco was still underway.

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<sup>207</sup> The 'exco' is the executive committee.

<sup>208</sup> Nigerian Television Authority; state-sponsored television.



Nowadays, if these guys get caught on campus, the students lynch them. But at that time students didn't know what was going on. Federal government gave their guys recognition by the Ministry of Youths. That meant that any international conference, any invitation to attend a leadership conference or whatever, it went to Obasanjo's boys. It was the fraudsters who were given passports to travel overseas and represent the whole of Nigerian student movement, to deliver speeches handed down from The Villa.

Revolution was the parallel president. The first thing he did was give an award to Obasanjo. A NANS award to the man who had once banned the union, who had carried out the massacre at Odi village. Revolution did not bother going through the NANS senate. His people just rented a hall in Abuja with money from The Villa. They invited ministers and governors. Not students, not activists. There in that hall they passed around bottles of wine and champagne to the Congress and the Press. They gave their award to the President. This was the second year of his administration. Later, he would do one or two things for the country about which the people could reserve judgement, could even hazard commendation. Like the way he brought the GSM revolution. But on year two, there was really nothing, nothing for the average Nigerian man on the street to admire.

As time passed, it became more obvious that Obasanjo's NANS was working in opposition to the elected NANS. This caused confusion among the public. The

fake president would appear on NTA and announce a policy. A week later the real president would appear at a rally and announce a contradictory decision. People didn't know who to believe. This was a strategy of government to weaken NANS, to destroy its credibility. Eventually the students tried to clarify the situation. It was suggested they use the press to let the public know everything. They did that. They started using a lot of press coverage. It came time for the NANS elections. They were to be held in Port Harcourt. Obasanjo's puppets got three million from The Villa to front its candidate. Revolution used the money to try and bribe the senators of NANS. Envelopes with 25,000 Naira. The students almost killed him. They broke both his legs. He was hospitalised for months. So he wasn't there on election day.

They came with thugs. With guns. The students fought them. That day was all out war. The students, too, were soldiers. This was in the Niger Delta, where there is no shortage of arms, they are everywhere. A lot of people were injured on that day. All of the government's boys went to hospital. After the war passed, the human rights community backed the elected NANS exco, placed their photographs immediately in the press. When Revolution returned from hospital he saw what had happened and went straight back to Obasanjo. He suggested using a parallel exco again, this time by holding elections. He collected money again.

Revolution had political aspiration. He wanted to contest as national representative in the years to come. Obasanjo told him that if he destroyed the leadership of NANS, he would then be extended the party ticket. This is why he kept coming back, again and again, with hand open and toothless smile. This is why he was willing to try bribery, to try even assassination. Revolution understood what power wanted. There is one Yoruba proverb. If the wall does not crack open the lizard cannot hide in it. Politics is about interest. Revolution was the crack in the wall.

The union was once a strong, unified force. It was Revolution who first split it open. This happened way back, years before Obasanjo's return and long before the famed Abacha rallies, back when he was student union president for UI. In the SUB there are many small small shops. All the rent they pay goes to the union. Businesses compete seriously over the space, and they are willing to pay a lot for it. The money is supposed to go to the representatives in the entire parliament. Everyone has his portion. During Revolution's time that system broke down. As president he began to collect rent, which should ordinarily be the job of the house secretary. So that person was collecting rent as well. Union government found itself in a situation where two businesses have paid for the same space, and the money already spent. Classic 419. Revolution would then say to the secretary: *I'm the president. The business I have chosen will stay. You refund the money.* But that money too would have been spent. So fighting would break out. Serious fighting. Fistfights almost daily in the SUB.

On top of everything, Revolution and his vice president were arch enemies. Twice, Revolution slammed his own VP on the floor of the union. All the while there were these cases of overlap, the president and the vice president were competing by taking over the roles of the treasurer and house secretary, taking more power for themselves. There was no due process for spending the people's money. There was open physical fighting. Deterioration. Students began to lose interest in the union. It was here that the management intervened. They said: *We cannot fold our hands and let the university become a war zone.* Other students tried to intervene, wanted to avoid management taking over the union. Some suggested calling a congress. Revolution refused. So they organised, collected signatures, got two-thirds of the population of the university to give authority to call a congress. In session, they called upon Revolution to give an account of his exco's finances. They indicted the president, indicted the vice president. They set up an investigative panel. Revolution and six of his exco were impeached. He refused to stand trial. He insisted he would use maximum force to remain in power. He claimed the congress was a lie, that his impeachment had been motivated by ideological differences.

His enemies challenged Revolution to appear before the main student court. It was an unwise decision. If he had accepted suspension, and if he demonstrated reform, then the movement could always forgive him and welcome him back. But whatever the university decided would be final. Some warned him not to go to

the university panel. Revolution was a double agent. Double agents are always wasted. When you sit on the fence, you get bullets from both sides. He went ahead.

At his first sitting with management he was expelled. Revolution left Ibadan. He went to Abuja. He reconciled with his exco. He went to speak openly for Abacha's presidency. He apologised for being a double agent. He spent two years crawling on his belly. Abacha believed him. The day after Revolution spoke on NTA in favour of Abacha, The Villa called UI. Just like that Revolution was reinstated, though he had lost two years, so they converted his expulsion to a suspension. He came back. This time he was not a double agent, but a full-time authority boy. He became friend to the VC. He preoccupied himself with Abacha's presidency. This is how the school's direct involvement in unionism started. The school set up a caretaker committee. They said, *We don't want conflict*. But what they really wanted was to absorb the power of the union. They actually wanted war so that they could wade in and take control. This was also the origin of cultism in unionism at UI.

The degree of the connection between cultism and student unionism varies from school to school. For example, at the University of Ife there is no connection. It is not possible to be involved in both. In fact, if you are found to be a cultist there the union will not waste time in getting rid of you, by any means necessary. Cultists have been lynched on that campus. There was a time that the unionists

and the cultists were at war in life. The cult boys went into the rooms of the unionists, and they shot everyone. Not just the union members. Everyone in the room. Then the union retaliated. It mobilised the students and hunted the cult boys down one by one, killing at every point. They burned one. Jungle justice. They caught him murdering a student. First he raped the girl, then he murdered her. They chased him and burned him. It was a witch-hunt. But there are other campuses where you cannot be a unionist without being a cultist. Ambrose Ali University in Ekpoma. That's in Edo State. There is serious overlap there. Or the University of Port Harcourt. River State University of Science and Technology. Most of the schools in the Niger Delta. But the degree varies. In some cases where there was overlap, the activists have succeeded in expelling the cultists. They did this by collaborating with ideological groups. Especially the Christian Fellowship. They produced unity candidates, and those candidates always win. So the union is Christianized, and naturally it takes up campaigns that appeal to the Christian block. They are against prostitution, against cultism. They are willing to expose the cult boys, to publish their names. They organise for exorcism. All sorts. So the cultists run away. The Christians carry the union.

Every university has its own story. At UI, cultism used to be very secret. Now it is very much in the open. The change happened like this. When Revolution came back, the students hated him. They saw him as a traitor. Everywhere he went they would boo him, beat him up because of his loyalty for Abacha. He would come to the congress – not at the stage, he wasn't involved directly then –

but he would be in the audience. At a point someone from the crowd would shout an insult at him. Then they would throw paper at him. Someone would shove him. He would shove back. And they would beat him. Still, he kept returning, absorbing these blows. He had been given a mandate from The Villa. They gave him a Peugeot car. They expected him to deliver his campus. He lied to them, told them that he was still popular. He started using police officers for security. But this led to rumours that he was a state agent. He became more unpopular. He had to withdraw the police. That was when he entered into an alliance with a cult group. He looked for the largest and most violent group. Then, it was the Buccaneers. He offered them money as well as guarantee of security, backed up by The Villa. Before this, if you got arrested there might be a member of your cult in the police force. But the most he could do would be to allow you escape. Not shoot until you were already outside. He wouldn't be powerful enough to grant you amnesty unless he was at the very top. The number one man. Now, Revolution was promising impunity of the highest level. So those boys jumped at it. The cultists became his crowd. He would get NTA cameramen to film him walking into the congress. He would appear on television surrounded by his entourage. An outsider, a person viewing on TV, would not know they are cultists. It was just a deceit. But the students on campus came to know who the cultists were. They were always with him. It became open, obvious.

It was around this time that the union had its first direct clash with the cults. The union could mobilise 15,000 students to confront Revolution. He had maybe 40 or 50 cultists. Some were ashamed to come out for him because they opposed Abacha. Those who did come, he paid them 10/10,000 each. He gave them alcohol. He told them to disrupt the congress. So it was 15,000 students against 50. They had guns, but they would not shoot in broad daylight. It's against their code. So the students would be able to confront them. When they saw the crowd was overpowering them, they would start shooting into the air. Like that the crowd would disperse. That was the strategy to gain power over the students. Revolution started it, but then other unionists began to use it too.

Then one day the congress took a stand. Even though Revolution's boys had guns, the congress stood their ground and beat up the cultists. They had to leave the union building. Revolution refused to give them the balance of their payment. Maybe he paid them N10,000 before and promised the rest after the job was done. This time he said their mission was a failed mission. He refused. So the Buccaneer boys started looking for him. He needed protection. He went to the Eiye Confraternity. Now the Eiye is a long time rival of the Buccaneers and the Black Axe. And they will not hesitate to shoot, even in daylight. They were coming with open arms, saying *we will protect you*. The Eiye went after the Buccaneers. That day was bloody at the congress. Cultists don't shoot civilians.



It's against their code. But they will shoot military.<sup>209</sup> The Buccaneers left on time, to avoid a full-blown war.

Later that night Revolution was drinking with his friends. He doesn't drink, but the others were drinking. The Buccaneers came for him that night...

Most people from the struggle would not like to see these stories. They would say it is just dirty linen for everyone to mock. Still, it is important to bring these things into the open, important to reveal the truth. We have to build our future on the truth.<sup>210</sup>

Way back, before all these tales, Revolution made himself known to be a pastor. He used to ring a bell. He used to come outside the hostels and preach in the mornings. He was using Marx's theory: religion is the opiate of the people. Even then, he was always making calculations, announcing invitations. He is a strong person. He understands the game. He always comes back, whatever happens to him. But the man who rides on the back of a lion will surely land in his stomach. Revolution rides on the backs of lions. In the end, he never succeeds.

And now? Now everything is different. There is no more a union. In fact, there are not even grievances anymore. Back in those days, even at these times of Revolution, the students were using stones, sticks against the soldiers. It was

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<sup>209</sup> 'Military' in this context refers to cultism.

<sup>210</sup> This paragraph captures the ethical dilemma inherent in this doctoral project.

war. People fell. People used to fall. They had the sympathy of the nation. They even had the sympathy of the soldiers.

It's different now. Walk around campus and there is no life. Maybe there is day vigil, night vigil, or Yahoo. But that is all again. Back then, if it was coming up to election time, there would be many people running around, drawing crowd, doing things, all sorts of things, just to make themselves relevant. Now you don't have to be relevant. You are not relevant. You are not irrelevant. You are just there.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Some phrases in this final passage are taken from an interview 'transcript', which is included below as Appendix G.

# **Part III: Renunciation,**

**the return**

## Born Again

We love you, dear Jesus, remember  
We Daughters of Divine Love,  
We cannot cry without reason,  
The Lord is my shepherd and king.  
We hail thee, O Christ our hope.  
We hail thee, O Christ our hope.  
A man appeared sent from God.  
You know his name was John.  
He was sent by God to bear witness.  
Chorus: That all mankind should believe  
Thy throne, God, endures for ages.  
Thou art a friend to the just.  
The daughters of kings shall acclaim thee.  
Chorus: The Lord is my shepherd and king.

— Daughters of Divine Love, "We Love You Jesus"

We used to do all sorts just to get to the girls. I knew how to talk to them like they wanted to hear. You meet a girl in the bus and you say hi what's up? Or probably it's a girl you've been stalking for awhile. A girl in your neighbourhood. The dad just got transferred to the compound where you stay. You know that kind tin. Somebody new. You've been following her, seeing where she's going. Then one day you just go over to her and you slam her the lines:

*Hi what's up? What's your name? I have seen you before. What's your name?  
Is it Sarah or Sue? It's so hard to find a personality like yours for me...*

That one na New Edition, something like that. We used it a lot. We also had Lionel Richie: *I fell in love with you inside my mind, and in my dreams I've kissed your lips a thousand times ... Hello is it me you're looking for?* I had a book of materials to work from. Stealing lines from songs. Worked like magic. Of course most of those girls never listened to those type of songs. So they blush like wow. They're just tripped by the whole flow. They don't know what to say. Of course you've got them cornered. Next thing you know they start sending notes and you guys are meeting in some funny places.

Boys came to me. I had too many friends. They wanted more than what was inside my book. I could do things with those lines. My own things. Put my own signature on them. Most times I didn't ask nothing for it. Got my kicks from it. First I interviewed them. What kind of girl are they after? What is the girl's name? So I can compose a line with the particular chick in mind. I had different ones for all kind of situation. If you meet her at school after class, this is how you do it. If you see her at the back of the bus, of course you pay her fare and you fit use this one to start. Or you go to her place. You ask somebody to call her.

She comes out. You throw your line:

*Did you feel pain?*

*Did you feel any pain at all?*

Of course she's confused. She'll be like, what? Then you tell her:

*You must be an angel that fell from heaven.*

She smiles, and you're in.

Then you start with: *Hey what's up my name is so so so, what's yours? I am a student of so so so school. I've been watching you for awhile, trying to see where you go, the friends you roll with. I didn't want to ask your friend, I just want to come up straight and tell you that I like you very much and it's been very very difficult to get you out of my head and I hope we can be friends and maybe more than friends...* Of course she blushes. It is all about the blush, the getting her guard down. And most times – ninety percent of the times – the girl doesn't say anything. She's just there, just smiling. All the questions you ask them, they're just saying yes to everything. At the end of it they'll be like, *Ok, yeah, I've heard all what you said ... I'll think about it ... I'll let you know in three days.* Then you are sure you'll be receiving one note that says *I Love You.* Works like magic. Every time. It was mad fun in those days.

Only problem was those rare times the girl talked back. Then the boys became confused and of course forgot their lines. Most boys then, it wasn't as if they had game. It was all about the lines. If the girl said anything we had not planned

ahead of time, well that was it for us. But even for that disaster we had a line. The boy can just say, *So we'll see later, abi?*<sup>212</sup> And run away.

That kind tin never happened to me. It was me who held the book. I kept it with me 24-7. This was one way I could always get by. I was forever the guy who had what you needed, the guy you could not do without. My story is a very common one really. I come from a poor family. I never knew my father until I left university. My mother raised seven before me. The story is too freakin common. Except for this fact: the kind of person I always was and the kind of person I became.

I had all sorts of protection. Then, it was my book of lines. Just one time, there was only one time a girl knew how to talk back to me. Flew away to Ghana just to get me off her back. Too bad for that one, I had genuine interest in her. But when I found her she knew too much to fall for the line I had in mind. I tried all sorts, but in the end it was she who got to me. That was a different case.

This what I am yarning now, this was all before I renounced and gave myself to Christ. Now I am here, fighting this thing. Everywhere I go, every church I see, I keep saying to people that cultism is not just a social thing. It's not just about people coming together. No. I think there is something about the spirit. How can you look human being for face and now want to kill him, without thinking twice? You don't think twice, you just kill. And this killing thing, it is not too

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<sup>212</sup> So I'll see you later, okay?

common in Africa except there is war. But on campus, on university here, these boys kill. And they walk away. Where do we get that kind of spirit? Let me tell you. Eighty percent of them are poor men's children. Ninety percent come from broken home. Like me, I feel protected. I feel more loved by them than I was back home. If I have any problem I now have someone to turn to. That was my own case. That is where it starts. Let me tell you where it ends.

I had it. The spirit. I had spirit for the business. I was rugged. I was fearless, even in my jew days. Even if I was outnumbered, even if I didn't have weapon, I could kill the enemy like that. I have done this more than once. I earned so much respect. And, then, I had my godfathers. When I was the Eye for campus – not to talk of nationally – there was a top supervisor of police who approached me and offered to me by my godfather.<sup>213</sup> I was never arrested in all that time. The police never disturbed me. I committed crime with pleasure, with pleasure. People keep asking me: *Can we eradicate cultism?* Of course we can, but only if God is involved. This is because we are not just talking about the university level. All these old men, they are also there. You cannot send the child to prison and expect the old man to just reform himself. No no no. In Africa we have a saying: no matter how many new clothes the child has, he will never match the mountain of rags an elder has collected.

You have to find the leaders. In Nigeria, that is a very funny exercise. The leaders are there. Everybody sees them. The papers reveal them. But

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<sup>213</sup> A capone is the number one man, the leader of the confraternity.



somehow they can never be brought down to our level. Never penalised. Did you hear about the governor? Used to be commissioner of police until they discovered he was selling weapons to armed robbers. He was dismissed, but some years later he is now elected to be governor of the state.<sup>214</sup> How? He changed his name, got affiliated with the godfather of the state. That is all he needed. But of course everybody knows who he be. Or take the man in the papers last week. Convicted of corruption. Twenty million US dollars. The penalty? Our judge gave him an option: six months in prison or a fine of ten thousand dollars. What do you think he will choose?<sup>215</sup>

Let me explain something to you about corruption in this country. In Nigeria, if you come into wealth, you must now ensure that the next seven generations of your family are lifted from poverty. This is why you will find the average Nigerian on the street is frustrated – mightily frustrated – when he discovers these corruption scandals at Free Reader's Association.<sup>216</sup> But if his own neighbour becomes local government council chairman, then of course he will go begging that the oga must now provide paved road, electric line, and clean water to all the houses on the street. Not by passing legislation, no. He must dig into the public coffers. It becomes his right, even his obligation. It is expected for the man to

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<sup>214</sup> True story of the rise to power of Christopher Adebayo Alao-Akala, current Governor of Ibadan's Oyo State.

<sup>215</sup> This is based on the true and recent case in which former Edo State Governor Chief Lucky Igbinedion, who was convicted of stealing over N3.6 billion (approximately \$24 million) and then released with a fine of N3.5 million (approximately \$23,000) (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2009).

<sup>216</sup> A 'Free Reader's Association' is an arrangement by which customers can pay less (5 or 10 Naira) than the cost of a newspaper (100 Naira) and, without having paid to take it away, can read it while standing right there at the street vender's stall. Predictably, Free Reader's Associations are often the site of engaging political conversation.

build a mansion and hold court. It is a must. You will find this on the cult level also. On the one side, you have all these anti-cultism something something. On the other side, you have members who have graduated and entered another level where maybe they are no more killing, but they are still loyal to the setting. They are now getting their juniors to do their evil for them, and with impunity. We have them at the Presidency, at the House of Reps, in the police. Even in the Church, among the pastors and the crusade leaders, you still have them. So many godfathers. This is why I was able to climb up the ladder. For in this Nigeria, you got to know somebody wen know somebody.<sup>217</sup> (This is also why, when I now had my experience with God and wanted to leave, they had plans to assassinate me). I knew too much. I was so big. Like a president of the nation. I had my entourage, my bodyguard, and yet I was a student for campus. It was not by myself that I achieved all that.

It is the same in student politics. No how no how, you can never be a student union president unless you are in one group or the other. Yes oh. You need backing from the student side, and then too you need backing from the top. You need godfather. So you see the entire thing is set up, set up just like that. Me, I worked my way through. I enjoyed it. As you see me now I will never say I regret being in that place. It was only that I wasted souls. I have no way of knowing if those souls were saved before I took their bodies. Most of them could be in hell and here I am preaching Christ. That is what I regret. Everything else,

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<sup>217</sup> You must know somebody who knows somebody.

na my education. I worked my way through and got up to some levels you cannot imagine. Even on campus I was a millionaire.

