

When Men Were Gods

LUCY JONAH

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For God and man

“Victory over challenges comes from Forgiveness than revenge.” –Rev. Fr. Nicodemus

1

THE ABDUCTION

The unceasing crow from the cocks that my mother kept in a hut beside her kitchen was loud and noisome and it woke me up. Although the kitchen and the hut were about 15 feet behind the house, their persistent crowing rang so loud that I felt the cocks were inside my room and their beaks in my ears. I managed to scramble up from my bed, strolled towards the hut and found the cocks in their hut flapping their wings and crowing continuously, unmindful of my intruding presence. I stood in front of the hut and stared for a few minutes at the cocks as they stretched their necks full length, their feathers spread out, standing straight as they flapped their wings and let out a loud cry. I wondered why they must always crow at four in the morning and every morning. Perhaps they wanted everybody to wake up at four just as their owner had been doing. I looked at them angrily and hissed, frowning and hoping they could notice my anger. They kept on hooting like workers diligently carrying out their duties, oblivious of the one standing by. It was clear to me that I was just wasting my time, so I turned and went back to my room. It was a few minutes past

four in the morning, showing that the cocks were accurate timekeepers. I lay down again to try and sleep, but the cocks crowed louder and chased sleep away from my eyes as if they were determined to keep me awake.

Not knowing what to do, I picked up the lantern by my bedside and turned the knob to brighten the light in order to see more clearly. I fetched a copy of pocket-sized Bible from the bag beside the bed. I tried to read but could not concentrate. I then took the lantern and came out again from my room, grabbed a small plastic bucket by the hallway and walked down to the underground water reservoir on the right side of the back of the house to draw water. I threw the small bucket into the reservoir, holding the rope tied to it, shook it round until I could feel the weight of water inside it. I pulled the bucket out with the rope and poured the water into the bigger bucket which I would use for my bath. I repeated the process three times until my bucket was full. Carrying the bucket of water with my right hand and my towel on the left, I ambled to the bathroom which was at a distance behind the main building. I had my bath and came back to my room.

The cocks had stopped crowing, having done their job of announcing the dawn of a new day, but they had stolen away my sleep. I dressed

up and waited impatiently for daylight. In spite of my impatience, daylight took its time to break through the misty dawn. At six in the morning the sun was gradually gliding out in its majesty, with all its promises of warmth and might, and I walked over to my mother's room to say good morning.

“Siweku, did you sleep well?” she asked.

“Not quite, ma,” I answered. “Your cocks woke me up early. They crowed so loudly that I felt they were inside my room.”

“Hmm,” mother murmured, “to think that you of all people could be woken up by the mere crow of cocks is unbelievable. When you were still here in Ngwelle, a thousand cocks could not wake you up! Do you remember how I used to pour cold water on you to wake you up to pound palm fruits for palm oil? It is good to know that you have changed in every aspect of life.”

Mother had just reminded me of those terrible days when being a girl child was like a curse. No child of today will endure what my sisters and I went through in Ngwelle, our village. Imagine waking up as early as four every morning to walk bare-footed to a river some seven kilometres away, to fetch water before going to school or to pound a drum-full boiled palm fruits before going to school?

“The cocks were our timekeepers and so

they were for most people in Ngwelle. Surprisingly, now that we are supposed to be more relaxed, we still depend on them for our wake-up call. The truth is, I loathed carrying out those chores but you never left me with any choice,” I said to my mother.

“Those were the best form of training we knew how to give in those days. Our mothers trained us to be hard-working, and all we did was to pass on what our mothers taught us. If I hadn't trained you to be strong, you wouldn't have been what you are today,” mother said.

“I assume you are right because life is generally tough even in the city where we now live. Survival anywhere in life is arduous and more difficult for the weak. The hardworking training you inculcated in us largely prepared us for what we are today because we refused to be daunted by some of the challenges that came our way,” I affirmed.

“I know you want to leave early to catch your flight, so your breakfast of roasted yam and palm oil is almost ready,” mother announced.