I rose to those heights, all the way up to the top of this nation. I had so many patrons, and then also I had black power. I travelled to some eight African countries to consult with the devil, to get my bullet-proof, my power. Like, I had one where if I put my body on the wall I can disappear and then appear wherever I want to be. I can go wherever I wish. I used that one here at UI. It was when I was returning from a trip to Port Harcourt. Immediately I arrive on campus I see that banner. They have them everywhere now. The banner comes from those days. It says *University of Ibadan Student Union Says No to Cultism*, something along those lines. I saw it and I was mad. I went straight to SUB. I went straight to the union president. I asked him, *What is this thing I'm seeing that cultism must go?* He said, *No it is not us it is the school authorities.* I said okay.

Back then, from time, this UI was headquarters of the three original confraternities. You have Pyrates. You have Buccaneer. You have Eiye. They came from here and they knew this place to be their home. Their Araba Tree. Their Mothership. Now things are different. The Crusade for Christ has pushed them out. Buccaneers moved down to Calabar. The Pyrates shipped out of the campus and moved to Second Gate, outside school. Only Eiye still has their headquarters here, but they can't do anything. We have exorcised this school. But back before this time it was different. Cultism was very much alive in Ibadan.

I was at the heart of it. So when I saw these big signs for campus I was angry. I just told my boys at SUB to give me some few minutes and I moved into my office. I backed my body to the door. I then stepped out into the Vice Chancellor's office, in the building some three or four blocks away. I just appeared before him out of the wall. I confronted him. *What is all this I see that cultism must go?* He was pale as a ghost. He was shaking. He asked me, *What is your own group?* He said, *Sorry, my mistake, your own can stay, it is only all other cults that will go.* He knew I could just kill him. He knew the power I had.

Those days, I had strong faith in black power. Complete faith. So many times I placed my life in those charms. If you are not exposed to Christianity, then it will work. It will work for you. Like me, when I was coming up I always skipped on going to church. I would rather go to the field, play football with my friends. I missed finding Christ then. It was easy for me to have so much belief in juju. If you do not have faith, it will not work. If you believe instead in God, then you have much more pure power on your side and these black charms will be useless. That is why Christ Army will always defeat cultism. It is just time. But faith in Christ was not my power then. I saw myself as second devil. I lived with my gun. I woke with my gun. I slept with my gun. And I made my living by my gun.

When I left uni, still I remained in the setting. I remained fully on court. My godfathers, they had their own lines to feed me. They had their own promises to

make me. I was being groomed. I became full-time hired assassin. In no time I had so many clients. So many patrons. Across the nation.

I remember one job. I had just returned from South Africa. Then there was no GSM. My godfather called me on land phone. He said he wanted to see me in Lagos. I said okay. I entered my car and I drove to Lagos. Whenever I meet with him I don't go with my entourage. I don't go with my bodyguard. Nothing. I know it must be in secret. I got into Lagos. He said to me that he has one friend who is an Alhaji.<sup>218</sup> The guy is in a bigger cult. Big boy's cult like that. I'm not talking campus cult. Those society cults, they don't kill as such, but they kill spiritually. They give you wealth, but it comes from the devil. First they give, then later at such and such time they now demand your life in exchange. So this Alhaji, his time was up. My godfather told him I could help. He needed virgin in order to survive. In ten day's time he will die except he finds a virgin head to sacrifice. That is his contract with the devil. I was like okay, call him. I knew how to do the job for him. I then negotiated. I told him that to get a virgin head I will collect six million Naira from him. In Nigeria, if you are a millionaire then of course you must do evil. If you are a Christian, you must be patient. If you are a millionaire, then the devil is pumping wealth. The man said, *No, that it is too much.* I said, *Too much! Do you know how many ladies I am going to kill to get a virgin head? Because I may kill one and it turns out she is not a virgin. You try kill one and see how it be. It is going to cost much.* So he now said okay, that he

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<sup>218</sup> A Muslim man who has completed one of the Five Pillars of Islam by completing the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

will pay four million. I said, *No I will not accept four million; this is a very tedious job.* So my godfather stepped in to negotiate and we agreed five million. Of course who won't pay five? It was his life we were talking about. He has more millions than that. Then, we arranged how he would make payment. As hired assassin it was cash I was collecting. Nobody wrote me check. No. It was then they were introducing Ghana Must Go.<sup>219</sup> He paid three million cash, and the remaining two million I would collect when I produced the head. He put the cash inside Ghana Must Go. I took and put inside my boot. That is where I had my bank. My boot was my bank. I was a good charity as a cultist. I was killing but I was also using my booty to help others. Any poor student who needed, I gave. It was like that. So I put it in my bank and I left.

Then, they were having ASUU strike for UI.<sup>220</sup> It would not be easy to get virgin head in the area I control. The place was just dry. So I left for one polytechnic. I entered campus. First person I met happened to be Lady D the Jezebel Queen, a very old friend of mine from my secondary school years. I told her, *I need a girl to pass night with but the girl must be a virgin.* She said, *Virgin? Why? There*

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<sup>219</sup> 'Ghana Must Go' is a reference, first, to a political slogan relating to the expulsions of Ghanaian immigrants from Nigerian between the 1960s and 1980s. The deportees towed their belongings in large square bags made of woven nylon, often in plaid patterns, that had been manufactured in China. The bags thus came to be known as 'Ghana Must Go', and it became fashionable to use them for the transfer of large quantities of cash in various kinds of illegal transactions. Today, the bags are experiencing a further transformation as artists and top international designers repackage them for art galleries or the trendy handbags market.

<sup>220</sup> ASUU is the acronym for the Academic Staff Union of Universities, one of the higher education labour unions that frequently strikes and has, in fact, been doing so for several months during the writing of this thesis. During the 1990s, before policy reform at UI limited the upper limit of years a student might be forced to wait for a degree, it was not uncommon for undergraduates to spend six to eight years working and waiting to complete a four year program. This situation created a great deal of idle time, considered by many to be a major factor in the growing trend of students joining cult groups. Another common method by which students might add years to their tenure was by engaging in radical politics.

*are strong girls on ground, why you want virgin?* I said, *Don't worry, I just want a girl tonight who will really cry.* She said, *Okay but it is going to be difficult.* You know in Africa it is about money. I gave her 20,000. Then, 20,000 was money, serious money. She saw cash and said, *I have a girl in my room, though she is still a child, not yet finished her exams.* I said, *How do you know she is a virgin?* She said, *I wanted to initiate her into our group, but when I was trying to introduce her to lesbian act the girl was shivering; she had never done it before not even with a boy.* So I agreed. Lady D persuaded the girl to follow me. I waited. She now entered my car. Short girl. Nice round face, still a child. She was about weaving her first hair. I could see the fear in her smile. To God I saw it, but I did not care. I just drove. Driving her around, petting her. In my car I had two Ribena pack. I was sipping on one. I gave the other to her. Told her she should drink. At first she said no, like girls will do. *So you are refusing? Don't you trust me? I thought we met through so so so lady, and if she doesn't trust me she wouldn't ask you to come with me.* So the girl drank. Some minutes later she was unconscious.

The sun was setting, the day gradually going to dark. I drove out of that place. I entered the road. I drove to the edge of town, into the burial ground. As of then that place was very very dark. I drove in. I took the girl. Laid her on the grave. Cemented grave. I went to my boot to bring out my UTC axe,<sup>221</sup> and I was about cutting off her head when I now heard a voice. *Leave this girl alone. Why do*

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<sup>221</sup> A UTC axe is a machete-like cleaver. It is named after the UTC Nigeria PLC grocery chain that features a butcher section where meats are freshly processed with the aid of this tool.

*you want to cut off her head? What has she done to you?* My arm dropped. That was the first time I had pity on somebody. Second time I went to do it, again the voice came to my mind, and I felt cold from my hand down to my toe. I was scared. Again I dropped the axe. Third time I went to try and my cutlass became heavy in my hands. It was like force, as though something was holding it down to the ground. I really can't explain what was happening that night, but I must tell you I have never experienced anything like that in my life. The voice came again. *Leave this girl!* At that moment I knew something was definitely wrong. I just abandoned the job, and like that I was abandoning the life itself. It was my moment to renounce. I put the cutlass in my boot. I did not think about the Ghana Must Go beside it. It did not matter anymore what happened on top that level. I would not harm her again. I understood. Of course the girl had parents who were praying for her, but that would not be enough. This girl must have a covenant with God. I carried her to safety.

These stories I am telling, perhaps it appears I was advanced for my setting. From one way you check it, that is true. I reached the highest levels in this nation. I had my contacts internationally. I was trained outside the country. I was in Libya for three months, without passport, and yet I was a student on campus. I had my entourage, my millions. To this day, I hold the scroll for my confraternity. I hold it secretly. No one has been able to retrieve it from me. Because I retain the scroll, still I remain the national Capone. You might say my case is an exceptional case. But it is not so very exceptional. My story,



generally, is just a common one. Though I reached those heights, still this is basically how it goes. The training is there. The money is there. The weapons are there. It is only left for you to cultivate the spirit. In Nigeria, the spirit is one and only. No matter how many lines you pull out of your book, if the spirit is not there you will never succeed.

Sometimes I think about the first girl. The one who turned me down. Very beautiful. Tall. Not too slim. Not too fat. Fair skin. An exceptionally kind girl. I liked her person. She had this mark on her cheek that looked tribal, but when I asked she said it was only a scar from the chicken pox. I was disappointed. You know all those tribal marks are disappearing in a hurry. It is considered uncivilised. Made in Nigeria is almost a rare sight.<sup>222</sup> But mark or scar, hers was beautiful. I believe till tomorrow she was the one for me, and for a long time after I abandoned her, still I harboured all sorts for her. But from where I am standing now, I can see it was better for her to stay away from someone like me. It was meant to go that way. Because sometimes I also think about the child who refused to give up what I wanted even though her eyes were closed. I think about her round head and the chill in my blood. I think about the heavy axe and how the journey I was taking would, in the end, lead me to that place where I could spare her life, and the devil take his wealthy pilgrim, and a voice from the dark night rise to save my soul. The Almighty uses us like this in his mysterious plans.

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<sup>222</sup> 'Made in Nigeria' is a reference to people with elaborately, traditionally marked faces.

God knows. In this our Nigeria there has forever been crusade between the darkness and the light. These days the light seems to have the upper hand, and so we pray.

**Dearest,**<sup>223</sup>

1<sup>st</sup> thing na hummer,  
One million dollars.  
monday, tuesday, wednesday, thursday, boys de hustle eh!!  
friday saturday sunday!! gbogbo aiye!!

– Olu Maintain, “Yahoozee”<sup>224</sup>

*My dear I am writing this mail with tears and sadness and pains. I know it will come to you as a surprise since we haven't known or come across each other before, but kindly bear with me at this moment. I have a special reason why I decided to contact you. My situation at hand is miserable, but I trust in God and hope you will be of my help.*

Growing up we had Cowboy Westerns on Wednesdays, and at week's end we had Kung Fu. I never liked to miss those nights, because everywhere it was like that.<sup>225</sup> If you miss one, then the next day at school you can't follow the gist. You are just there. You don't know which town John Wayne shot up, which Samurai master met his fate. I had a friend with a TV set in his house. That's how it was in those days. The whole neighbourhood comes out for the showings.

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<sup>223</sup> This story's title and its italicized portions are direct quotes excerpted from a recent 419 scam email I received while writing-up. It is know as the 'Hanan Ibrahim Bare' scam and is listed as well on the index of 'Fresh Scams' at [www.419baiter.com](http://www.419baiter.com), one of a number of website 'watchdogs' for Nigerian internet fraud. International dating sites now also feature sections warning users against chat room scams and providing detailed lists of 'Nigerian traits' to watch out for. The site deploys language that begs analysis of the racism underlying its representations.

<sup>224</sup> A wildly popular hit son that celebrates the rich rewards of internet fraud.

<sup>225</sup> A classic example of Benedict Anderson's theory of how national communities are collectively imagined and constructed through the simultaneous consumption of media forms (1991).

If somebody has a TV, everyone is invited. The grown-ups sat inside to watch. Most times we kids squeezed in or else we could catch it from the window. That is how I saw all the big flicks: *ET, Ghostbusters, RoboCop, Rambo...* There would always be one or two of us trapped into doing running translation. We could understand the American accents, but the adults complained the oyinbo people spoke too fast. You know the English we have here is different. Still, it was enough fun for them to even watch the pictures. I only had one auntie who refused to come along with us. She smelled of shea butter and kola nut, and she carried her late husband's walking cane. Originally they had travelled from the East, after Biafra. She used to grumble that she preferred the moonlight, that all those films were just the work of the devil. She was our very own traditionalist. On Sunday the network would just show news or church program throughout, so we used to go to her place to take our Tortoise tales then. Auntie always poured ground nut and sweets into our palms to make us quiet and happy to listen.

*I am constrained to contact you because of the maltreatment which I am receiving from my step mother. She planned to take away all my late father's treasury and properties from me since the unexpected death of my beloved Father. Meanwhile I wanted to travel to Europe, but she hide away my international passport and other valuable documents. Luckily she did not discover where I kept my father's File which contained important documents. I am presently staying in the Mission camp in Burkina Faso.*

You know there are Nigerians everywhere in this world. You can go to any major city and you will find a mini Nigeria. Nigeria is a vast country. The giant of

Africa. And, yet, we find it so easy to meet ourselves. Maybe I meet one Naija boy. I don't know him from Adam, but somehow somehow we are able to flow easily. We all have the same stories.

Like me, I got involved by a common way. I wasn't prepared for it, but that doesn't mean it was unusual. How it happened was I got invite to one very big party like that. I was just a Jambite at the time, so of course I was eager to attend. The location was secret. I had to meet up with some boys at a bar ahead of time. I thought they were just going to give the address and maybe we would ride convoy to the place. I walked into the bar. Very popular place for UI. It is built like a round hut with palm frond roof, native artwork on the walls, you know that whole African look. I didn't see the guy I wanted so I went up to the bar to order for Star. The bar boy was pouring it for me when someone slapped my shoulder from behind. I felt scared, but I didn't want anyone to know so I just remained cool and turned around. There was my guy, huge smile on his face. He had a bottle of groundnut in one hand and a glass of wine in the other. He shook some groundnut into my lager and that's when my mind flashed back to that our auntie from the old days, the way she used to pour out our treats. He pointed out our table. There were other boys there already. I don't know how I missed seeing them, I was a bit embarrassed. My man put his arm around my shoulder and walked me over to the table. I had to concentrate so as to smile and greet the boys and at the same time keep from spilling my beer.

That was how it started. As for the rest of it, long story. Same story you hear again and again. The groundnuts were mixed with something funny. I woke up in a room somewhere, and I got blended. Just like that.

I didn't mind it, really, but at the same time I was never all that fond of the life. Like I have a friend who travelled out. I was always trying to impress her way back. I used to go around to her room at school, just to visit. I thought maybe she would agree to give me a try, eventually. But she didn't want a setting boy. She was too smart for that wahala. The girl was more than just those curves I liked. She had so many interests. She played volleyball most times. She had a guitar. Really talented. Fine voice. She actually wrote her own songs. She used to hook up with the Rasta crowd and jam. Bob Marley was her all time favourite. I liked her, I really did, but in the end our friendship didn't last too long. I was just getting into my crowd at the same time she was finishing with the whole thing. So we drifted apart, lost touch. It was from another girl I later heard she won the visa lottery. I looked her up on Facebook. Now she's living in Nebraska. She's studying to be a nurse. She's still single. Who knows, maybe one day.

*I am seeking for longterm relationship and investment assistance. My father of blessed memory deposited the sum of US\$11.7 Million in one bank in Burkina Faso with my name as the next of kin. I had contacted the Bank to clear the deposit but the Branch Manager told me that being a refugee, my status according to the local law does not authorize me to carry out the operation.*

I never renounced as such. I was one of those boys that just started moving away, small small. If I could earn money and pay my dues, my people didn't really care. I was never a big fish in my pool. When they blended me they told me maybe I would become the Eye. They thought I had all the right traits for that. They wanted to groom me. But somehow it didn't happen like they said. I managed to avoid a lot. It isn't like the stories you might have heard. You can really choose your level. That is just it. So I started working with computer instead. The first job I did was using number generator. You know what that is? I was using software to generate credit card numbers. It wasn't a big hit. I was just testing the waters. I went online and I bought a textbook. I bought a pair of trainers. Finish. Even today, I don't have too much ambition. Like those boys you see trying to manage Hummer through the streets of Dugbe, I am not one of those guys. I like a quiet job.

Let me tell you one thing I have noticed in this life. Boys, they prefer to use Yahoo mail. The site is faster. You can chat at will. That is just it. Now they have this new one, Gmail? The program is better, but we cannot use it here. It is slow. Yahoo is what we have to use. But, still, unless maybe you own your own gen and your own system, there is serious limit to what you can do. You can spend a whole morning researching, composing something, and like that it is gone. That's why the first thing a boy buys is laptop. Laptop is serious investment in your future. Even then, you have to power it, you have to get online. These cards you can buy, even if they work well it will still take you some

hours to upload one photo. That is the patience that is required. You don't complain. At least you are online.

My friend in Nebraska, she was chatting with me and saying she's even thinking of taking a Facebook vacation. Can you imagine? She says the thing is really using up too much of her time. She's starting to feel depressed looking at all the advertisements saying she should lose weight, trim up, do sit-ups, fix her hair, blanche her skin, all sorts. In my mind I was thinking, *You de craze?* Let me tell you the truth. In all the time I have spent on top that system, I have never noticed a single advertisement. It is like we know they are not there for us, and we just blank them out. As in, we don't even see them, not to talk of feeling bad. You can call it survival strategy, you can call it time management, but that is what I have been doing all of my life. If you let your eye drift over to that side of the screen then, man, you will feel low. You will see so many things you will never have. Even if you make one billion, some things are just not possible. I tell the junior boys who are getting into this game – very junior boys – I tell them to keep a cool head. It is very good to dream, but when you look at the odds I don't see how many are going to get there. The game is not so easy as it used to be, even with all this new Yahoo Plus they are playing.<sup>226</sup> Me, I am just in it because it is better than what I was doing before. At least I can keep busy. I have something doing every day, and that makes me happy. It is very important to be happy. That is the most important thing in life.

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<sup>226</sup> 'Yahoo Plus' is Yahoo Yahoo blended with juju practices, to boost likelihood of success in an increasingly skeptical market.



*Therefore, I decide to seek for your help in transferring the money into your bank account while I will relocate to your country and settle down with you. I have my fathers death certificate and the account number which I will give you as soon as you indicated your interest to help me.*

Let me not deceive you. My friend complains about the cold weather where she is. You know in Nebraska they have a lot of snow. She says she is missing the heat in Naija. Man, I no lie to you, I am okay here. I don't want to expect anything. I have seen too much to go down that road. But, man, I wouldn't mind having the chance to miss the kind of heat we have.

*Thanking you alot in anticipation of your quick response. I will send you my photos in my next email.*

*Yours Sincerely*

I am Seun Adeshina. That is the man who is talking to you. I grew up here. My people hail from here. As you see me now, I am omo Ibadan, son of the soil. Though now I can go by different names. I can come from different places. It just depends on the story I have to tell.

## Second Coming

They have felled him to the ground  
Who announced home from abroad  
Wrestled to a standstill his champion  
Cousin the Killer of Cows. Yes,  
In all that common  
And swamp, pitched piecemeal by storks,  
No iquana during a decade of tongues  
Could throw or twist him round  
While he rallied the race and clan.  
Now like an alligator he lies  
Trussed up in a house without eyes  
And ears:  
    Bit of bamboo.  
Flung to laggard dogs by drowning  
Nearest of kin, has quite locked his jaws.

— John Pepper Clark, "The Leader"

This is the story of one who died and is no more dead.

The Peace and Reconciliation Commission was attacking the Socialists. They didn't want to generate sympathy for the union cause. They believed that because the socialists had lost support over null and void elections, their rivals would just sit back and watch. But there is a place beyond the barricades where even rivals must maintain solidarity. The socialists, however naïve, were still activists. How could he watch the like of the Committee destroy his comrades? At first it was still possible to remain aloof, until the people started blaming the union for these attacks. Until it became serious.

The Committee went after the one they called Chairman. Captured him in daylight right there in front of SUB. Stabbed him in the gut, puncturing the kidney, trying to kill him. There was no one to come and rescue. All his comrades were in hospital. But the one they called Orisha, chief among all rivals, he was there.

Orisha had cut his teeth on Abacha's lead. The very first time he encountered death, it came in the form of a martyr's head pouring itself empty into his lap. He and his good friend were at their first major anti-military rally. When the soldiers opened fire, they linked their arms tightly together. Orisha could never forget the force of impact that, moments later, pulled him down onto the street. Nor the angle at which the bullet had pierced his friend's throat and exited his skull. Nor the heavy sadness that stayed with him after that time. The earliest martyrs linger longest in the mind.

Though Chairman had stolen the power that was rightfully his own, Orisha could not let this brutality continue. He took up a megaphone. It had been long since he had done this himself. He went to mobilise the students for rescue. In those days, the people feared Orisha. When they saw him, they would say: *Dat guy got level*. Though shorter in stature than most, his reputation for the union still towered at that time. When the members of Committee saw him coming, with the people following behind, they were alarmed. They paused the assault, there in front of SUB, and they shouted out across the street. *No! This is not your*

*fight. Injustice was done to you!* At that moment the sun was high in the sky.

The season dry and not yet dusty. There was no shade, there in front of the SUB and in the street and on the other side. The sun was white in the high sky so that its brilliance flashed on the faces of the people and on the pieces silver in their pockets, as if Ogun had come to play.

The Committee side had guns. Orisha was unarmed, but Orisha was also unafraid. There were things he sometimes insisted he knew, experiences and protections he laid claim to. These things preserved him. As if on cue, the two sides entered into physical combat, fighting man to man. Even as the Committee was busy dragging a severely wounded Chairman by the foot, Orisha had isolated the leader. Spectators noticed this twist in the action, and they began to chant: *One on one is allowed! One on one is allowed!* It wasn't such a common sight, two leaders fighting while a third was being dragged to his death. Orisha acted quickly, took his opponent in head lock as soon as the wrestling began. One twist of the neck and he would be dead. The pinned man's people pulled out their guns. It became an open fight. In the midst of it, Chairman escaped. The unionists rushed him to safety.

At the end the Committee was furious with Orisha. He asked to know his offences. One, that he had assaulted their leader. Two, that he had taken their captive. They asked him, *What is your interest in this matter?* Orisha had earned back the respect of the Socialists. In later elections, they would deem

him the 'Capitalist with a Socialist Heart'. Chairman was in hospital for three months. At the end of it, he fell weeping at Orisha's feet. He would no longer stand as rival for the hearts of the people. He would no longer allow it come to blows like that. After all, they were students, Nigerian students, all of them, comrades to the end.

Like this, for some weeks, Orisha was unstoppable. Everywhere he went the people watched. He became high on top his own resurrection. He took his crowd and went out nights searching for cultists, flushing them out of the system, hall by hall. They chased the cult boys into the bush. His fame grew even more because no one expected him to remain. After everything that had happened in the months before, it would have been no shame to disappear for some time. But Orisha saw himself to be the general commanding an army. Can the general abandon the battlefield when the war is not yet won? Like this he was leading the efforts to purge the school.

But the more you try to cook the coconut leaf so it will be soft, the harder it becomes. Some two months later, on one particular night, Orisha received information that he was being hunted. Management had given the university security forces an order to stand down. The authorities would not protect him. He had become overconfident, believing everyone feared him because of his exploits and because of his jazz.

Orisha had moved his base of operations to Kuti Hall. Cult groups always use those small small halls, so his entourage now came in to take control. It was from there that he received the information: *They will hit you this night*. Orisha laughed when he heard it. He laughed at the hunt. He said, *Let them come*.

That is when Judas entered the story. The authorities had bribed a friend to betray him. A socialist. An old friend. He came to the room in Kuti to offer a situation report. After they met, he said he did not want to leave by himself. He said he was afraid, would Orisha escort him to the bus stop? Orisha agreed, saw him off in front of Queens.<sup>227</sup> Immediately the socialist left, Orisha saw a car flash its lights. Right after that, a phone lit up inside a passing bus. The girls at Queens Hall were shouting *Presido! Presido! Run!* Orisha did not run. He stood in the darkness in his long white gown, which flowed and rippled and concealed all manner of charms tied to the body underneath, and he placed his hands on his hips, and he shouted, *Let them come!*

Have you ever seen war? Have you ever seen bullets flying in the night? Have you ever seen green bullets flashing in the night? They drove by, spraying. Had you been standing on the other side of the street, you would have seen them drive by with their machine guns flooding charges into the night and through the white flowing robe of a man who remained as he stood.

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<sup>227</sup> An all-female dorm near the main gate of UI.

They switched to pump action. Close range. And Orisha fell. Later, he would say that at a point everything became faint. His hearing became dull. *Thud, thud*, the blasts of the attack were faint in his ears. The boys surrounded him. They used machetes, vigorously, but the blades refused to penetrate. His white robe ripped to ribbons, but his body would not tear. One boy lifted a stone block and brought it pounding down upon Orisha's head, its force the last thing he remembered.

Kuti sent reinforcements. It became a full-blown war. Three members died. Orisha's men carried him into a car. He told them to transport him to Benin. They left immediately. That's when the students wrote the press release about his death. It explained that there was no body, but that those who saw the scene of the hit knew he could not have survived.

Orisha went to Benin for fortification. The charms he was using had weakened. He had been having sex during his lover's menstruation, and so the jazz had lost its potency. All those bullets and not a single one penetrated his flesh. But they left red marks that were hot, pepperish. Proof that the charms were wearing off. If one of the attackers had carried antidote, then Orisha would have certainly died. So he went to Benin to renew his voodoo.

After the fortification, Orisha took extra precautions. He borrowed his daddy's bullet-proof. He was nervous. He knew there would be major war on campus.

He took the bullet-proof and he returned. Immediately they saw him, a ghost and a legend and a hero. They all believed he was dead. His own mother was about holding service. The students had come in masses for candlelight procession. They were ready to wear black and carry light. They had been angry. They had broken into the campus security office and destroyed everything inside. They had broken into the VC's house and kidnapped him for the night, tied him to a chair on the roof of Kuti Hall, mocked him well. At the same time, they were hunting cultists, weakening cultists, and in the setting the fear of the union grew.

Orisha's men had told him not to come. They felt the cultists would hit again. But Orisha was fortified, and beyond that he was the general of an army. How could he abandon them at their most crucial chance for ultimate success? He came in convoy from Benin. Huge convoy, well guarded. He came to do revival of the union. He started going from hall to hall. Within hours everyone had heard the story. He had only to appear and lift his shirt, to show himself intact. He need not say a word. At the end of the parade he only had this much to say:  
*The union is stronger than the cults.*



## Daughters of Jezebel

I know life is a dance  
I know I must dance  
I know I must move with the dance  
I know I'm the new masquerade  
I know it is my chance  
Let me do my dance  
Let me move with the dance  
I know life is a dance  
I know it is a chance  
Let me do my dance  
Let me take my chance.

– Osonye Tess Onwueme, *Tell it to Women: An Epic Drama for Women*

She would have liked to tell her story. The other day her neighbour was tuning her transistor radio and this one overheard a white woman who entered Congo to interview the rape victims. Video them one by one. Made a film out of it and now she's famous on the radio.<sup>228</sup> She, too, would like to explain some things about her life and have people over there pay dollars to listen and draw tears and shake their heads. She would say this life is just like watching an American film. Action film. Hollywood. Only the pirated one from China that spoils easily, and Nepa down just when the good man wants to win.

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<sup>228</sup> Reference to Lisa Jackson, producer and director of the recent influential documentary *The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo* (2008).

She still thinks about the monkeys back home, banded at the bottom of the street where she stayed.<sup>229</sup> Monkeys and parrots in big cages. Back then she believed these monkeys had it easier than the people who lived down the way from them. Time was she wouldn't mind to be watched and fed and protected day by day. Barrow of bananas the same time every evening. To live peaceful and unknowing in the shadow of important people working. Fine trade-off for what some would call captivity.

She had one white friend from there. Susan. From a place called Calgary. Very nice white lady with a funny fast walk, she stayed almost one year watching and recording exactly how these monkeys arranged themselves in their compound.<sup>230</sup> When she left finally she threw a party for all the friends she had made. Plenty of Star and Malta to go around. Promised to be calling and writing, but within a month or two the news from her side had dried to a trickle, and soon it seemed that Susan had all but forgotten her year in Africa. More white lies.

Last week his mum called her. Network was bad but she got the message. News that he was shot in the chest and the leg. They took the body to the police station. He died Monday.

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<sup>229</sup> The Calabar-based site of captive drill monkey who are cared for through conservation project that was founded by two Americans who discovered the plight of these most endangered of primates while traveling through Nigeria in the 1970s.

<sup>230</sup> 'Arrange themselves' is a euphemism for mating.

Most times if they want to kill anybody in school they do it during exam. That is how it was for him. More than once. She remembered the morning he called her and told her not to show face for that school. She asked why. He said they were killing that day. But she had to go. She had to write her exam. She noticed his absence, and for many months, nothing from his side. Later, he told her how one lecturer tried to help him. Wanted to examine him privately, help him to graduate on time. They ran the lecturer down and shot him. They then stabbed the boy in the field. He spent six months in hospital. He had an extra year. She knew then that it was only time before they killed him finally. She got the call from his mum. The old woman said she felt nothing. He was a bad son. She was grateful he can no more trouble her. But this one did not know what she was feeling, whether she would go for the burial or stay far away again.

She was remembering a friend she knew from her final year of secondary school. This girl was very, very cute but not very experienced. She was going out with one of them, but something happened and they broke up. She was staying at the guy's house in Barrika.<sup>231</sup> She couldn't pack her things. She couldn't go. He had all her money. She was just indoors. All of the guy's friends, they used to come to the house to sleep with her. All of them. So many ... she lost count. She couldn't say no. There was one day a friend came to her place. He wanted to go and collect his things. He met her there. Now, she was pregnant. Three months pregnant. He said, *Come, what is wrong with you?* She was watching TV. She said, *Let's go inside and you do your own so I can be free.* He said,

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<sup>231</sup> A residential neighbourhood near UI.

*Tola, you are looking pale, come I will take you to hospital.* So he took her to the hospital. She couldn't keep the baby. Who was the father of the baby? They had to do abortion. Now she still remained at the guy's house. He was doing all sort of things to her. If they fight, he would make her be naked. He would strip her and make her sit outside in the yard.

But this girl, the girl of this story, if it were *her* there, nothing doing, bare-fleshed in the yard, the neighbours would have wounds to count.

*One.* There was one particular guy she loved. When he left her like that, well then there were *two*. An Eiye boy. At the same time, one Aye guy. Actually she was going out with four boys in school at that time, and they were all in different factions. Eiye, Aye, Pyrates, and Buccaneers. She was so smart she dated all of them at the same time. None of them knew where she lived. She never told them where. She used to go and visit them separately.

Aye boy invited her to one party. It was a cult party, of course. There she was raped by *six* different guys. Friends of his. He wanted to punish her. He loved her so much and he heard that his friends had slept with her. They used GSM to send video of it all around school. So he had them rape her. She then called Eiye guy. Eiye organised his boys to follow her back to her house. Then they told her to take them to Aye's place. They all went. Eiye confronted Aye. There was a fight. Aye's boys shot two of them. Eiye disappeared.

She left Eiye. She left Aye. She got a house where Bucca boys were staying. Buccaneers and Eiye don't see face to face, they can't go near each other. The Buccaneers, they are decent boys. Fine boys, they call them. She wanted something safe. So she was staying with them and at the same time she started going out with *one* neutral guy. He worked in Lagos. She told all of the others off. She was just waiting for the day when she could leave school.

At the Bucca house, this girl, she took up smoking. She smoked weed, cigarettes, and cigarettes mixed with weed. They took her Mary Jane and poisoned her food, the others in the house. She was cooking and they put weed into the rice. When she was drugged well, there was first *one*. Then, *two*. *Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen. Fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen. Seventeen* to rape her.

*Seventeen* wet and red cocks.

*Eight* blades in her back.

*Ten* gashes in her body.

And *one* bullet in the flesh above her knee.

She has heard all the stories of the Daughters of Jezebel. And the Pink Ladies. The Black Bras. All sorts. People say they are lesbians. Witches. That they seduce girls. Terrorise boys. There can be four girls coming together in a hall to now overwhelm a man, force him to do all sorts. They are aristo girls. Big girls.

Always linked to one man somewhere. Powerful men with charm. They have boys around them. Boys at initiation. Boys to do their bidding. Sometimes, boys to do their killing.

At a point she was wondering everyday how she might join the Jezebels. But now, since the phone call, most things are falling away from her mind. She wonders mainly about the body at the police station. Was the hole in his leg, his leg soon to be underground, was this hole the long lost twin to the juju in her thigh? She thought about how her people were twin killers before white Mary came to stay.<sup>232</sup> Mary, who gathered up the matching children, and dressed them in identical gowns, and kept them safe in her compound, and fed them on the hours.

Once her twin bullet was buried, would she now escape with no one seeing, slip out the gate and fade into what little bush is left? Could the credits then roll?

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<sup>232</sup> Reference to Mary Slessor, the Scottish Missionary who lived in the eastern region of Calabar in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Slessor championed a campaign against the practice of infanticide of twins. She also became the first female magistrate in the British Empire, and her likeness is featured on the Clydesdale Bank £10 note (Mary Slessor Foundation 2009).

## Water for the President

He waits, to this day, in the bush for the hunter or any human being who comes across his path. He waits to avenge his wife and her beautiful egg.

– Ken Saro-Wiwa, “The Python’s Eggs”

Before I proceed, Warm and Revolutionary greetings to all Airlords in the Sky.

And now, story story.

Roads and pipelines. Do you read the dailies? Did you read about the soldiers on their way home from Sudan? They were all happy to be alive, looking forward to chop amala again, to be finally done with their peacekeeping wahala. They met death on a Nigerian road. Collided with a tanker in the night. The entire unit wiped away.<sup>233</sup> These are the hungry roads we have in Africa. They crave so much libation. It is just God.

Like me, as you see me now, I am like a ghost, a spirit, a lucky devil. So many brushes with death. I used to make mad runs on the Express. Ibadan to Lagos and back again in a day. It is the kind of place where you find shaded police harvesting twenty Naira notes from every third conductor. Trees growing out of

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<sup>233</sup> This is a true story that happened in May of 2008 while I was in Nigeria (Adinoyi 2008).

holes in the road. The kind of place where you can sit twelve, even twenty hours in a go-slow and never know why. I used to make the trip a lot, and I would go by bus. Now I will insist even my distant friend take taxi. I will pay his fare if he is stubborn. That day the bus flipped two or three times before landing in the swamp. Its load was too much, the balance of weight collapsed when the driver narrowly missed the road. The driver was just stressing himself, trying to avoid the checkpoints.

It happened near Redeemed City.<sup>234</sup> We flooded with mud. My head was underwater, upside down. I really don't remember. Somehow I got out through the window. I was in the middle of the seat, two people on either side. Somehow I got out. The bags of rice loaded onto the bus had split open and poured themselves onto the wet earth. I remember rising to standing and then just standing, looking at the small mountains of rice, and at the same time I could feel the grains brushing my feet, and it felt strange that I could not connect the two. It was like I forgot what was rice. I was just staring and trying to understand. Then a woman came with nylon to save handfuls, and like that I came back alive and looked down to my own hands. I saw that the rice was all around my feet, that I had lost my shoes inside the bus. My shoes, my wallet. I could not see the other passengers. Perhaps some of them were taken away by good people.<sup>235</sup> Maybe not. I really don't know. I just wanted to get away from

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<sup>234</sup> A massive revival camp site for the Redeemed Church; it occupies a vast stretch of land adjacent to the highway, about midway between Lagos and Ibadan.

<sup>235</sup> With no emergency rescue infrastructure available, car accident victims generally have to rely on good Samaritans to help them reach medical aid.



there. At the camp they let us use their showers. So much mud. I was covered completely in mud. I took my time to wash well, filling several buckets and scrubbing my clothes as I wore them. But I could not get the black out of my jeans. I had to abandon the whole thing. I crossed Express as I was and bought slippers from one woman like that. I waited by the road. The high sun was like an iron pressing my body, evaporating the afternoon from my mind. Eventually I was able to call another bus. I went back home. I had two two bottles of Star, and I slept off. This was the last time I took Lagos road like that.

Se you see wetin I mean? I done face plenty things. But me? I no fit die.<sup>236</sup> It is the same as per the setting of my youth. I waited for my time to come, and then I left on time. No wahala. I turned my back on that road and I travelled for the creeks of my coming up. When we were done at uni, all of us in my squad abandoned bush in different ways. The family hammer moved to Lagos.<sup>237</sup> He was the third number three I had known with us in my time. Rumour spread that he was running armed robbery operations, first on Express and later out at Ikoyi. In the setting there are so many rumours. But this guy, though he was a killer, his heart was never fully in it. You know within the house it is the hit man who gets the best treatment. A dirty hit man does not have to pay accommodation. Doesn't have to worry about food. That's a serious incentive for joining. Food is a serious business in this country.

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<sup>236</sup> Do you see what I mean? I've faced many things. But me? I can't die.

<sup>237</sup> The 'hammer' is the hit man.

If I had a million tomorrow, do you know what I would do? I would open a place where the people could come in and get a meal. Some rice, some stew. Many of us are living on less than half a dollar per day. That's like 100 Naira. 30 Naira will buy you amala. No meat. You can buy pure water, 5 Naira. Or else you drink the water they offer you at the restaurant, the well water. You still have 65 or 70. At least you, yourself, can eat twice in a day. Not to satisfaction, but at least eat so you can get by. Except your life is not all about food. That money is going to be channelled somewhere else. Maybe out of what you have, after you take care of the one or two kids and the business you are trying to run, then maybe you have 20 Naira left to eat with. And of course this idea of a dollar a day, it is only a number. It won't always work like that. Some days you won't have anything, and then somehow you get something to last you a few days. You get the idea. The poverty in the country. Nigeria is a rich nation, but the poverty for the people is too great. And still you have those on the other side. There's one man. He has sixty houses in Ibadan. Sixty. And it's not as if he's renting them out. Just for him. Can he sleep on sixty beds?