Few minutes later I sat before a meal of steaming roasted yam served with peppered and salted palm oil. While still at home in the village, this type of hot roasted yam was the special treat I got from my maternal uncle, who had a very

special love for me. I was happy that mother never forgot it, even though I had been away from home for over ten years. I relished the yam and pushed it down my throat with water. After the meal, I bade my mother farewell and walked to the park to board a taxi to the airport and eventually flew to Lagos.

I had lived in Lagos for ten good years but had managed to steal into Ngwelle to see mother on three previous occasions. This visit was my first open one to mother, and it was possible because father was no longer in a position to satisfy his whims and caprices having failed to curb what he perceived as our excesses. His kinsmen labelled him a weakling because of us. All through the period we could not visit home openly; my sisters and I had been able to change our mother's perception about modern womanhood, and we made sure we sent her financial and other support which improved her living conditions. We also sent money to our father and our four elder sisters from time to time and occasionally sent financial assistance to our half-brothers and half-sisters.

This particular visit was to make final preparations to relocate mother to a modern house despite her insistence that she was satisfied with the way she lived. She made it clear that she would not live in a so-called modern house where both the

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living rooms and kitchen were usually lumped together in one enclosure. She also made us understand that she could not do without her chickens. We had assured her that we would build her a better house where provisions would be made to her expectations.

Mother had seven of us, all females and because she did not have any male child, she was more or less abandoned by father, who had two other wives. These other wives bore him both male and female children. When father stopped paying attention to our mother and us, she contemplated leaving father's house but decided to remain and suffer deprivation and total neglect because she did not want us to grow up in a home devoid of a man. She had many issues against herself; even her immediate family were disappointed that she could not bear male children as if she herself had chosen to have only girls.

Ngwelle people had little regard for women and so, for a woman to give birth to only female children meant double disregard for her. Ngwelle men never bothered to know the role of a man in determining the sex of a child; so, they heaped all the blame on mother who was equally ignorant on what determines the sex of the child.

Because of father's resentment to a multitude of daughters, he did not care for our

education, and mother could only afford to see us through the elementary school. With our mother, we slaved day and night for our upkeep and to acquire the little formal education we could get.

Mother made us work very hard to prove that girl children were important, and this sometimes set us against her. We cultivated our farms and did all the jobs that boys did. We felled trees with axes and cutlasses, made ridges and even set traps for animals. We fetched water from a stream seven kilometres from our home, fetched firewood, pounded full drums of boiled palm fruits on wooden mortar and did all the household chores. As we did these jobs, father's only concern was to give us out in marriage to men he admired.

One by one he gave out my four elder sisters for marriage without their consent or that of our mother. He betrothed the remaining three of us to various families he admired. We were completely at his mercy.

My four sisters who were married off came home from time to time to complain to mother about the inhuman treatments their husbands subjected them to. They lamented lack of love and subjection to compulsory sex. They cooked for their husbands, washed their clothes, worked on their farms and kept their homes clean; they also bore children, took care of them and took care of

their husbands as well. They got beaten when they got too tired to surrender themselves to the sexual pleasure of their husbands. They got beaten when they felt too weak or tired to carry out some chores both at home and on the farms. They got beaten when their husbands get drunk. Sometimes, they would lean on mother's shoulders and cry and mother would join them in their show of tears.

Ajuwa, Efesi and I being the youngest, would look on with trepidation while these women cried and lamented. Most times, I would hear mother say, “You have to bear all these and hope for the best. There is nothing much a woman can do than endure; we know that men rule the world the way they know best. All that can be done is hope and pray for God to soften their hearts. Remember that what is happening to you isn't new. Our mothers and grandmothers went through these pains of womanhood and lived their lives to the full because they accepted their fate. If you accept that what you now call pain and humiliation are some of the prices you have to pay as a woman, you will find that it is not as painful as you now believe.”