That was our hammer's own reason, his reason for joining. Simple. Food. He wanted the feeling of security, of trusting that your belly will be full everyday. He never announced this, but we who knew him well understood the motivation. We could see the absence of hatred in his face, could see his distaste for violence even as he raised his axe. It was not in his person. He was very fortunate, anyway. Most times nothing was required of him but to wait, to protect the

armoury, to broadcast our power. We had some peace during those years, so for him it was more like a job. Like a job, and at the same time like a family. At the end of it he graduated the setting and, yes, he moved to Lagos, but he also resigned his weapons. Last time I heard he had one or two things going. He's trading in cattle with his brother from the North. He's a good businessman.

In my case, I did not want to go to Lagos. I did not want the life of a banker or a dealer. I returned to the land where I buried my mother. I returned to the South South.<sup>238</sup> There are people in the North who are dying of thirst, simply because there is no water. The lake is disappearing. It is a desert land. There is nothing green in that world. Where I come from, there too we are thirsty, though we have too many trees to count. Trees on fire.<sup>239</sup>

There was a time in my last year that I had my opportunity of joining NANS. Then the setting was well-involved. Our boys were running for office. My position was not too powerful – just UI observer – but still I was there with them. One uni in Niger Delta invited us to come and do solidarity demo against the government. I was sure to join that committee to attend. The school was having problems with its water. Everything was tainted. There was nothing safe to use for cooking, bathing, not to talk of drinking. I was happy. I could see my chance

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<sup>238</sup> Geographic term for the Niger Delta region that is flanked by the South West, South East, and so on.

<sup>239</sup> The Niger Delta's natural gas flares, products of irresponsible oil drilling, have burned continuously for decades. The flares release massive amounts of carbon and toxins, and they hemorrhage millions of dollars *a day* in potential revenue for a state that lacks the infrastructure to trap the gas. Even more than oil, this is, to me, the ultimate metaphor of postcolonial Nigerian tragedy, as well as of our collective plight.

to serve in politics, to change the situation back home. We went in convoy. We drew a very large crowd. We began to protest. We were aiming to riot, but we then left before the issue was resolved. I was confused. It was only later I learned that government had paid off the exco. NANS is not as strong as it used to be, but NANS is still NANS. Everybody respects the violent nature of the student movement. Everybody in power wants to prevent them from getting to the streets. The politicians in the country pocket the student leaders.<sup>240</sup> I don't know why this surprised me. I think because I really felt for the students there. I wanted to resolve the water issue for them. Of course we all did, we all wanted that, but everybody has a price. When that thing happened, it was then I became an activist. I looked around myself and I didn't see anybody fighting again. In Ibadan where I schooled, everyone now speaks of democracy. They say at least nobody is repressing them anymore. There is no common struggle again. Democracy is achieved. People are not suspicious.

It is not that I am angry, just that I know better. In my part of the country there is war. What they have now is essentially a military. They can invade the Nigerian navy. They can defeat the Nigerian navy. They can declare war, kill hundreds of soldiers. What is happening now is mobilisation against the entire federal government. Not just the creeks anymore, but the entire region. The thing is big. They are capable of overthrowing the federal government. They have potential allies in the East. And they have the benefit of knowing the mistakes that were

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<sup>240</sup> These last two sentences are taken from an interview 'transcript' that is included as Appendix G, below.

made in Biafra. They are like marines. If they continue, the government would have only one resort: extermination. Back then this would have been possible, but they cannot do it now. Now that we have democracy. The nation would rise up against it. The international community would condemn it. And even if they were to fly in and drop bombs they would not get to the heart, because these men live in the bush, in the swamps. Se you get? They are no more interested in reform. They are becoming secessionist. And they have numbers.

During the war in Sierra Leone the rebels had names like Mosquito and Terminator. This is how they got their strength, from the screen. I do not know the kinds of film they are showing in the creeks, but I remember one story from the dailies. I cut it out of the paper. I have it in my mind and I have it in my wallet. It tells how the militants met with Nigerian senators in the heart of the creeks. This is what it says about their leader:

*[He] had a pistol in his left hand and a Thuraya [satellite] phone on the right, with red cloths tied round his head... He said only the unconditional release of the MEND leader...could bring about a lasting peace to the region... As he spoke, guns and dynamite boomed intermittently. He was sandwiched by hordes of militants who were masked. The MEND leader presented a big bullet and a brownish water in a small transparent bottle...for onward delivery to Yar'Adua, stressing that the President must drink the water to appreciate the plight of the Niger Deltans.<sup>241</sup>*

A friend at uni once showed me a video on his computer. We sat on his mattress with the laptop between us on the bed. The screen was cracked so a thick black rip cut the picture in half. The film was about the great secret, the force of attraction. It explained the laws of the universe and physics, how everything

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<sup>241</sup> See Olaniyi (2007).

happens according to what we think and what we want. Over and over again these people have success. One poor man wrote 100,000 on a dollar bill, and within a year he had earned it. A woman cured her cancer in only three months.<sup>242</sup> When it was finished, my friend and I, we just lay back on the bed and started dreaming. He already has his job with Glo.<sup>243</sup> And me? My dream is bigger than his own. Since that time we saw the film I have been praying fervently, practicing the laws as they were revealed to us. I hold the newspaper clip in front of my eyes before I sleep. I picture in my mind the gifts those men sent to Yar'Adua. The bullet and the muddy water. I picture him receiving them, and the tears coming to his eyes. I feel perfect happiness. I picture the entire region at peace, disarmed, the fish and the farms restored. I believe these things will happen. I believe hearts will be turned. In this life, we all have something to regret, something to renounce. We should help each other do this.

People say if you give a mouse a cookie he will ask for a glass of milk. It is true that some of the kidnapers are using their ransom to line their own bellies. That is what the stories say, and I cannot refute them. I do not have any excuses on top that thing. Only that is the way their setting is. I have learned not to judge these things. Some are becoming governors of those creeks, and some are becoming bunkering kings. But that is not the whole truth. No one knows the truth except he who has walked that path. The boys I schooled with years back,

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<sup>242</sup> I somehow managed to evade any encounter with the international hit film *The Secret* until I went to Nigeria.

<sup>243</sup> Glo is Nigeria's own cellular telecommunications company.

before I travelled out, they are waiting for me in the swamps. It is not for food that I, myself, have come to join them. It is for water. Water for the President.

## Underground

There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel; there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of man; there is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?

– Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*

*Only for your ears:*

At the top of Olumo Rock,<sup>244</sup> once you have climbed the steep ancient route from which no one has ever fallen, there is a small square piece of stone. A bandage – one foot by one foot – it seals a singular wound. A delegation of scientists travel to Abeokuta, the ancient Yoruba town north of Lagos. The travellers are from another land. They come not once, but three times, to ask the Oba for permission to drill into the rock, sacred to the Yoruba people. They are convinced they will find gold. At last he concedes, for a fee, and they begin their work. The day of the drilling. Just one foot deep and the rock begins to ooze water, blood, and pus. The scientists are stricken blind. Desperate, they consult

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<sup>244</sup> Olumo Rock is the historic landmark of the ancient city of Abeokuta. The Egba people, who would found the city, took refuge in this rock during inter-tribal wars. It used to be a freely accessible, public monument and spiritual destination for some. Now it is fenced off, 'maintained' by a private company that charges admission prices that are dear for foreign visitors, not to talk of local peoples. In the past, porters helped to carry visitors who were not able to climb the rocks and reach the view on top. Now, ironically, an elevator has been constructed alongside the Rock, delivering greater ease accessibility to the few tourists who come but at a cost that is prohibitive to indigenous devotees.



the oracle. He tells them they must return to whence they came. And tell the truth.<sup>245</sup>

*They came to a few of us and asked if we were ready to become an army. They said we should attend a meeting. An underground meeting. They said if any one of us was not interested, then the plan would be scrapped. We came and we listened. We saw reason. Every one of us was interested. The plan would carry on.*

Obasanjo now lives alone, with none of his wives, in a mansion on the other side of Abeokuta. Looking up, it is as if his home stretches a mile across the most beautiful vista in the city. Mr Ayokunle Ajayi, a young banker whose people hail from here, often sets out at dusk to drive his fairly new, air conditioned Toyota Corolla up into those hills, as near the villa as security will allow him, where he imagines the day when he too will own a home in proximity to these wonders of the wealthy. Not Obasanjo's style, mind you. He would never even want to set his dreams on top that level. Like any average Nigerian man on the street, he has no respect left for the General of Democracy. But Mr Ajayi, the banker, is no longer much interested, anyway, at least not enough so as to linger in anger over incidents from the past. He has his mind on how he will model his someday home. He will use African aesthetics, masks and staffs for the décor, richly varnished mahogany furniture. He has his mind on the girl who will live there with him, but who for the time being will not say yes or no. The girl who persists in smiling invitingly from where she sits behind her desk, her adjacent desk,

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<sup>245</sup> This story was told to me by a man who guided my tour of Olumo Rock.

when it is after hours and ties are loosened, when computer hard drives jam pop tunes through the final figures of the day. That is when she smiles as if to call him near, only later to disappoint him at the club with those church hugs that make him feel a boy again, the coy sidelong embraces he has come to dread. Perhaps he will drop by on her after his drive. Too late to be appropriate, he will nonetheless invent a decent line, offer to fill her water barrel or buy fuel for her gen. Perhaps he will catch her in her sleeping wrapper, and Nepa down, and... At the end of the climbing road, where the smooth new pavement ends suddenly, Ajayi brakes and idles then turns off the engine, cuts the headlights, releases his seatbelt a moment, slides low into the cool vinyl. He closes his eyes. He is dreaming.

*The whole thing looked big to me. I was not sure. But the role I had played in the struggle, all of that... they had this special confidence in me. Because I was able to convince people to come on board. And people feared me. So the information was managed on my end. I never spoke to anyone about it. Never. My job was to recruit students. How did I convince them? By nature. Naturally, I have persuasive skill. And then the magic formula is credibility. I would approach someone and they would think, Wow he wants to talk to me, personally. I was a big fish then.*

The Yoruba have one saying: Ala go. Dreams are stupid. The dreams one have will forever be chameleons. Mr Ajayi watches the sun fading behind the mansion's silhouette. Golden plaster. He tries to remember the way it was in childhood. No details of dream stories come to mind, but he senses light, easy places born of heavy sleeping, the sort one has after a day of carrying cassava to

the road for sale. Dreams like white sugar. But in time, in no time at all, they became more of raw cane, the waking kind of dream that one must suck and gnaw for some sweetness. Dreams of growing bigger, of leaving for the far away, of standing large in special stance among a gathering crowd.

*One thing I've learned is that people always crave for adventure. The urge to do the forbidden. What prevents us? Fear. Fear of a society without limits. Fear of anarchy. But it is society that creates limits. How much control you have over your own self depends on how solid your reason is. If you ask me now, do I want to fight a war? I will say no, because I know there is nothing heroic about war. Nothing poetic. I have seen it and I know. But then I was a kid. All my life there had been rules. Here was my chance to do the forbidden.*

Mr Ajayi's thoughts return to last Tuesday. He had arrived at work to discover his future wife discreetly dabbing at her mascara. She would not tell him why when he pressed, but he suspected something about the empty desk in financial services. In his four years with the bank, the accountant Dotun had never before missed a day of work. Never raised his voice in anger. Never failed to buy a round at happy hour. Everyone is exceptionally fond of Dot, except perhaps for Mr Ajayi, who suspects his love holds a secret crush for this number one number cruncher. Dot is always so infuriatingly well-dressed, so quick to smile. He can pull off even an afro cut, a modest afro, with some style. Imagine a man who can wear afro to his bank job and be the better for it? A mid-morning staff meeting confirmed the worst. Dot has abandoned ship. Now he is in pursuit of the four million US dollars he was apparently stuffing under a Swiss mattress all year

long.

*I understood that psychology. When I was recruiting I didn't go for contented people. Contented people will not fight. I would look out for someone who would do it for the fun of it. Not those involved in violence. Violent people will not go to war. They have already seen it. It was easy to recruit, actually. I was the first of us to meet the target figure I had been given. Some of them came in because they just wanted to be called comrade. They said, If I do this will you call me comrade from now on?*

Mr Ajayi pictures Dot at the helm of a ship on the high seas. A fugitive. A woolen scarf tossed around his neck. Dot, alone, sailing into a true blue sky, his face moist with spray. He is like Tortoise of the moonlight tales. He has slipped past all the honest beasts. He has used them well. Mr Ajayi does not know whether to feel admiration, or scorn, or the envy that tastes of brine. He and Dot sat the same bank exam. They passed probation together. They flirted with the same girls. Dot is the measure of his own advancement. Always one step ahead, and therefore at once resented and indispensable. Since mid-morning Tuesday, Mr Ajayi has noticed a curious and persistent hollow feeling of lightness in his body. The sensation circulates continuously through his belly and chest but has a tendency of clotting in the centre of his windpipe. Unsure of what to do again, he has thrown himself into the daily grind.

*We had to become soldiers. Some of us were sent to training camps. I went to a camp in Liberia and one in Lybia. No passports. They just got us there and they got us back. Everything underground. They didn't tell us where the money came from. We didn't know. It was basic*

*military training. Nothing fancy. You learn how to organise. You learn basic combat skills. You learn how to shoot. The student movement became a secret army. A revolutionary army. Very few people know what the real plan was. The authorities suspected something. They were watching us. They were still arresting us. After Abacha's death, NANS was invited to discuss with government concerning purported coup plotters. We were shown secret video clips. The video showed Obasanjo discussing with the plotters. They were all there. But to this day they do not know what really happened, what we were planning for.*

Hopeless in their pursuit of him, the police have detained Dot's parents. Nigerian police have a special disdain for bank boys, and they have learned from experience that the best way to apprehend a white collar thief is to torture the mother who weaned him. Of course no one is above suspicion. Better never to mention anything. No gist on top this story. All colleagues remain mute. See no, hear no, speak no evil. Eyes and ears and mouths in every corner. Best to clean up the smudges round your eyes at once. Get back to work.

Mr Ajayi followed this protocol to the T, and yet on Wednesday he was called in for questioning by the regional branch manager. The makeshift interrogation office was a few degrees cooler than the rest of the building. Air con hummed beneath their conversation. Mr Ajayi felt refreshed as he learned he had been given number three priority on the list of possible accomplices to Dotun's crime. When he asked what grounds there were for granting him such a high place in the queue, he was told that all of this was mere formality. He had been close to Dotun. They had been friends from the beginning. But surely Dotun had no shortage of friends in this branch? After all, it was Dotun who had founded the

company club, the very same club where this manager had so often been seen courting lap dances in the VIP lounge. Mr Ajayi kept this last detail to himself. At interview's end he was extended a handshake, told not to worry about anything at all. And he should not leave the city for now. Would he be so good as to show the number four suspect in?

*Up to 40,000 of us received military training, and the bulk of that number was from the student movement. But almost all of them thought the training was for the usual work of the struggle. Finally they were learning how to fight back at the police during demonstrations. Learning how to defend themselves. And then of course when you go through a military training, the bond it creates is very strong. We all respected the secrecy. The authorities never learned what was really going on. To this day. Of the students who knew the real reason for our preparations, those who were going to be part of the squad that carried it out, the number was maybe four.*

Mr Ajayi returned to his desk and took a moment to rest his head cocked against his palm. Now he is in his car resting his eyes and relaxing his body against the dampening vinyl of the seat. He is humming beneath his breath. He thinks of his father who used to sing while seasoning beef. He would sing the old anthems from the time of national freedom, or from the time of civil war. He knew all the songs of the struggle, but Mr Ajayi's father had been a peace loving man. He was always catching harmless snakes and releasing them to safety. His father had killed many pythons in his day, to be sure, but he knew enough of the bush to leave the gentle ones alone. He would show the snakes first to his son to stroke. The animals always lounged peacefully in his father's hands. Mr Ajayi's boyhood self had marvelled at the soft contentment of these creatures, so fast at

ease with their own capture.

*The plan was to kill the president. Kill Abacha. Overthrow the government. A revolution. A revolution, not a coup. Immediately we would have a sovereign national conference. Only after that would we hold democratic elections. There would have been no sense in rushing into elections. You know the organisations from the East who were part of the plan, when they came to us they said that we should work together to get rid of Abacha, and then we should go our separate ways. They wanted secession. So many there still want secession, so much so that I wonder how this Niger Delta something will play out. We said no to them. No. If we divided like that the region would become very weak. But we knew there would be a lot of these issues to work through. So we planned to hold a conference, and to give it plenty of time. Only after the various players had a chance to talk through the issues, then candidates would emerge and we would have an election. In the meantime, we would spend a lot of effort re-orientating the people. Bringing them out of the military mindset. The student movement understands about national unity. Patriotism. Altruism. We would take time to inculcate those values in the people.*

Mr Ajayi wonders if he will catch snakes to show his own son. It has been long since he last saw one at all. They are nearly banished from the city of cars and concrete blocks and Christians. He wonders if there will be any gentle ones left for his son to know. And when he is there in the kitchen with his future wife, and he is frying dodo the way his mother knew how,<sup>246</sup> will Mr Ajayi instinctively pull from his memory the sounds of the struggles of his life? He reaches now into his mind for a rehearsal and searches out the power words of his youth. They come suddenly, breaking the crust in his throat, flooding sound into his fairly new car. The chant crescendos into anger he had not expected. It is anger at not being

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<sup>246</sup> Dodo is fried plantain.

asked to keep the secret, to share in the danger, to divvy the spoils. Dot should not have acted alone. Human beings were never meant to act alone. Where have all the comrades gone? The Oracle had disappeared. Disappeared like so much cassava harvest he has dug and carried on his own head, but now it is bound for another man's market share.

*It was a pity that Abacha had to die on us. I was selected to be one of the elite squad that carried out the plan. I wanted to do it. We all wanted it. I had become a soldier. I wanted to die doing it. I wanted to become a martyr. When I heard the news that Abacha had died, my friends thought I was weeping because I was happy. Those were not tears of gratitude.*

Mr Ajayi opens his eyes into silence. Old songs and snakes and comrades vanish from his mind. In this his world, Orisha has retreated under the swamps. Obasanjo's mansion is what remains, darker than all the other shadows, more grand than Olumo Rock itself. It is Thursday night, and late, and tomorrow there is work. He shifts his body higher against his seat. He is not a tall man, but he is becoming a comfortable man, on the road to modest wealth. Soon, he will afford a driver. They will transfer him to a branch in Lagos, and he will relax in the back of the car as another man manages the traffic. There is comfort in this thought. Mr Ajayi coasts down the hill and weaves deftly round the potholes of the empty night time city. He checks his wristwatch, indiglo. 10:30 in the night. He pulls in front of the compound and switches off his headlights.

There is no place in the new Nigeria for worrying and wondering as he has this



night. Times have changed for Mr Ajayi. He will relax into the chilled handshakes of his interrogators. He will forget about the truths he has been keeping like so many paper clippings stuffed in cupboards. He will simply make himself a new man as many times as is required. He will study management in England and, on returning, he will make one particular girl his bride. She will be a professional woman, emancipated and strong, eager to contribute actively to the building of their lives. He cuts his engine and opens the boot, pulling out diesel for the gen. She will keep her own account at the bank, his wife. And drive her own car. He pauses by the shadowed gate and rehearses the line he will use to call her down. She will own her own degree from a school in London or in Houston. She will travel the world in her own right, but she will always return. At heart, she will always remain here. African. African like Osun, goddess of the lake shrine, bringer of children, and peace, and answers to prayers. And happiness. As Nepa brings the light. Great happiness.