I grew up with this perverted view of womanhood and gradually grew to hate men. I felt men had no reason to maltreat women because in our home, mother brought us up to be stronger than many men, including our half-brothers. If we

could farm and cultivate both food and cash crops and combine these with trading and housekeeping, why should we allow men who cannot do what we do to subject us to servitude? Sometimes, my two sisters and I would sit down both in the farm and at home and wonder why strong women allowed themselves to accept subjugation. Whenever we were alone, we would sit down and try to find answers to why women should fold their hands and do nothing about their oppression by men. One day, despite being the youngest, I was forced to confront mother while she was advising our elder sisters to accept their lot as usual.

Ajuwa, the eldest among the three of us who were yet to be given away in marriage, was the workhorse of the family. She was hardworking and strong-willed but spoke only when it was absolutely necessary, and whenever she spoke or reacted, she expressed her views and reactions in very strong and clear terms. Efesi was the moderating factor in the house as she would be the one to make sure that peace reigned in our home always. She was also the most domesticated among the three of us. Of all my sisters, I was tagged as the garrulous one because I had the habit of speaking up even when my elder sisters chose to whisper and grumble about some unfavourable situation we confronted from time to time. I would

speaking my mind and most times would be punished for it. Being the last child of my mother, I thought I had the privilege to be freer than the older ones, but mother felt that I needed to be checked in order to be a good wife. I had got used to being punished most times for the things I said. Without caring about what punishment would be visited on me, I asked, "Mother, why do you keep advising my sisters to bear suffering and enslavement?"

"Because they are women," mother said bluntly.

"Why must being a woman translate to slavery?" Ajuwa boldly asked, to our mother's surprise.

"Ajuwa, and you too? I'm surprised that you are joining Siweku in her stupid never-ending questions," mother complained.

"Seriously speaking, I want to know why women must be subjected to virtual slavery," Ajuwa insisted.

"It is not slavery, but accepting the role God assigned to women. You may not understand that a woman needs a man to be complete. The man is the crown on the woman's head. A woman needs a man for many reasons, such as child-bearing and protection. Without a man, a woman cannot bear children and no woman will willingly choose to remain childless! An unmarried woman is an easy prey, and our society has no respect for a woman

who has no husband,” mother said, looking down.

“If being a wife means enslavement, I would rather stay single and face society and tackle their antagonism,” I said with resentment. My two sisters agreed with me and said that they too would rather remain single than opt for enslavement. Mother was flabbergasted.

“Make sure you don't say such nonsense before your father because if you do, you'll be in serious trouble. Don't forget that all of you have been betrothed to men, so you don't have a choice. Besides I have enough trouble already and I know you won't add to my troubles by putting me to shame. Our tradition has no room for single women and my daughters wouldn't be the ones to break tradition,” mother chided.

My sisters and I resolved we were not going to marry the men we were betrothed to; in fact, we decided to remain single if what we saw mother and our four sisters going through was what marriages meant. We knew this decision would be difficult to carry out but we would not give in easily. In our innocence, we were ready to confront society and its repressive rules and control over women.

I was the last daughter and it was the turn of my fifth sister, Ajuwa, to be married off. She stood up to father, refusing to marry the man to whom she

was betrothed. Father threatened to teach her how recalcitrant women were treated traditionally. He vowed to disgrace her, and mother rained tears from her eyes, begging my sister to do what was expected of her as a responsible and obedient daughter. Ajuwa stood her ground and swore that she would not marry Ogor, the man to whom our father betrothed her, and we supported her. After all entreaties failed, father decided it was time to actualise his threat so that Ajuwa would know that men were superior to women. He resorted to an archaic tradition whereby strong-willed women were brought to submission. He arranged for Ajuwa to be abducted and forcefully taken to Ogor's house.

On a market day, Ajuwa went to the market to sell palm kernels; as she was negotiating with the man who wanted to buy her palm kernels, ten hefty men dashed towards her and surprisingly carried her shoulder high right before the intimidated market crowd, who had been warned by the abductors to steer clear because they were fulfilling tradition. The sudden onslaught was surprising, but it was not too much for Ajuwa because father had earlier warned that he would deal with her. Because she knew that father was behind it all, she kept her head. Being a very strong and brave woman, she took time to look at the faces

of the men carrying her; to her surprise, they were familiar faces.

“Where are you carrying me to?” she bellowed.

“To Ogor, your rightful husband,” they chorused.

“So, all of you are working for my father and Ogor, eh?”

“We are not working for anybody, we are carrying out our obligations according to the custom and tradition of our people,” they retorted.

“I have something to say before you carry me to wherever you want to take me. Just put me on the ground, and allow me to breathe properly so that I can release what I have in me,” she pleaded.

'What is she up to? What can she possibly be up to? We are many and she cannot escape from us,' her abductors thought and then put her down gradually, forming a ring around her.

To the amazement of her captors, she inhaled a puff of air and breathed in and out and with tears streaming down her eyes, a melodious song burst forth from her mouth. She sang about the agony of womanhood:

Must a woman be a man's property?

Must a woman not have a mind of her own?

Must a woman be a slave to a man?

By the time she finished her song, her

captors had developed mixed feelings. Some were angry with themselves because her song touched their sensibilities despite their masculine toughness and orientation. They fought to hide their red eyes while a few others admired her, but because men were supposed to be hardy, they denied their feelings and continued with their mission. They then carried her more gently and she relaxed on their hands. As they carried her along, she would ask them to stop from time to time, and each time they stopped, she would burst out in a new song on what it took to be a woman.

Oh you men of small minds,
Would you be happy to see your mothers
kidnapped
Or your sisters kidnapped and forced into
marital slavery?
Oh, that I were a man
I would respect and honour womanhood.
I would honour and care for the woman
who is my mother.
Respect the woman who is my sister
Cherish the woman who is my daughter
Love the woman who is my wife
And adore and care for the woman
who bears my children.

Ajuwa's courage was enough to disarm her

captors; rather than they feeling defeated, carrying her became fun for them as they danced on until they reached Ogor's house, where gunshots were fired to seal up her marriage to Ogor. Even though she had been forcefully carried to Ogor's house, she swore that Ogor would never touch her. Her courage convinced her captors that she had a strong will and that Ogor might never be able to consummate the marriage without inflicting bodily harm on her. They decided that four of her captors would hold her down; two holding her hands and the other two holding her feet so that Ogor could consummate the marriage as the tradition demanded for a woman of strong will. Four men therefore held her tightly down while they turned their faces to the wall. Ogor lay on her and had intercourse with her. When he had had his fill, they left her and kept guard in the house so that she would not escape.

For three days, they watched over her day and night, but Ajuwa remained defiant and refused to eat. She refused food and water but could no longer resist Ogor's sexual assaults for fear of running out of energy. Ogor raped her day and night even when she refused food and water.

On the fourth day, her captors became worried that she might die of hunger. Although she was still looking strong, beautiful and healthy, they

felt that refusing food and water for four days was an indication of intent for suicide. They needed to keep her alive in order to actualise their aims. They then decided to let her go, convinced that she had had enough of Ogor's seeds to impregnate her. They held a meeting and gave her the option of either remaining or going if she wanted. Naturally, she opted to go but she was not broken.

While in captivity in Ogor's house, she was allowed to go to the bush behind the house to wash and ease herself under the watchful eyes of male and female guards. The male would follow her to a point and stop for the female guards to take over. My elder sister, Efesi, and I made a secret arrangement with some of the women guards who followed her to take her bath or ease herself. They allowed us to hide behind the shrubs to give her food and water. For the four days she was under Ogor's captivity, we made sure she fed well and drank enough water without her captors' knowing and she remained strong. When her captors allowed her to go for fear that she could die of hunger, we were happy that we had scored our first victory.

2

AREFUGE

Father disowned her after her release and swore that she would never return to his house. Mother washed her hands off the whole saga because she too claimed that my sister had put her to shame. Ajuwa therefore had no home and no hope as she had neither money to care for herself nor anybody to harbour her.