*Greatest Uites!*

*Great!*

*Greatest Uites!*

*Great!*

*Greatest Gbosa!*

*Gbosa.*

*Greatest Gbi!*

*Gbi.*

*Greatest GbaGa!*

*GbaGa.*

*Aluta Continua.*

*Victoria Asata!*<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> This is a call and response chant commonly used to warm up the crowd in student union politics at UI. Gbosa, gbi, and gba gba are percussive sounds meant to invoke hitting or smacking, sounds of riot and struggle.

**Bonus Track**<sup>248</sup>

What you hear is not my voice ...  
But my grandfather always said, "Why put the ocean in a coconut?"

— Chris Abani, *Song for Night*

Ok. The conclusion aspect of the story I gave you earlier. The guy Dayo, friend to my junior sister, the one Deji murdered, well I now discovered he did not die. I never knew. He called me the other day from London side. Jesus knows how he got my number.

Then, something happened in school, a few weeks back when I went to collect my results. You know I am now a student for OSU, where they have the football field and they do the killing there, in the open. The place is more notorious now than UI was even at its height. But at the same time it is easier for me. They have more of us, and the chicks are known to party hard. Even at UI, every time there is a show happening the boys are just lining up waiting for OSU girls to come around. So it is easier for you here if you are the kind who likes the gist but doesn't want the heat. The boys just move on if you say no.

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<sup>248</sup> This story is an adaptation of a brief 'update' interview that a friend recorded solo for me after I left Nigeria. Another mutual friend traveled to the US with my Dictaphone and this 'bonus track'. The voice of my friend arrived like the ocean in a coconut, a reminder that the stories continue far beyond the 'gist' re-presented here.

So some things have happened at school. They kidnapped my HOD's wife. And they shot a girl. A very innocent girl. And, what else, what else happened? Let me think. And... Last week, yeah, last week, last week, they had a fight. Cult members. This time around it was the Eiye Cult and the Buccaneers. They were fighting over some stupid title or something. Last time I checked the scores it was eighteen vs. thirteen. They killed like eighteen / thirteen. And they shot one of our students when he went for clearance. People say he's an ex-guy. Right now in school, school is really hot. If you're going for school, you just have to be tight and everything.

Well I guess that is the end of my story. I really don't have much to say. That is why I have been delaying telling you. Cause there's nothing much happening in school. Sincerely, I won't lie to you. But when next gbege gas, I go gist you well.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> 'When next gbege gas' is like saying 'when there is war again'.

## Epilogue

### Reflections on Race/ism and Representation

*I grow up hearing stories about cars hitting Africans.*

As a fetus I am living in my mother in Ouagadougou. One day she is driving in town and hits a boy on a bicycle. He flips high in the air and over the boot. He then stumbles to his feet, as she tells it, to the tune of passers-by crowding around, shouting, not at Mum perched upon her glass enclosed and elevated seat, but at the audacity of the boy who would glide across her path. Distressed, she seeks help in the nearby French embassy, where she is told by a male official that it had been very wrong and dangerous for her to stop the car; as a pregnant woman she should not take chances with angry mobs. Mum thinks this ridiculous. (Indeed, she often tells this story in the genre of nationalist anecdotes, in illustration of what she deems 'typical French' callousness). In her view, there are few places in the world where people are as friendly, kind, and non-threatening as Burkina Faso. She pulls herself together, abandons the embassy, collects the boy's details, and drives home. My father later sees to it that his family is compensated.

In another story it is night time. Mum again, driving alone. I cannot remember if it is Tanzania or Uganda. It is that vast stretch of beautiful, mythical East Africa – spacious shades of lilac and green cradling strange animals. My family lived

there before I was born, when it was, they say, a genuine 'hardship tour of duty,' before there were cheap tourist flights with safari packages. (When Bill Clinton visited Africa in 1998 he was the first US President to do so since Teddy Roosevelt had gone to bag big game). Mum is driving alone because Dad is on temporary duty somewhere else. I don't know where my brother or my sister is. In my story-memory, Mum is most definitely alone when an African jumps, gazelle-like, into the headlights. A flash of light across his eyes as the car and the African collide, and then he disappears. Mum is left gripping the steering wheel and scanning, uselessly, the night.

My grandmother's daughter is married to a white South African. She is a spirited woman. She drives her car on roads near townships she has been told to avoid. One time it is evening. She approaches a group of men blocking the road. She sees they have guns. She slams the accelerator. In the race home, an unexpected speed bump. She will chat about it later, back at home, over drinks to soothe the nerves. The worried shrieks and wringing limbs of those who love her will fall finally into laughter as adrenalin fades. Her neighbour followed the same route. He has come by to tell the tale. He reassures her. Don't worry; he hit the same speed bump before her. Perhaps he killed it, but she can rest assured of her innocence in this matter. By the time her car rolled over the body, it was already dead.

*I grow up overhearing stories about Africans hitting cars.*

It wasn't until the late 1990s that I began to hear a few secret family memories of Uganda in the 1970s. Fragments turned fictions in my imagination. I see a checkpoint. My sister is a four-year-old in the back seat. A man strokes her bleached blonde hair through the open window, while his other hand holds the barrel of a machine gun to my father's head.

A checkpoint. My mother's friend is told to get out of the car. She's offered some sort of choice; I don't understand when I hear the story. There is something about executions.

In 1992 in Lagos I am being driven home from my American international primary school by the family chauffeur. On the way we stall in a go-slow traffic jam. I am one of many witnesses to what was probably the vigilante execution of an armed robber. Because the story is never to be spoken of, and because I am very small, I do not understand exactly what has happened or how much my memory has constructed. I remember an old tire has been wrapped around a person's torso and set on fire, and I remember vividly that this person is a man in the process of becoming a body.

\* \* \*

What does it mean that I have narrated these stories using the word 'it' to describe the bodies under the wheels of cars? A friend gently points this out to me, and I am grateful for the observation. This racism is not mere parapaxis that, however fascinating, can be easily enough corrected or obscured or erased in the language of guilty apology; rather, it is a formidable and formative pattern both in and all around me, which I must first acknowledge, only then deconstruct and hope to confront. bell hooks writes that “the need to create a context where our pain can be reclaimed from a voyeuristic ethnographic note-taking that turns it into spectacle by either mocking, trivializing, or sentimentalizing it is urgent” (1995:137). If these stories have incorporated a critical perspective on race and racism, they have done so primarily by taking up space, by existing *as stories* at the heart of a doctoral thesis. I cannot claim to have fully avoided mocking, trivialising, or sentimentalising the material I drew from. I cannot say if I have succeeded, but I have tried my best to be an engaged yet also compassionate narrator, to write critically, but with a minimum of judgment.

The poem of my pre-departure returns to mind, urging me again to reconsider the moral imperative that underscored my desire to do this work: *I need you to acknowledge that you have benefited from what they did*. If I take this need somewhat out of its context, beyond a recognition of white ancestors as progenitors of white privilege, I am inspired to consider how, and why, I am indebted to the co-authors of this project, the storytellers who sketched its characters. Of course they are responsible for the very possibility of the degree



for which I work, and the status it offers. But I believe there is more to say, a final story to tell about why I chose to write this kind of thesis, and what I learned along the way.

At the beginning of my doctoral research I was preoccupied with theorising, understanding, perhaps even shaking up (or off), a certain measure of postmodern angst, an orientation I had inevitably absorbed during the course of my higher education. I felt deeply ambivalent about this inheritance, unsure of how to parse the insights of a vast literature on seemingly endless cultural relativity with my desires for an engaged, activist posture in the world. I felt that by writing about cultism I would, and should, be outed as the agent of a dubious, if subtly rebellious, work of ethnographic espionage. In fact, in the month leading up to my departure for Nigeria, I wrote the following short story as a kind of cautionary disclosure:

#### **Parable of a Precedent**

The communities, historically antagonistic, are rallying behind a prophet.

He commands them to join forces and build a massive earthen pyramid, a focal point for burying vendettas. For constructing the unification that will be necessary if the people are to defeat the greater enemy.

They congregate at a refugee camp. This is Africa during the war that followed the war to end all wars.

The colonizers stare at the thing these Africans, coming from all directions, are doing. What the hell are they building? And why? They send an anthropologist into the refugee camp to spy on the people, to unlock the secrets of their strange defiance.

The anthropologist will describe his time there as his worst professional experience to date. The weather harsh, the food as bad as the timing of the job, and the people avowedly uncooperative.

He will nonetheless produce a classic of structural anthropology.

He deftly plucks the people out of historical context. The refugee camp becomes the 'field.' Diverse groups of displaced people become a 'culture' possessing a coherent set of practices and beliefs. Refusal to interact with a member of the greater enemy becomes evidence of the xenophobic 'nature' of these solitary nomads. The anthropologist discerns and renders legible – or perhaps one should say invents – for us their conceptions of time, space, power...and other ideal types.

(What if we had followed Heraclitus instead of Plato?)

He publishes nothing of real value to his baffled and impatient employers. In the introduction to the monograph there is just one clue to real context, to where, when, and why: a single reprint of an aerial photograph of the dirt pyramid, taken from the eye of a panopticon fitted within the body of a colonizer's flying machine.

Perhaps it is the same aeroplane that swoops down to drop bombs upon the mysterious pile of earth those devilish Africans insist on defending. Because one might call the pyramid many names – purposeless and senseless and backward and bizarre. But one can simply not ignore it.

Such is its threat to the logic of the State.

Unfortunately for the pen-and-button-pushers, made as it is of dirt packed by hands and hooves, the pyramid merely dents under the force of the explosives. Impotent blasts. As if the structure is laughing and winking up at its assailants. Like the unified prayers of the people, it has uncanny, even amusing, powers of endurance.

So the colonizers kill the prophet.

Always interrogate the author.

I have long been fascinated by Evans-Pritchard's 1940 classic *The Nuer* and by the historical events that commissioned it.<sup>250</sup> The static social order the book describes so beautifully is completely removed from the historical dynamics of world war and displacement that created and carried the project. It is a platonic type for structural anthropology, and at the same time it is an act of defiance of the British State. But re-reading this short story at the end of this project, I wonder whether it has as much to do with my work as I had expected. Maybe I did follow Heraclitus instead.

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<sup>250</sup> For historical background on the prophecy story referenced in the parable, see Johnson (1997).

And what if I did? Is a dissident stance still possible? In his epilogue to *Lost People*, David Graeber offers a critique of postmodernist trends in anthropology and a glimpse into a possible alternative (or perhaps restorative) trajectory:

To write in a way which takes for granted that one would never be able to reveal everything, that art is the art of selecting details, is perhaps the hallmark of a literary sensibility ... rather than seeing the limits of our knowledge as a problem, it would be much better to see it as the best basis on which to build a broader sense of commonality (2007:390).

Graeber argues that, for all its alliance with literary theory – with fragmentation, intertextuality, subjectivity – postmodern social science “seems to move in precisely the opposite direction, and ends up slipping into a kind of perverse, extreme scientism” (390). In other words, the important admission that one can never know or capture another’s perspective fully has somehow led to styles of ethnographic writing in which complex abstractions fill up all available space, crowding out the real human characters who were obviously at the centre of the work of generating theory. The impossibility of understanding should not prevent us from seeing clearly what we can.

My decision to adopt an overtly interdisciplinary approach in my doctoral work very much emerged as a pragmatic choice in relation to the complexity of the subject – laced as it is with violence and taboo – with which I wished to engage. The process has been more than synthesis. It has involved a challenging and uncharted effort to wrest new ways of researching, thinking, and writing – at least as pertains to my own intellectual biography – from multiple disciplinary conventions. As Roland Barthes has written:

*Interdisciplinary* activity, valued today as an important aspect of research, cannot be accomplished by simple confrontations between

various specialized branches of knowledge. Interdisciplinary work is not a peaceful operation: it begins *effectively* when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down – a process made more violent, perhaps, by the jolts of fashion – to the benefit of a new object and a new language, neither of which is in the domain of those branches of knowledge that one calmly sought to confront (1979: 73).

Interdisciplinary activity has turned out to be enormously helpful in subduing my own anxious reflexivity, while at the same time humbling my pretences to comprehension. Coming from a background in anthropology and history, I found the spatial grounding in geography to have a balancing effect on my thinking. Trajectories in feminist and radical geography were particularly helpful. While anthropology may have a richer tradition of theorising text, geography enjoys a larger and more pragmatic literature on the necessities of and possibilities for direct political engagement both through and alongside research. As I considered my own work, I began to assess the process and effect of writing ethnographic fiction in terms of radical geography. Through this combination of tools and positions, it might be possible to preserve some of the space that fieldwork necessarily opens up, space in which myriad characters tell their stories. Rather than deducing into abstraction that ultimately, if inadvertently, eclipses the lives it has drawn from, might I try to write stories and characters that are shaped by an implicit process of more engaged theorisation?

It seems to me that this approach has an advantage where ethnographies of violence are concerned.<sup>251</sup> Achebe writes, “The fiction which imaginative literature offers us ... does not enslave; it liberates the mind of man ... It begins

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<sup>251</sup> Indeed, ethnographers of violence have been among the most vocal proponents of reflexive, creative, and accountable methodologies. See the Prologue for discussion.

as an adventure in self-discovery and ends in wisdom and humane conscience” (1989:115). In developing a literary style, I have tried to become open to this lofty possibility even as I remain mindful of its limitations. But in my efforts to avoid trapping people into categories like ‘victim’ or ‘perpetrator’ (‘mugu’ or ‘cultist’), have I instead transformed accounts into pornographies of violence designed to shock and entertain? I hope not. Whatever the risks, the choices I made in designing this doctoral project allowed me to experience a way of being in the world, a way of making art, of privileging the work of compromise and commonality both in the ‘field’ and on the page. And it is here that I must acknowledge, again, that I am in truth the benefactor of a process by which many people shared their dreams, frustrations, and stories with me. To the extent that I have had any small success in the re-presenting, I acknowledge this storytelling as a shared and social process.

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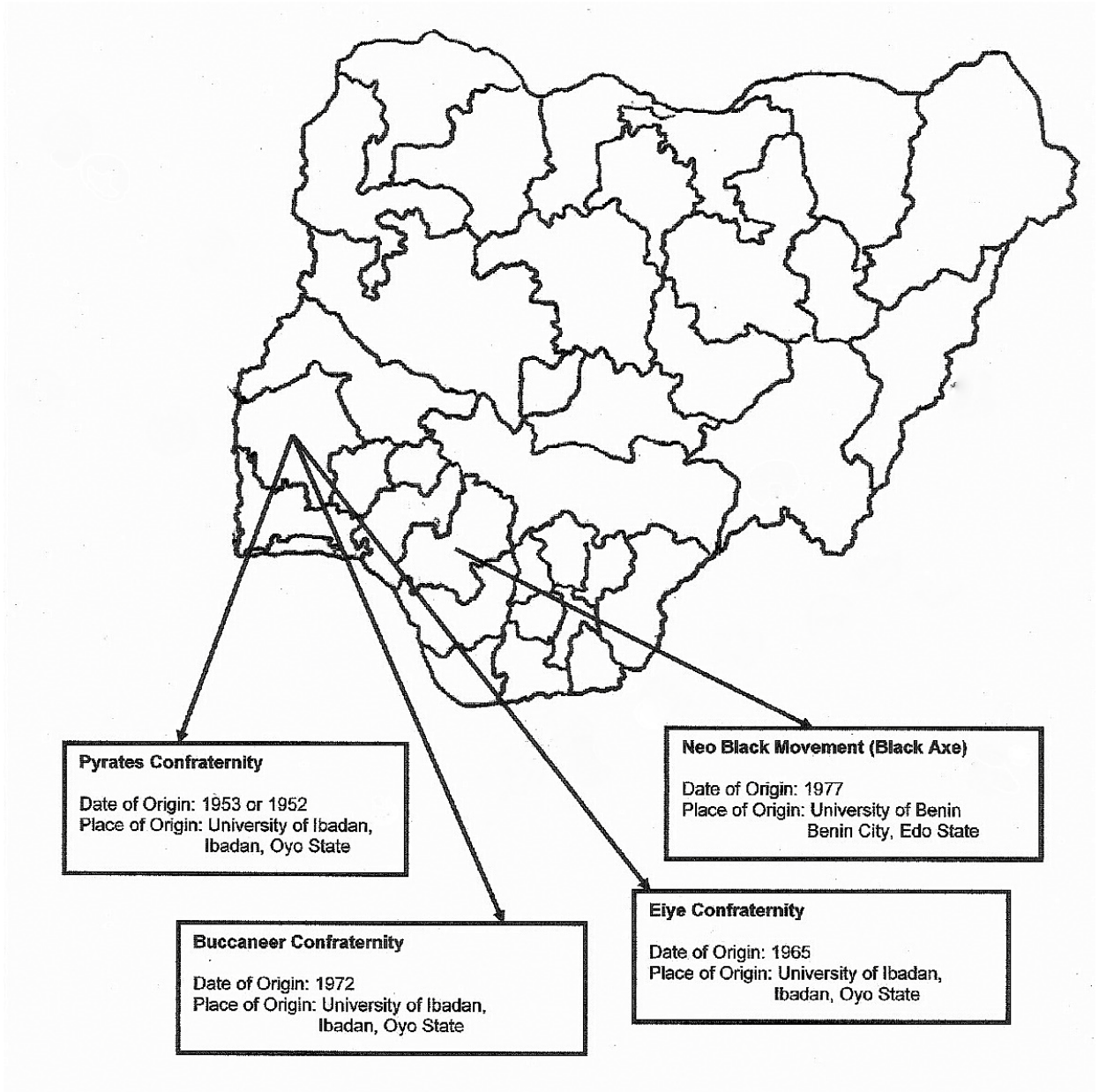
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# Appendix

## Contents:

- A. Map of Origins of the Four Original Confraternities
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## A. Map of Origins of the Four Original Confraternities<sup>252</sup>



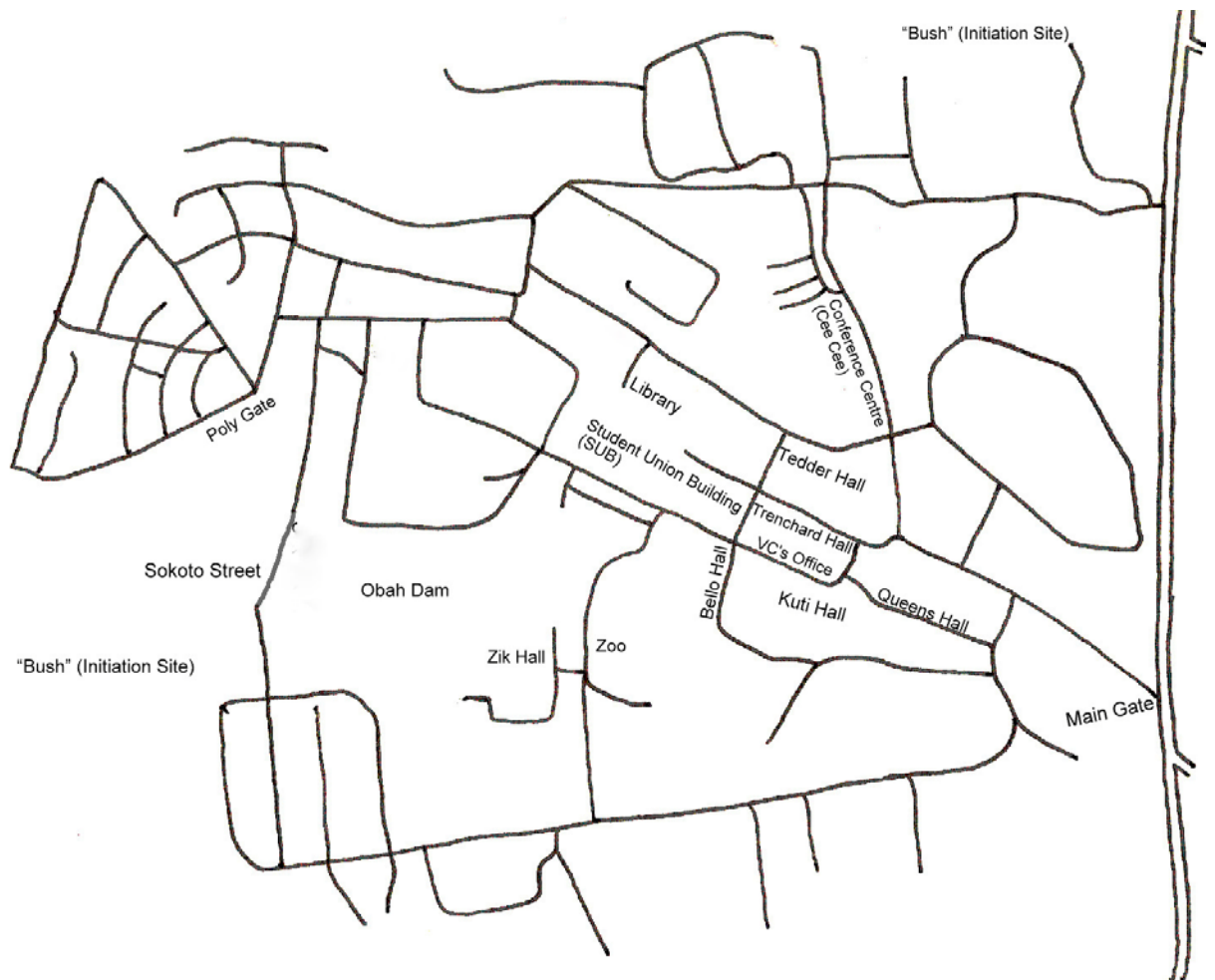
<sup>252</sup> Hand drawn map; not to scale. These four 'original' fraternities feature most heavily in the collection of stories. The geographic importance of UI, the 'Mothership', is illustrated here.

## B. Map of Key Sites in the City of Ibadan<sup>253</sup>



<sup>253</sup> Hand drawn map to show spatial relationships; not to scale. These key sites and roads feature in the stories.

### C. Map of Key Sites in the University of Ibadan<sup>254</sup>



<sup>254</sup> Hand drawn map of the campus road network with selected points tagged; designed to show spatial relationships and not to scale. These key campus sites feature prominently in the stories.



## **Methodological Note: The Open-Ended Interview**

Before embarking on my fieldwork, I successfully pursued clearance with the University of Glasgow's Ethics Committee. Knowing that the topic of my research might well entail a level of risk for both myself and those with whom I hoped to work, I thought carefully about the methodology I would deploy. I discuss this issue at some length in the Prologue above, but I wish to reiterate that these practical, ethical considerations led to my decision to centre the project on open-ended and anonymous interviews, framed in such a way that the interviewee would be invited to direct the conversation as much as possible.

Circumstances in the 'field' led to a further opening of these interviews. Most people I interviewed preferred not to have the session recorded by a dictaphone, either for greater anonymity or a greater sense of ease and cordiality in the relational space between us. Although I initially viewed this as a threat to my expectations for 'transcription', I soon realized that it created a wonderful opportunity for me to practice being more present, aware, and open, myself, within the lived experience of the interview – the story – as it emerged and developed organically and according to the context of its telling. Knowing that my final goal would be a thorough fictionalization of this material, I opted to begin the novelizing process as I listened as much to the distinctive voice of the narrator as to the story. Later, I wrote each 'transcript' from memory and, when available, from notes. Shortly into this experiment, I discovered that I preferred

this method to the more traditional transcription of recorded voice. I still carried my dictaphone, but I came to feel comfortable working without it.

The interviews conducted during fieldwork have been so pivotal to the entirety of this enterprise that I have included four of the original, semi-fictionalised 'transcripts' in the Appendix below. These four are a sample of some of the semi-fictionalised records of interviews that comprised the heart of the primary 'data' for the thesis. I chose them to convey to the reader a sense of the information from which I worked to create the stories above, as well as for their richness of ethnographic detail that covers a range of the themes explored in this work. In total, I facilitated over thirty formal interviews, ranging in length from fifteen minutes to over four hours.

## **D. Interview 'Transcript': Overview from a Recently Retired Cult Member**

Written January 3, 2008  
Interview conducted 31 December 2007

*This write-up, from notes and memory, is based upon an impromptu and informal interview conducted at the home of a friend in Abeokuta. Having met the younger brother of my friend during lunch, I told him the topic of my research. Between mouthfuls of chicken, he said: 'You should talk to me'. He then launched into a kind of overview of the trivia of cultism in the country with personal anecdotal evidence based on his experiences at Lagos State University, where he is currently a final-year undergraduate. I have chosen to preserve the rambling and repetitive flow of the interview.*

You should talk to me. I am involved. I like talking about it. Let me first go and clean my hands. [*He enters the house and, I later learn, takes the opportunity to ask a mutual friend if it is okay to talk to me, whether his disclosures will make me think ill of his brother. Reassured, he reappears and begins an extended overview of cultism. While speaking, he paces the veranda. He seems to resent any interruption and to quickly restore the conversation. He is visibly enjoying the process*]. Cultism. There are a lot of groups. Over twenty. You have the Pyrates. They wear red. Usually red caps. You can call them Ahoy. If they are still on campus they are called puppies. Five years after graduation they become

Dogs. Sea Dogs. They believe that by the time a dog reaches a certain age it has rabies. After five years you have rabies and you become a Dog. Before then you are a puppy. You have the Buccaneers; they wear yellow. They are also called Brotherhood Across Nation. Or Alora, or the Sea Lords. The Bird Boys wear blue. The Axe Boys wear black. They wear black to show that they are in charge. They are called Soldiers, or Camo. They can also be called Aye. The 'Y' stands in for 'X'. The real name is Neo Black Movement or NBM.

All the cult groups are associated with a particular colour, but that doesn't mean they can't use all the colours. They do. They also have football clubs attached to them. The Buccaneers support Arsenal. The Pyrates, Man U. The Eiye, Chelsea. Those are the four main ones: Pyrates, Buccaneers, Aye and Eiye. But you also have Mafia; black hats. And Vikings. They are very very prominent. They wear black hat with red ribbon. They are a mixture of Buccaneers, Aye and Pyrates. You have the KK, the Tutu...and so many others. In Eastern Nigeria there is mainly the Aye, the KK, the Tutu. In the West you have the Eiye. In the North cultism is not that pronounced. Maybe because of the kind of person there. Maybe because education is just coming in there. It has not had time to develop.

They can use colours; they have their own languages. You can find this information

on the internet. They have websites now. They are for members. They are coded. I have never searched for them but you can find them. You can type in 'alora' or 'sea dogs', and you will find them. They use syllables. Buccaneers use five. They can say: 'vict-ry on is-land'. Pyrates use four: 'vict-ry is-land'.

They have their own styles of killing. Usually, though, they will get boys from other schools to do it. They call in their boys from other campuses. This is to protect themselves, their identity. The authorities can't trace them. In the Vikings they like to share the body. One person takes the head, one takes the stomach, one takes the legs. You can have eight people at once cutting a body. The Buccaneers don't touch the head. You know they are called Fine Boys. For some reason they don't like to touch the head at all when they are killing or when they are initiating.

You know in initiation they do not use marks. They do not mark the body. Only the PCs (Pirates) can mark the hand. For the others the only mark you will see is made by the stick.

How they greet. They call it clawing. Greeting. The Pirates and the Buccaneers do it like this. First they grab the vein on the arm with their fingers, then they pull it back into a claw and the thumbs press together. The Eiye handshake uses seniority. Just like a chicken. You know chickens have a hierarchy. For the Eiye if the two people are not equal, one thumb will bow down to the other. If they are

equal the thumbs will meet. Only Pyrates and Eiye use seniority. That is, hierarchy for non-officers. It is usually based on the year the members joined. Each of them have numbers associated with them. The Aye have 7. Because 7 looks like an Axe. The Buccaneers have 101. The 1 stands for the bone. The 0 stands for the skull. The 1 stands for the bone. And they have sounds, rhythms, beats. For the Buccaneers it is: 'pa pa papapa pa'. For the Pyrates it is: 'papa pa pa'.

There are hierarchies. The Aye use numbers for the names of the places in the hierarchy. For example, in the Aye #3 is the butcher, the hitman. There are always eight officers. Eight officers in all of the cults. In the Buccaneers the number one guy is called the Big Eye. They take it from the telescope. You know the telescope is only one eye. In the Pyrates you have the Capo. Like the Captain.

Then you have different names for the universities. The Eiye give names according to the biggest tree on campus. You know they are birds and they like to land on the biggest tree. The Buccaneers use islands. Like Atlanta, Carteginia, Barbados. They call UI the Mothership. The Pyrates use bodies of water. Like Saratoga...I think they also call UI the Mothership. The Vikings use words with 'Aqua'. Like Aquamarine. The Buccaneers and Pyrates like to do their initiations close to water. The Bird Boys do theirs in the bush.

Of course the Pyrates are still active. They are the richest. Though they are registered they are still a strong force on campuses. Registration doesn't make a big difference. Many lecturers are members. They have yearly conferences. A lot of money. The big members in society make use of the boys on campus for politics. They do have guns, but they are becoming more civilised. They are trying to reform, to save their image. And the Buccaneers are seriously trying to tow that path. The two are very alike. They play together. They believe they are both from the water. They greet the same way, just a few minor differences. They do have weapons, just in case, but lately they have not been involved in clashes. Really it has been peaceful for the past five years. They are trying to save their image. But it is not like in the beginning. They are not interested in defending students' rights anymore; they defend their own rights.

In the Southwest the Axe and the Eiye are major forces. There is fighting up and down. A lot of bloodshed. A lot. It is also spilling into secondary schools now. They are even getting non-students involved. You know Jakande Estate in Lagos?<sup>255</sup> They have a lot of them there. One boy, just a boy, was butchered there. It used to be that cultism was confined to universities. Now there are no borders, no barriers. Like nation-wide gangs. They use a lot of tactics to sight people. They say that America also has cults. Have you heard of the Skulls?<sup>256</sup> They call it 'blending': grooming future members; recruiting. Nigerian cults are now spreading. You have members in South Africa. They are spreading to

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<sup>255</sup> I spent my first week of fieldwork in this neighbourhood.

<sup>256</sup> I assume this is a reference to the Hollywood fictionalised version of Yale University's secret society Skull and Bones.

Ghana. You can have them in private universities, where you have a lot of students who were expelled from state and federal school and who are rich enough to buy a placement.

The Buccaneers and Pyrates are the richest cults. When they are recruiting they look for financial capability, and they look at the person. They recruit at a certain time. But the Eiyé can blend at any point and time. They don't have such strict criteria. They are looking for qualities that will make someone a good fighter. Academics don't matter. They have a lot of numbers. Members can come from anywhere, but the majority are Yoruba.

Cultism is not as bad as it used to be at the federal universities. It is rampant at state universities. And most are bred at the polytechnics.

The politicians are partly to blame. They buy guns for the cult groups. For thuggery. But when the politicians are finished with them the boys still have the guns. They use them to rob, to attack rival gangs. What weapons do they have? They do use a lot of voodoo. A lot. The kind of voodoo where a bullet will be fired at you but it will not pierce the skin. It's real. In the East they have grenade. But here in the Southwest you find AK 47s, pump action rifles, local-made pistols. Also axes. They use a lot of axes. Only now guns are more popular.

In the Pyrates and Buccaneers you hardly ever find robbery. You know I told you they are trying to protect their image. But in the Eye and the Aye, they can rob,



they can rape. They make use of ladies. There are female cult groups. You have the Black Bra. They are connected to Aye. The Pink Ladies are connected to the Buccaneers. Female cultists will harass girls. Beat them up. And they can harass men. If the man is a member then they will make use of the cults to beat him. If he is not a member then the ladies can beat him up themselves.

The cult groups hold parties at school. They call them coded parties. The venue is secret because of the threat of rival cults. People meet at a point and then move in a convoy of cars to the party. The dress code can be the colour of that particular cult. In 2004 at Lagos State University the Black Axe had a party. They raped so many girls. They picked the girls up and took them to a secret place. Most of the girls didn't know what the party was. That's how they do it. If the girl is a regular, they leave her to party. If she is innocent of what is happening then they rape her. There's no how you can complain because they are much. If you complain they definitely will track you down.

There was a time one collected my phone. He called me over to preach to him about Christ. Then he took my phone. You know what he told me? He said: *Your friends are not up to twenty. We are more than two hundred.* So I had to let my phone go.

Where do they get their finances? Number one, politicians. There is a rumour that the governor of Oyo State is a member of the Buccaneers. And it was

strongly suspected that the former governor of Lagos State was Eiye. They have a lot of money to give. They use the cult boys for political thuggery. They can use them for assassinations. Then, second, the cultists rob students. They take phones, jewellery, money. They tail you down, threaten you. The third way is armed robbery. And, fourth, they levy themselves. Usually there is a particular month you pay each session. Then they throw parties and you make pledges there.

After graduation you are automatically out of the group, but you can chose to continue. If you continue, you enter a new level. It becomes fun. It is more of helping one another out financially. It is all about money, power, networks. You do not clash anymore. You become friends. You can use boys in university groups to clash for your interests, but you do not attack members of your level. There are commissioners who are members. Ministers. Especially in the Pyrates and the Buccaneers. This is why members of those groups are rarely exposed by the police. There cases tend to be swept under the carpet. Greater control by the graduates over the university groups has also reduced activities for the Pyrates and Buccaneers. But the Aye and the Eiye are still new groups; they don't have so many powerful members in the society.

A lot of them graduate and go directly to short service in the military. After one year they become officers. It's very competitive, but there are a lot of cult boys

who do it. As more members get into the military, it becomes easier for them to bring their boys in.

Let me explain the hierarchy.

Like I said there are always eight officers in a cult group.

Number one is the head. He makes the big decisions. Whether to have a hit, start a war, throw a party. Usually #1 is gentle, quiet and rich. He doesn't have any problems academically so he cannot get into trouble with the authorities. He has a cool face. He is capable of reason. He is not easy to pinpoint. He has to be cool. You can't really see that he is a part of them. They believe that they should always hide the identity of #1. At the end of each session #1 selects the new officers. The outgoing officers draw up their list, but the head always makes the final decision. He looks for the desired qualities.

Number two is the administrative head. #2 can be anybody that is active.

Number three is the hit man. He leads the squad. He is responsible for getting the voodoo before any clash. He takes the members to the voodoo priest. He is also the one who goes out and interacts with other gangs. (Or that can be #2, or any of the known faces). He must be rugged. He is also in charge of blending, of getting new members. And he is in charge of the initiation. Now, the Pyrates and the Buccaneers will look for a #3 that is reasonable, level-headed, who will

be able to discern when violence is necessary. Not just aggressive. But the other cults want someone who is very rugged, who is capable of killing.

Number four is responsible for discipline. He is selected based on how active he is.

Number five controls the money. He is selected based on how rich he is. He has to be rich enough that he won't steal.

Number six is the one that sings. He sings whenever they meet. They are common songs that have been transformed to fit the gang. He is chosen based on how well he can sing.

Number seven is the guard for #1.

Number eight works with #3. He is the guard for number three.

Why would you join a cult group?

The first reason is deceit. They tell so many lies. They tell you that it will help you academically, that the group will be a shoulder for you to lean on when you have problem. If you say that you hear the cults kill, they will say that they do not

really kill like that. That it is just for protection. They tell so many lies. So you go in with that and then you get a different picture.

The second reason students join is politics. Student unionism is funny. Just like politics in Nigeria at large, the same is happening in the universities. You need power. Ordinary students can't go out and demonstrate. Can't face the riot police. You need back-up. Maybe one union member tries to do something on his own and he gets beaten up, harassed, he can't do anything. So the cults then say *join us, be underground, we will protect you, you will protect our interest*. You know it has happened when that same member then returns with confidence. He can say anything and he is not afraid. Maybe the unionist is not actually a cult member, but he is working for them. It is an arrangement. They get someone to fight for their interests, their money. There is a lot of money. You know these student politics, they get grants and they have levies. Every student has to pay to the union. The unionists take this money for their own pockets. They buy cars. Some of them build houses. They use it to drink. There is always a lot of drinking in the union. If a cult group has a person in the union it can use him to get its money. So the cult groups get their money indirectly from the union. I remember one time at Lagos State University a gubernatorial candidate came to speak. He gave money to the student union and said it should be shared among the cult groups. He didn't have to say it directly; people knew what to do.

Cultism is definitely in the union. A cultist can be president. That's what gave Lagos State peace. A Buccaneer became president. Because he was a Buccaneer he was not involved in any active rivalries. He was a neutral person; he gave money to all parties. If he had been Eiye or Aye there would have been a lot of killing. Like in 2000. There was an Eiye president of the union. Then the union was killing so many Aye. They did it in the name of purging the campus of cultism. They were burning them. Burning them. But now you don't see that so often. The fight has moved off campus. Now you have campus marshals. They are heavily armed. They will arrest you and hand you over to the police. Or they will shoot.

All of this is why students don't bother to vote at union elections. They know the outcome will be determined through the cults.

The third reason students join is because of harassment. Maybe one student had his phone collected by a particular cult. Or a student was trying to talk to a girl and a cult member started harassing him. The rival cult will then approach him and promise to aid in retaliation. This strategy especially works for freshers. They are easy prey. The ego is easily let down and there is a desire for vengeance.

The fourth reason is to have a say in the university system. Unless you're a cult boy you don't have any power. You cannot affect anything. You will get

nowhere. Maybe you have a just cause, but if you are not backed up you will not be able to fight it. I remember one union guy who was impeached at Lagos State. He went to a particular cult group to ask them to defend him. But they already had connections with a different unionist. They said no. He went to all the cult groups and all refused him. He was helpless. He had nobody. If he had a group, it could have led to a serious clash. This is why there is no genuine activism in unionism now. Most heads of NANS are Aye boys. They attack riot police with weapons. These are definitely cult boys.

I remember five years ago the government gave the NANS president 500 million for the World University Game. He just pocketed all of it. They slashed his throat. You know NANS holds national conventions. Every time you will see cult boys there. They come with their colours. They come with ammunition. They come to fight for their interests. They kill. In NANS, Eiyeye's interest is strongest.

Members are everywhere. The head of a Christian fellowship can be a cultist. I knew a head of a cult who was also a Muslim leader on campus. In my school the Eiyeye now hold their meetings in the mosque. And the Eiyeye union president I mentioned, he was the one burning people. They don't fear religion. In fact if you are religious then you can be their first target. If their secrets are leaked, they will suspect you. You will be a prime suspect.

Cult groups have their faculties. They have strength in a particular faculty. I read politics. In my faculty there was not much conflict because there were members from all the groups. Everything was balanced. Although they used to say that the Buccaneers were more powerful.

What if you want to leave? Renunciation. The best way to pull out is to wait and graduate. Or else you are endangering your life in many ways. If you try to leave, members from your own cult will track you down. They will beat you. They can kill you. Or else you become vulnerable to attacks from other cults. They will not respect your decision to get out, or else they will not know of it. You will get no protection from your gang. They will not give you information about a clash. You're on your own. Renunciation is a bad option. You are a target. If you want to get out it is best just to avoid them. Just keep quiet. Just stay out of it, but don't make it official.