As we were thinking of what to do, one of the men who abducted her, known as Kokome, stole in to us in the night while we were lurking around mother's family house in the hope that they might help us out of the situation. He sneaked in to express his admiration for Ajuwa's bravery and to offer her help. He offered to accommodate Ajuwa in his mother's house in Alumeku, a village situated about six kilometres from Ngwelle, our own village. His offer of help was the only available option and Ajuwa accepted it. She was smuggled out in the dark to the neighbouring village where Kokome's mother was living alone as a widow.

Kika, Kokome's mother, lost her husband when Kokome was only three years old. She had refused to remarry because of what she suffered

when her husband died. She was accused of causing her husband's death. She was a very beautiful woman who had many admirers before she got married to Okefu, a native of Ngwelle. She was married for barely four years when her husband fell from a palm-tree he was harvesting and died. Kika was accused of using black magic powers to cause her husband's fall and eventual death. She was thereafter stripped naked and paraded round the village with the husks of palm kernel on her head and a big millstone placed on it for her to carry around the village. After this stigmatising treatment for witchcraft, she ran back to her village to live alone with her son until he was old enough to be returned to his father's relations in Ngwelle village.

When Kokome brought Ajuwa to live with Kika, Kika was very happy to have a companion, so she did not even bother to ask who Ajuwa was. She was very kind to Ajuwa and particularly happy with her when she realised that Ajuwa was a very hardworking girl. Ajuwa willingly accompanied her to farm and did all the hard work in addition to helping her look after her many fowls and goats. She had many fowls and goats and was very fond of them. She had separate shelters for the fowls and goats where they roosted at sunset. Every morning she would wake up very early to feed her animals

and birds with corn before releasing them to go for further pasture.

Kika was so fond of her animals that she had names for them. When she called the fowls and goats by their names, they would answer and obey her. When Ajuwa first came to live with Kika, she was surprised to see Kika speak to goats and fowls. After she had spent some time in her house, she got used to Kika and her animals. Gradually, Kika's attention shifted from the animals to Ajuwa. Because Ajuwa readily fitted into Kika's way of life, which involved farming and caring for her animals, she became very fond of her.

Whenever Kokome visited his mother, she would praise Ajuwa and say she was the daughter she didn't have. Kokome was also happy that his mother's attention was shifting away from her goats and fowls. After Ajuwa had lived with Kika for about one month, Ajuwa was horrified to discover that she was pregnant! She confided in us when we visited and in Kokome, but warned that neither father nor mother must know about the pregnancy until she could figure out what to do about it. She also begged Kokome not to tell Ogor or his mother. Although Ajuwa kept a calm head, she was confused just as we too were. We did not know what to do about the situation, but Ajuwa remained calm and resolute in her determination not to marry Ogor

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or endorse father's oppressive treatment of women. She was ready to face any situation no matter how tough.

Kokome had developed empathy for Ajuwa not only for affecting his mother's life but also for suffering because of her aversion to forced marriage and for the fate of Ajuwa's unborn child. He pleaded with her to tell Ogor of the pregnancy even if she would not marry him. Ajuwa refused, arguing that Ogor's cowardice by way of allowing men to hold her down for him to rape her made him less of a man. She decided that she would never allow him to be the father of her unborn child.

After all Kokome's entreaties failed, he decided to help Ajuwa out of the situation by offering to marry her. He discussed his decision with Ajuwa, who though defiant, was still reeling from confusion and frustration about the pregnancy.

“Would you want to marry a defiled woman?” Ajuwa asked Kokome.

“As far as I know you are not a defiled woman because you fought and resisted the rape to the end. We might have assisted Ogor to take your body, but your spirit was never broken. I feel ashamed that I was one of those who humiliated a brave and determined young woman. Ajuwa, knowing what I know about you now, I admire your

courage and spirit of hard work. I want to shield you from further humiliation. I will marry you and be the father to your unborn child,” Kokome assured her.