During a clash, they start by killing officers. They mark the officers. But if there is an escalation, everybody in the group can be attacked. If you have money you can buy yourself out. You can settle yourself out of a clash. That is why you can see members walking freely on campus even when there is a war.

They have their mottos. The Aye say: *Forgiveness is a sin*. Can you imagine what they are capable of? A group with a motto like that? The Buccaneers say: *No price, no pay*. You have to sacrifice to be rewarded.



They do juju, voodoo. We call it African Science. You find this in Aye and Eiye, not so much in the Pyrates or the Buccaneers. They have to use this protection. There are so many clashes; your life is at stake. They go to a herbalist, a voodoo priest. He gives them charms, beads. Charms for every kind of thing. Protection against clubs, bullets, machete, bottle, axe... So many. They can renew the charms. It has a 'recharge card'.

The charms have many do's and don'ts to retain their power. They will tell you that you can't eat such and such, that you have to be indoors by a certain time, that you can't be with a lady in this or that way. There are so many do's and don'ts that it is very difficult to follow them. Since these charms are not Christ – do not have the power of Christ – they are not always perfect. They can wear off. I'll give you an example. In one case there was a guy who was protected by bullets so long as his legs remained on the ground. But as soon as he jumped onto a fence they shot and killed him. Or you can have a case where bullets will not penetrate, but a person can be killed by a stick. I knew one boy who died because he had charms against metal penetrating him. He had typhoid and they could not give him an injection. You have seen the white garment churches? They do charms for them. They use blood. They will heal you, but they will give you something make you come back. They like to use candles – seven candles – and streams. Also the Islamic priests will do it. The Alfa. When they started

using AK 47s they didn't have a charm for it. But now gradually they developed one. AK 47s? They do have. AK na pure water for school.<sup>257</sup>

I remember in 2000 at my university they had a peace meeting. A disarmament. It wasn't like they gave up their weapons. It was like a ceasefire. The school actually gave them money to stop fighting. It happened at the Eko Hotel in Lagos. The ceasefire lasted for three years. But you know during peacetime they blend more. They are very active on campuses when there is peace. They harass students more. This is why students don't want peace among the cults. When there is peace the cult groups will have time for the students. When there are clashes the members just kill themselves, they are exiled from school. Non-members are safe. That is why students pray for cult clashes.

During peacetime rival cults can be friends. They hang out together, go to parties together. Then you can have close friends in rival cults. These friends will help to share information. One will call the other and say: *We are coming to eat in your school tomorrow*. To give warning. I know a family where every son is involved in a different cult group. Five boys. They come home for the holidays and they gist about it. I knew two friends at Lagos State. One became the head of the Axe, the other became the head of Buccaneers.

Yahoo? It is true, Yahoo Yahoo has decreased the activities of cultism. You know these boys care so much about money. Money equals respect. And you

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<sup>257</sup> 'Pure water' refers to sachets of poor quality drinking water that are ubiquitous. In context, this is a comparison between the weapons and the pure water sachets – both are everywhere.

see that ladies seem to like cult boys. They like the money. Yahoo has been a very big distraction for them. Especially during peacetime, they think, *I'm not fighting, let me do something productive*. These boys done make mad money on top Yahoo. Most of these boys are tired of fighting, but there is no way out. They can't help it. If you are in, you are in. They then started using Yahoo as an excuse to die the whole thing.

Shall I give you the answer finally? I was a Buccaneer. I guess you can say I became involved through the deceit method. They told me all kinds of things and I was persuaded. But then I saw that it was not what they had portrayed. I was not cut out to be there. They, too, did not think I was really one of them. I was not the type. They were attracted to me because I am quiet, I am responsible, I am intelligent. I can handle money. But I was never really one of them. Eventually I came to Christ. I just started to avoid them. They let me be. Now I am just waiting to graduate. Sometimes, though, members still come to me for advice. You remember that story of the boy who took my phone? I was out of it by then, but I didn't retaliate. I just let it go. I didn't have a phone for nine months. Later, he wanted to talk to me. He used to come to my room. He just wanted to talk. I told him about the hardship he put me through. He was remorseful. One day he was talking to me and he was called to go somewhere. He left his gun by my side. When I was involved I never once touched a weapon. I never saw any killing. He just left his gun there. He trusted me that much.

How do I feel sharing all of this? I've seen the light. I've seen Christ. I was involved with them so I know what I'm talking about. I like to share what I know. I like to educate people who might be thinking of joining.

I don't fear them.

## **E. Interview 'Transcript':**

### **Yahoo Yahoo**

Written 13 January 2008  
Interview conducted 8 January 2008

*This interview was taken on the 8th of January with a final year undergraduate at UI who claims to have many friends who are involved in Yahoo Yahoo – internet fraud. I am interested in this phenomenon especially because of its role in diverting the energies of cult members away from their 'usual' activities (theft, assault, etc.). The nature of this interview was more question and answer (as opposed to open-ended) than previous ones have been. The interview was recorded but this write-up is from notes and memory.*

I have friends who do Yahoo. They have been in it for two years, two to three years. Yahoo is basically a modified 419. It's the latest version of 419. They go through the internet. You find a lot of people doing it. Boys. From sixteen or seventeen to twenty-five, thirty-five years old. What they do with the money is mostly to buy cars and girls. Sometimes they buy shares.

They can get a lot of money. I know one boy. He's in his final year at UI. He bought a Peugeot 406. He paid for a masters in South Africa. He married a lady from the UK. All of this from one hit. He used cheques. Fake cheques. You send the cheque abroad and you have someone there to cash it for you. They then take a percentage and send the dollars back to Nigeria. So that's how they

do it. They work hand in hand with guys in the US or the UK. It's a two-way thing. The guy you have over there, you call him a 'maga'. That's a slang they use. The oyinbo person they 'hit' is called a 'mugu'. It's like saying they're a fool. They have a lot of slang. They call the job 'ise' from the Yoruba word.<sup>258</sup> The boys who do it are called Yahoo boys or G-men.

The problem in Nigeria is that so many people don't care where the money comes from. If the boy is illiterate, his family will not care that he gets his money through Yahoo. They will celebrate him. Otherwise you will find them hiding it from their parents. Especially cars. They use tinted glass so no one will know them when they are driving. I have one friend who bought two cars. 1.6 million Naira. He hides them from his parents.

Most Yahoo boys are wannabes. They are trying to tick all the boxes. Money, cars, chicks. They want to be 'happening boys' or 'club boys'. They want to be big. They see Yahoo as a means to an end.

There are lots of ways they do it. There's one place in Lagos where you go to get fake documents. Fake visa, fake 1-20, anything they can use. I know one guy who wanted to renew his papers for the US. He went there to do it. The embassy didn't notice anything.

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<sup>258</sup> 'Ise' is 'work'.

They can get credit cards and buy something on the net. They get a crazy amount of goods that way. Have them shipped to the US and then the maga sends them by DHL to Nigeria. Then they have someone there in customs who clears the goods for them and lets them know to come and collect. They buy cd players for cars. They buy laptops a lot. That's why the laptop market in Nigeria crashed. They can sell them so cheap. Maybe 70k instead of 120k. If you see something that's really really cheap, you know its Yahoo.

Basically, you get involved for the money. If you want to do it, you find somebody in it to teach you. Everybody knows who they are. Ask any student in UI and he should be able to give you five Yahoo boys by name and department. Students openly know who they are. You hear it by gist, or you can easily notice when somebody's lifestyle has become flashy all of a sudden, and they can't back it up. A lot of them don't go to school anymore. Some of the younger ones even drop out of secondary school. They just do Yahoo all day and night. They mainly hang out in their own clique. They are friends. When they leave school, some of them stop. Or some of them stop after they have one big hit. Others can go on for years. It depends. Sometimes they are respected, sometimes they aren't. If you are a friend with a Yahoo boy you can get a lot of things. Free beer. Trips. Anyway those who don't do it never expose the Yahoo boys. They just let them be. Everybody keeps to their own.

What they buy depends on their level. At the top, they buy Hummers. You see that a lot in Lagos and Abuja. Yahoo Yahoo is most prevalent in Lagos anyway. But really they have it everywhere. Most of the boys don't buy brand new cars. They call it 'Tukumbo'. A Yoruba word that means something like 'born abroad'. They buy cars that are fairly used and have been brought to Naija from overseas. 1994 to 2000 models. You can buy the cars in Lagos. You can buy them in Ibadan.

Sometimes they do get caught. I had one friend. His junior brother got money through emails and he had some paid into his account. He went to the bank to collect it. He was eighteen years then. It was some 15,000 dollars. That day there were bank security operatives there. They held him for questioning. He couldn't answer them. They took him.

There used to be overnight browsing. At cyber-cafes. You could pay 300 Naira and browse from 12am to 6am. But it is not common now because the police started raiding them at night. And you know how it is in Nigeria. If you get arrested there is nothing like due process. Sometimes you can bribe them to let you go, but otherwise you can be stuck in there for years waiting for your trial. So now the first thing a Yahoo boy will want to do is buy a laptop and hook up high speed internet in his house. Do it in privacy.



At UI I would guess that about one in fifty hundred students is involved.<sup>259</sup>

People say that Yahoo has decreased cultism, but at UI I'm not sure if you can make that claim. There are a lot of factors. The VC really clamped down on accommodation squatting and set up stern conditions for being a student. A lot of cultists were caught and chased out of the system. I would say cultism at UI dropped because of that. But I do know that cultists do like to take money from Yahoo boys from time to time. If they hear about a hit, the cults come to collect on it. Like paying taxes to the government. And people do say that if Yahoo stops, there will be an increase in the incidence of robbery. People want to keep up with their exotic lifestyle.

There are a lot of different strategies. They can use Yahoo chat. They meet a white guy online. They pretend they are girls. Send pictures that they download from the internet. Or they go through webcams, get girls here to do all sorts of rubbish. Porn stuff. They start a relationship. Eventually they ask for money, for plane tickets. When the money arrives for the ticket they come up with some story about why they can't travel. They never go anywhere. They use it to buy a car.

But somehow it is becoming a bit hard to dupe people. I think people over there are starting to expect this kind of thing. So they've started doing Yahoo Plus. They use charms. Not necessarily voodoo, but different kinds of African charms.

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<sup>259</sup> At a university in Lagos, it is likely to be a higher number – according to one source, perhaps one in twenty.

So they can be talking to a guy on the phone and they think the charm will make him believe them. They also call it 'jazz'. They go to market priests. Babalawos. Does it really work? I know a friend who does it and he bought a car. That's all I know.

Another strategy. They get a US roaming number. They conduct a fake business transaction. They tell the white person in the US to call this number to verify the details. It's a US number. Then they are here in Nigeria ready to validate the transaction.

For a while they were doing it a lot through phones here in Nigeria. They send a text to a phone saying that you have won a large sum of money for a promotion you didn't do. They tell you to send recharge card and they will use the money to send your gift to you. But the networks placed controls and curbed this a lot. And people became more enlightened about it.

I don't think Yahoo can be eradicated though. Look at 419. It has been around for so many years and it hasn't stopped. They are always one step ahead of security. The only way to stop Yahoo would be to reduce privacy, to control the use of the internet. So people are still being duped day by day, because people are greedy. People want to believe the stories the Yahoo boys tell them. It is greed.

## F. Interview 'Transcript': Stories at Mr Biggs

Written 23 January 2008  
Interview conducted 20 January 2008

*This interview took place at the second storey of Mr Biggs, the original Nigerian fast food joint (the only one, I think, when I was here in 2001). The 'informant' had agreed to an interview but had one or two bank errands to run first. A friend who had put us in touch and a young woman (both current UI undergraduates) came along for the ride in his rickety BMW, and we all ended up gisting over Jollof rice and chicken. The cultism stories started organically at a certain point, following on from business chat. The chief 'informant' directed most of his enthusiasm towards the mutual friend. It became a kind of blether, with me at first awkwardly pulling out the notebook and then seeking consent in such a way that temporarily broke the flow and irritated the storyteller. But soon all was well. Chat was almost exclusively in Pidgin English – the lingua franca. I was pleased to understand nearly all of it, but my notes are a bit scarce because most of my energy went into following the plot. No dictaphone used at the request of the interviewee. Following Pablo's advice, in the below write-up I will indicate phrases of the informants in italics (some of these phrases are common slang in Pidgin and as such go into a growing repertoire of terms and phrases that might comprise the diction of the dissertation; others are more idiosyncratic, particular to the storytelling styles of these individuals). The process of making decisions feels a bit clumsy and subjective to me because I am relying on notes and memory, but it is one experiment in dealing with this concern. I think a more*

*pressing issue in terms of acknowledgment is probably my eventually making use of the stories themselves, even if they are 'fictionalised'. My informants here assure me that I should feel free to adapt from their personal stories and are happy for me to keep the sources anonymous. Still, I am not fully satisfied. I think that finding a way to explain my methodology transparently within the logic of the thesis will help me to negotiate these ethics.*

*A few words about the individuals involved in this gist session. C is a UI alumnus who graduated a long time ago. Most of his cult-related memories hail from between 1992 and 1996. The son of a professor, he grew up on the UI campus and spends his mornings hanging out at the basketball court for old-time's sake, a pastime he can afford because he is an independent businessman. As far as I can tell he used to run clubs; now he buys cars at 'Yankee auctions' and sells them for a high profit in Nigeria. He is currently preparing for an exam with an agency that supplies infrastructure project managers to trouble zones like Iraq, a destination he is hoping for. He says he loves adventure and confrontation. He is an animated storyteller – enthusiastic, engaged, obliging – also he strikes me as somewhat easily annoyed. J is, presumably, one of C's girlfriends. She is a second-year student at UI. She has come alone to be dropped off at a hairdressing salon, but when the salon is full she tags along to the interview. She transferred to UI from Uni Port and often chimes in with opinions and information about life in the oil rich Port Harcourt or in the female halls here at UI. T is becoming a good friend of mine. Also the son of a UI professor, he is a*

*lanky basketball player with aspirations to make it in the NBA. He is a devout Christian. His demeanour is gentle, sweet, smiling. I have offered to help him make a basketball audition tape in exchange for his help. I have a feeling he tagged along to the interview today in order to make sure I was okay and help me get the information he felt I wanted. I did find his presence helpful as C seemed more open bouncing off of T in his storytelling, and I did not feel completely comfortable alone with C. The interview experience was fun, I think, for all involved. Imagine laughter punctuating most of the write-up; cult stories told like jokes, amusing yarns.*

C: I have one company with a friend in Lagos. We sell inverters. You know you need inverters to power batteries. We get them from one company in Yankee. The company sells batteries too, but we can't bring in the batteries. There is a battery cartel. You can't get into it just like that. As soon as your batteries hit the docks they will take them. It is the same in Ibadan. You can't buy or sell without knowing one cult boy. It is cults here too, but not exactly like what you have on campuses.

J: It is the same with the lawyers in Port Harcourt. You can't become a lawyer unless you are one...

C: Ogboni, abi?<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Ogboni is a male fraternal association of powerful male seniors who are linked through Yoruba tradition, though it operates beyond Nigeria.

J: Ogboni, yes.

C: I knew one Ogboni guy. When he died they wanted to take some parts of his body. His family refused. Let me tell you on the day of the burial the rain was so much it filled his coffin. So many people had accidents on their way. This isn't something I heard; I saw it. I was there. In the end they had to give them the parts they wanted.

J: It is the same in Port Harcourt. I know one family. The husband died and his people wanted to take some parts. The family refused. So many evil things started happening. They had to give up the man's heart. In Port Harcourt all the big big people are involved in these things. If they don't make their money from oil, they make it anyhow. Powerful people.<sup>261</sup>

Me, I like Buccaneers.

C: Oh you like their colours? MTN, abi?<sup>262</sup> I had one friend. A fine boy. He painted his roof yellow. I said you dey fly colours. Man, but those Buccaneers are fine boys. There can be some who you will never know they are cult boys. You will never suspect them. They are just cool. UI is quiet now, but back

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<sup>261</sup> This is a classic 'otokoto' story (see discussion in the Prologue of Bastian's work on the subject).

<sup>262</sup> Here he is comparing the colors of the Buccaneer confraternity to that of one of the mobile phone networks.

between say 1992 and 1996 cultism was big here. Big. I remember one crisis. I was at the basketball court. You know back then, the basketball court, we were like our own cult. We had that kind of strong brotherhood. I was sitting at the courts having a bottle and I saw them coming. Tying yellow bandana. The core of UI fine boys were all there. One of them came up to me and asked please, this is for your own good, can you leave? I said I would leave once I had finished my drink. He told me to finish, but if I did not leave in the next five minutes he would take my bottle and smash it over my head. I got out of there. Two people died that time. Do you know what was the origin of that one? The younger brother of one Buccaneer wanted to travel. He had his US visa. His flight was in two days time. Then there was one guy. We used to call him Craze. He became the Don for Black Axe in his two hundred level. They boy left his passport inside his car and Craze took it. That was what started the whole thing. They burnt one bq (boys quarters). They wanted to hit the Axe squad leader; they heard he was in the bq and they were going to burn him alive. But he wasn't in there. That was a serious crisis at UI.

K: You say UI was more active in the 1990s. Why is that?

C. UI has always been active. It never went underground. But I know that way back when my folks were in school, back in the 1970s, it was different. There is one guy we used to play basketball with. Do you remember him? One big guy like that. Old.

T: One fair guy?

C: Yes, that's him. He was one of the first generation of Pyrates. Back then they used to keep it secret. They used to wear mask like KKK. Didn't go out during the day. He is a family friend. In his time he was the tallest, the biggest guy in school. Everybody knew who he was. So one night he was out wearing mask and the students just shouted out his name. He was so big; they recognised him like that. After that he didn't bother wearing mask. But it was more important in his time, the secret thing. The next generation were younger, I guess. More daring. They were willing to come out in the open just like that. Now they carry it on their forehead. They wear the colours; they can even wear t-shirts.

K: What about the connection between cultism and unionism?

C: Yeah. The union members need their protection. It has always been on. Maybe it really got started in the late 80s / early 90s. For protection. And of course student union has its own goodies attached to its portfolio. I can give you one incident. The student union election in 1993. One Christian guy was winning. All the pastors around UI had endorsed him. They were saying it is time for the Christians to take over the union. You know that kind of thing. When the cult guys saw he was winning they scattered the election. They chased all



the voters away. They held another election and he still won. They chased him away again.

T: Tell her about what happened in 94. She wants stories.

C: 1994? The Poly Gate. Do you know how that got started? Some UI students went to Poly. To use the geology lab. They wanted to run some tests. Then Poly guys saw them there and thought they were thieves. They held them down, used pliers to remove their fingernails. The UI students came crying back to the bball court. That's when I saw them. We went after them. It became a full-blown war. Families were running away from their houses. They were using louvre plates. Do you know what are louvre plates? These kind of sliding glass windows. Guys took them and snapped them in half and flung them down the street. Later the cult guys came in. I remember one guy had a car and he was giving lifts to people who wanted to fight. He said that if you come in the car you have to pick a gun. It was serious. The governor had to intervene. There were two or three deaths. Burnt cars, houses. Blood everywhere.

T: What other stories do you have?

C: I remember one cult guy. He was a rapist. They passed judgement on him and they killed him. In a way I blame myself. He came to the club. He saw someone else dancing with his ex-girlfriend. He gave the guy a dirty slap. I was

upstairs. You know the upstairs of the club is glass. I was on the phone with my sister and I saw the whole thing happening. You know the power these cult boys have is amazing. The guy was tiny, and the bouncer was afraid of him. The best way to fight them is to use the authorities. My first strategy was to appease him. I even took him to the VIP lounge. I bought him a drink, a Goulder. You know what he did? He took the bottle and he smashed it over the guy's head. I told them to call the cops to arrest him. When I got out of the club the next morning I went into the parking lot and I saw him there sitting on top of a car with two of his friends. The police had done nothing. They had the police on top of their pocket. That was a Friday. I went and complained to the police commissioner. You know I have guys in the police. They arrested him. On Monday his mother came to my office, to beg me. But he was in there for two weeks. They released him. Two weeks later he rapes a girl. The younger brother to the girl is also a member of the same confraternity. So they got together and they punished him. They didn't want to kill him; they wanted to punish him. But he died from internal bleeding.

J: At UI they have the female cults. Pink ladies. Daughters of Jezebel. Black Bra. I am telling you they are worse than the boys. They like to approach strong women. If they see you can take care of yourself they want you. There is this one girl in my hall ... she helped me during registration. After a while she then came up to me and said that she had something that she wanted to say. She told me that if I don't like it, she does not want to hear about it anywhere.

But if it is convenient to me I should tell her. She wanted to recruit me. What it is really is a group of girls. They help each other academically and financially; especially financially. It's a lot of aristo girls. They're big. You will always see them linked to one man somewhere. Powerful men. They use charms, they use all sorts of things to get that power. And they have connections with the male cults. Like the Daughters of Jezebel. They use the Buccaneers. At any initiation a Buccaneer head must be there. He can use them anyhow, sleep with whoever he wants. The girls are bad-o. They are very wicked. During this past winter break I know that four girls came into one of the halls and raped a boy. They can do anything.

C: There was this one girl I met in a club. One day I called her. I was planning to stop by and visit her at Queen's Hall. She told me she was sick and she needed money to buy drugs. I told her not to worry that she should tell me what drugs and I would go and get them. So I did that. When I got back I called her and she sent her friend down to collect the drugs. And I gave her 2000 Naira. Then I left. After a few days I tried to call her number to make sure she was okay. She didn't pick. For two weeks I kept trying her. Nothing. Finally I ran into her. I asked her what was going on that she didn't pick her phone. She said I shouldn't be angry, that it was a long story. I told her to go ahead and tell me. She said right after she got the drugs and the money from her friend one girl came into her room. She said she was looking for somebody that her friend wanted. While she was in the room her phone rang. She told my friend that she

should take the phone and give it to the girl upstairs. My friend refused, said she was not feeling fine and she didn't want to go upstairs. Do you know what that girl did? She left and came back with two of her friends. They beat my friend black, took her phone and the money I left for her. Her mom had to come and take her back to Lagos to get better. When she got back to Queens Hall those girls told her that she had to pay them 5000 Naira. This was three sessions ago.

J: You start fighting with those girls and you will never end. They have power. At a time there was one cult boy who was really frustrating me. He said I had to be his girlfriend. He was threatening me. It was my girlfriend that helped me. The one who wanted to recruit me. I told her what was going on and she said that I shouldn't worry, that it was finished. You know what she did? She called one hit man. She told him she wanted him to deal with somebody for her. She told him the situation. One day she called me out from my room and met me at the Queens bus stop. She asked if I could see the boy who threatened me. He was across the road. She told me she had somebody to deal with him and that I should go and point the boy for him. I refused. I was afraid to point him. But she told me I had to do it and that nothing was going to happen to me. I told her who it was and she walked up to him. She said to him, *You are the one who is disturbing my friend*. He started to shout at her, that she should not feel she can just come up anyhow and accuse him. It was then she called her friend over. He said, *I think you know me. You know you are disrespecting me*. It was then the boy apologized to me. Just like that. He never bothered me again.

C: Wow these things are still happening at UI.

J: It's in UI. Definitely. It's in UI but you know it's not really exposed. I remember this one time a guy called me from UNN.<sup>263</sup> I didn't know him, but he gave me my matric number, my name, my hall. He told me, *I have lords in your school.*

C: The only way to deal with these boys is to let them see you and be scared of you. There was a time a guy called me like that. I told him if you continue to harass me I will come after you, that I will make life very difficult for you. I cut the phone. He called me back and said who are you? Who are you with? I told him that it didn't matter, that if he continued I will make sure that he loses his education, that he loses everything. I never heard from him again. I tell you, you have to confront them. Once I was coming out of Kuti Hall and I saw a guy breaking into my car. I yelled at him and he took off. I chased after him. We ran all the way to the SUB, but I cut behind the swimming pool and I caught him there. I knocked him down. I had a cut on my hand – his teeth. Within two minutes twenty people done surround me. Cult boys. I ran. I got three security guys and came back with them. I let him go but made him swear he wouldn't touch my car again. Then I went to student affairs. They really helped me.

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<sup>263</sup> University of Nigeria, Nsukka is an institution that is notorious for cult activity. According to an article in Nigeria's daily newspaper *The Nation*, then president Obasanjo had instructed the Nigerian military to enter UNN and keep the peace should the cult violence prove too much for the police to contain (Adibe 2003).

People think they don't do shit but the truth is they are like Jesus Christ for school.

J: It's not like that at Uni Port. Student affairs won't help you at all. Let you lose an eye, an arm, a leg, they won't protect you. There you have cult boys whose parents are so high they can fall out of school and it won't make a difference. They are willing to do anything.<sup>264</sup>

C: They're really cowards. That's the truth. But they can cause a lot of wahala. I remember one party we held at IITA.<sup>265</sup> They had eight soldiers at the gate keeping the cult boys away. Another time I was at Queen's Hall and I saw some cult guys force one of themselves to crawl on his knees on the gravel. They beat him all the way across the road. But really they're cowards.

I had one friend. This was in 2004 during the Nation's Cup. He had a girlfriend then. I was hanging out with the two of them, and I thought let's play a trick on this girl. I told my friend that he should say he was going out of town to Lagos, and without her expecting it we would go and see her. A surprise. So we did that. We got the girl's compound that night and we were going to knock on the door when he saw one guy's boots placed there. She opened the door and she was wearing a short skirt. I didn't expect this; I just wanted to catch some fun. My friend went crazy. He wanted to beat the guy. I told him to chill, that you

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<sup>264</sup> University of Port Harcourt in the Niger Delta.

<sup>265</sup> International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, a major research facility managed and funded by largely western personnel and institutions.

don't know him from Adam. Maybe the guy was just a friend. He came with me but on the way out he flung the boots to the next compound. Three weeks later we were playing snooker at UI. That guy entered with his cronies. Turns out he was Aye. My friend ran. They tracked him for three days. They found him in Agbowo and they dealt with him. It's girls and money. Always girls and money with these cult boys.

## **G. Interview 'Transcript': SUG UI (Student Union Government, University of Ibadan)**

Written 24 January 2008  
Interview conducted 17 January 2008

*I\_\_\_ gave me the phone number for the 'informant' who granted me this interview. I\_\_\_ described him to me as someone who was not necessarily on the inner circles of student politics, but who was active during 'the struggle' and who is now interested in the revival of the union at UI. I met him at his department in UI. He wishes expressly to remain anonymous and was hesitant about speaking with me before I was able to ensure this (after which he was happy to participate). His concern is that the university authorities could discover his history in the movement and use this as an excuse to refuse his graduation, something he says he has seen happen to others time and time again. He is at the beginning of a second undergraduate course, having abandoned the other after too many extra sessions. The interview was conducted in a large, nearly empty lecture hall – just a few other students studying for exams. He was very softspoken, struck me as someone trying to keep his head low. This write-up is not verbatim, but enough of the phrases are more or less directly from notes that I think it would make sense to see the write-up as a paraphrasing of the interview.*

I spent the first part of my education outside of Ogun State. In 1996 I left high school. I entered UI in 2000. All that time between I was living at home. I used to dash into UI for a week or two. That's how I learned about what was



happening. I was unconsciously learning. I was a neutral person then, but by the time I came in as a student I knew I was interested in politics. I was interested in fame. I wanted to be known, to be respected. Now I look back and I see I was naive then. I tried for my first office in my department. It was a loss. But I was hanging out with some of elders who were around back then. Big figures in the movement. People like I\_\_\_, people like F\_\_\_. There used to be many of them then, though most of them were leaving the stage. Eventually I was invited like that into NANS. They used me to run errands, print papers, do write-ups ... I was part of the team. I served on committees. A lot of committees. I became the mobilization officer for NANS. They used to have two officers. I was number one. At that time NANS became factionalised. The president at that time died. A motor accident. You know NANS has two vice presidency seats. At that time there was one VP from Zone C and one from Zone D.<sup>266</sup> Both of them wanted the presidency. So they broke into factions. Revolution came in to unify NANS. You know our convention is usually violent – the most violent I have ever seen. Anarchism is allowed. You can box, you can beat. It is only weapons that aren't allowed on the floor. If you want to try and unify that you have to be strong. You must have the strength. Revolution had that. And he had ambition. He knew the next NANS president was supposed to come from Zone D. He was going to be that person, so he did all he could to unify the movement. It wasn't just him. So many played an active role in working for unification. But he had an extra year then. He had a quarter session free; he

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<sup>266</sup> NANS zones correspond to different geographic regions in the nation. It is a designation designed to ensure equal representation and rotating leadership.

wasn't in school. He had all the time to move around. To call people. To call congresses. He was on ground. Politics is more than what we see. He was playing politics, playing politics to bring those people together. So he won the Kano convention. He became the NANS president. That was when UI was having a crisis. In 2002 there was supposed to be a handover to Zone A. Revolution had stayed in longer than he was supposed to. One year and seven months. Overstaying your tenure is typical in NANS. Usually, if they stay three months over it is considered innocent. To get a convention is not an easy thing. The incumbent exco will always try to foil your efforts, to stay in power longer. Eventually there was a convention in Port Harcourt. Two Senate Presidents emerged. There was I\_\_\_ and then someone else from the East. They fought themselves. NANS became factionalised over the issue of Senate President.

What happened at UI? If I had my way, I would still put my neck on the line to bring back the union. But too many are not willing to do it. And I can't blame them. But now there is no life on campus. The union used to bring activities, programs, debates, inter-hall competitions. And when the elections came, we really enjoyed it. There used to be agitation. People were always there to ask for new things, for change. Now we can't ask for anything. As an individual can I ask for it? The authorities are playing it cool. They are not over-stretching us, so we don't feel we have to register our need. Things are okay for us now, but my question is how long will that be the case? Even now you have rising tuition fees while the economy is not catching up. It is okay at the federal universities, but at

the state institutions the situation is becoming serious. Maybe now we are willing to pay, but if it becomes too much who will be in place to fight for the students?

What happened was simple. During the military era the student wing of the country strengthened unconsciously because they were fighting. UI had become too strong by 2000. The leaders were power drunk. They were too strong. They began to use force they shouldn't use, and they were getting away with it.

Abraham was the last president at UI. He was president when I was coming in. Then there were two major ideological groups. The Enlightenment Campaign (EC) and the Socialist Alliance (SA). The SA was strong, very strong, but they were not winning offices. Especially the presidency. They wanted it so badly, but they could never win. They hadn't won since 95. It had been four or five sessions. They were desperate to win in 1999. That year EC didn't have a credible candidate. Revolution was gone. I\_\_\_ was on suspension. The SA got on board with a candidate from a smaller group. They called him Struggle. He wanted to contest as a neutral person, but he accepted to run for SA. So they got all his supporters. EC thought, let's play politics. You know the average student doesn't understand it that way, but the SUB always had a lot of scheming. That's what politics is. EC got in contact with Abraham, a pastor. EC, they play it well. They know the propaganda. They used to have one guy in charge of that kind of thing. He was brilliant at it. He could tell you any story and you'd think it was true. He knew how to mix truth with spices, to spice it up. Tell the truth, but give the whole story a different meaning. Abraham won. The SA

was not happy about it. They vowed to win the following session with Struggle. At that time the EC was in crisis. They were no longer together, and there was really no one to put it right. Revolution had his eyes on NANS; he was not willing to play at UI. I\_\_\_ was just returning from two sessions rustication, and he had been the NANS PRO. People thought he should leave the stage, but I\_\_\_ wanted to run anyway. He got the blessings of some people; a few supported him. We used to have press nights then in the nine halls. Prior to the election, manifesto nights. Each candidate would go and deliver his manifesto, and then it would be like an opinion poll. A big crowd would form. They would shout, hail you. That election I\_\_\_ was out for the press nights. He had taken Queen Hall, Tether, Kuti...he was winning all the manifestos. There was no doubt he was going to win the election. So the SA came in and disqualified I\_\_\_. It was a crazy thing. At that time the leader of ISEC was with the SA.<sup>267</sup> ISEC had been set up as a victory of independent unionism. It was a scandal that they disqualified the leading candidate. Abraham was impeached by then. Twenty members of the SRC had impeached him unjustly before the election process.<sup>268</sup> There were corruption charges against him, but there had not been due process. He had gotten a court injunction, which should have prevented any further election pending the suit. Now I\_\_\_ went to the court and got his own injunction. ISEC said they had disqualified him because he had been rusticated in the past, but in his defence he said that case had happened as a result of his fight for the students during the military era. Throughout all of this management was

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<sup>267</sup> Independent Student Electoral Commission.

<sup>268</sup> Students Representative Council.

watching like a watchdog. Just waiting. Then a few hours before the election management said that it shouldn't hold. The students were angry at the interference. They didn't understand everything that was happening. They held the election anyway. Struggle emerged victorious. Nine excos were elected. The authorities served them all letters. Queries, really, asking them to explain why they should not be punished for participating in an illegal election. The officers refused to honour the letters, so they were refrained from writing their exams. This was January 2001. They fought back. The authorities wanted to avert a crisis so they allowed the officers to write their exams. Meanwhile there were demonstrations at the court on a daily or weekly basis. Struggle was also in court by now, trying to defend his office. \_\_\_'s case had been pushed aside; he agreed to leave the injunction when the authorities refused to acknowledge the election results. In the second session the authorities wanted to declare a new election. There was pandemonium. Students were saying that the school was not supposed to hold an election for them. It didn't hold. Abraham would not withdraw his case because the allegation of corruption was still there, preventing him from going forward as a student. Two sessions later he was allowed to graduate and leave the system. Struggle's case is still there. Even though he was expelled last session because of a clause in the school's constitution that restricts a student from registering for a session if he has a pending suit in court. If you are not able to register for two sessions, then you are out of school. He is still fighting till today, but there is no one here to fight for him. All his friends graduated in 2004 or 2005. And he's not a politician. He

doesn't know how to ask for pardon. He doesn't know how to bargain. So there is no hope for him. He is at the point of no return. And while he is there, so is the entire union at UI. During all that time NANS didn't intervene to help. Revolution was NANS president. He said there were power conflicts that prevented him from helping. In reality he let UI down. He shut his eyes against us. You could not even find him on campus. He was off solving the problems of other schools.

Now NANS is not as strong as it used to be, but NANS is still NANS. Everybody respects the violent nature of the student movement. Everybody in power wants to prevent them from getting to the streets. The politicians in the country pocket the student leaders. Where are the activists now? I don't see anybody fighting now. Now nobody's suppressing one another. There is no common struggle again. Democracy is achieved. Bit by bit we are getting better. It is slower than during the military era. We are learning that democracy is not that fast. But we can now talk. I now find it much easier talking to you, for instance. People are not suspicious. Activists need to talk. Need to sensitize others, the oppressed. The oppressed at times don't know they are oppressed. That's why you need people to speak out. But if the problems really start again, what I want to know is who will fight? Will past leaders come to our aid? Few are there now. Struggle is supposed to be continuous but now there is a gap. We're not talking. We're not even able to talk. Now we trivialize things. Let me give you an example. When I entered UI in 2000 I paid 90 Naira for a bed space. Now I am paying

10,000 Naira. We are being told that we don't pay tuition, but there are all these fees, fees, fees! Another example. It was just a few years ago that we were paying 150 Naira for a GS course. A General Studies course. Now you will pay 1,500 Naira. If this isn't tuition fees I don't know what is! But it has all been swept under the carpet. You call this neoliberalism. But the difference between the situation where you are and the situation here is insincerity in government. In a practical sense Obasanjo wanted to deregulate the educational system. They denied him, but you see it has been done already. We are not being made to know it, but it has already happened. We are being made to pay.

Cultism? I got around to discover it was part of our union at UI. The officers used the cult members for protection, and then again the officers had access to benefits the cults wanted. Fortunately at UI they were never allowed to take power. Here they were being invited to join in the struggle. During the military era. It was the cultists who could face the police. You can't expect ordinary students to do that. In so many other schools the cults ultimately ruled the union. In 2001 the situation became serious. Virtually all the unionists were attacked by the cults. When the university decided to organise another election, the cult members felt they wanted to contest. So EC and SA had to join forces to put them out. But then the cultists decided to fight the union boys, I still don't really know why. That morning we woke up and came to find that yesternight SA members had been attacked. The gate was closed. Before we knew it they had

occupied Bello Hall.<sup>269</sup> I was with I\_\_\_ all through. I saw him in his room and he just looked at me and said, *Young man go home; this is going to be serious*. We went to Zik Hall to mobilise. We were throwing stones, bottles, sticks. They had guns. Were we brave? No, we were foolish. I don't know why they didn't shoot on time. We fought for sometime first. But at a point they did shoot and the crowd dispersed. That night I\_\_\_ was attacked and whisked away. I don't know the mystery behind that thing till tomorrow. I can't ascertain his spirituality. He came back unscratched. They took him away and he came back. He came back to talk about it. That is very unusual. Highly unusual. He came back. The following session he became NANS Senate President. The union was silent. It was the SA the cultists were attacking, so the union came to her aid. But there really wasn't a union then. It was all ad-hoc. Still, everyone came to defend what union we did have. Everyone except Revolution. He was not there. Three weeks later there was an ASUU strike.<sup>270</sup> It helped to end the situation. Everyone wanted to graduate. It was already second semester. Now the cults are active at Agbowo, not here on campus.

What happened at UI? Politics. You can't know the thoughts of another person. Interests clash. The union became too powerful. Now everything is different. We don't have a union. In fact we don't even have grievances anymore. Me? I need my certificate. I've seen people go through their course only to have the

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<sup>269</sup> Ahmadu Bello Hall is a male undergraduate dorm next to Kuti Hall at UI. Ahmadu Bello was Northern Nigeria's first premier in the 1950s and 1960s. He was a key northern activist and politician during the pre and post-Independence period.

<sup>270</sup> Academic Staff Union of Universities.



university refuse to graduate them. The university says the student is not of good character. That's all they have to say. Politics is not a crime but it is difficult for you to fight and maintain your character at the same time. Usually what happens is the freshers play pranks at the detriment of their leaders. That's why you need to organise the new students so well. You need to make sure they take it seriously. Sometimes, rarely, you have a brilliant leader who is so good at scheming he doesn't need to use violence. C\_\_\_ was like that. Then there was no internal crisis. Just government. Then, back then the students were up against the military. They were using stones, sticks against the soldiers. People fell. People used to fall. They had the sympathy of the nation. They even had the sympathy of the soldiers most times. It's different now. You walk around campus and there is no life. Students are really missing out. Back then maybe it was coming up to an election time and if you were running you would be doing things, all sorts of things just to make yourself relevant. Now you don't have to be relevant. You are not relevant. You are not irrelevant. You are just there.