“But you know, you cannot marry me because I'm betrothed to Ogor.”

“Perhaps, not formally, but you can live with me and bring up your child with other children we would have. I know some men who are living with women they didn't pay dowry for. I'm saying this because I know that your father will never agree to return Ogor's dowry in order to accept mine.”

“Thank you for your offer, but let me think about it,” Ajuwa begged him.

Efesi and I sneaked out to visit Ajuwa as we usually did, and she told us of Kokome's offer. We reasoned with her even though we were as confused as she was; we thought it was a good idea since there was no other option. Knowing that she was determined not to have anything to do with Ogor, we felt she should accept Kokome's offer for the sake of her unborn child.

“Kokome might be different from other men we know,” Efesi advised Ajuwa. “For him to offer to be the father of your unborn child shows he has an accommodating heart. To house you and provide for your basic needs without asking for

anything in return also shows that he's one of a few good men around. His sacrifice for you must be commended and encouraged." Ajuwa took a long look at us and sighed.

"I don't seem to have any choice now; so, I can as well accept Kokome's offer, at least for the sake of the child I am carrying. By accepting this offer, I will have to concede to circumstances forcing me to go against my avowed decision to remain single. I'm now beginning to see what my mother meant when she said women never win any case before men! But is mother being proved right? Time will tell if any woman can ever win and if any can, it will have to be me though I don't know how this will happen." Saying these, she cried silently and we crouched round her and rained tears together with her.

Ajuwa informed Kokome that she had accepted his offer, and he counseled her to keep the information from his mother until he had finalised arrangements about where the two of them would relocate to. Ajuwa continued to live with Kika until she was five months pregnant without Kika knowing. She continued to work hard with Kika on her farm and in taking care of her animals. Kika had become a more relaxed woman now, and whenever Kokome came in to visit her, she would sing praises of Ajuwa.

One day, Ajuwa and Kika went to plant cassava in the farm and suddenly a shrill cry escaped from Ajuwa, who had been busy tilling the ground. She cried so sharply that her cry pierced through Kika, who rushed to her and found her lying face down on the ground.

“Help! Help!” Kika cried, running around and beating her breast. A few people nearby heard her wailings and rushed to her, and with their aid, Ajuwa was lifted off the ground and brought to the roadside where Kika spread her cloth on the ground and laid her on it. She poured water on her head to try to revive her. Immediately the water touched her head, she breathed heavily, opened her eyes, wiped her face with her left hand and yawned. She looked right and left in confusion and was surprised to see the people crowding around her. She tried to pull herself up but Kika held her back, crying, “Ajuwa, take it easy; don't force yourself to get up. You fainted!”

Tears rolled down Ajuwa's face as she looked round again at the faces surrounding her. “Mama, what happened?” she asked, staring at Kika.

“You fainted,” Kika repeated.

“Really?” she sobbed, trying again to lift herself off the ground. “Oh, Mama, I fainted?”

“Yes, you fainted. These people here

helped me to revive you,” Kika reiterated.

“Oh, my God, I must have given you a lot of trouble,” Ajuwa sobbed.

“Trouble? Thank God you are all right. What would I have told Kokome and your family wherever they may be or even my late husband's people, who branded me a witch?” Kika sighed.

“Thank you, Mama; thank you, everyone here. I'm now okay.”

Kika fixed her gaze on Ajuwa and asked, “Are you sure you are all right? What went wrong? Why didn't you tell me the work was too much for you?”

“It was not the work. I do harder work on our farm at home. I don't know what happened to me but I'm okay now. Please, tell these people to leave us, so we can go back to the farm and continue our work,” Ajuwa requested.

“Go back to which farm? We are concerned about your life and you are here talking about farm work. You want to add to my troubles? You want the people who said I am a witch to say I have done it again? Ajuwa, my dear, don't let me remember what I've tried hard to forget! You cannot work yourself to death! Just wait for me to take our machetes and hoes, so we can go back home.”

Kika ran back to the farm to take their

machetes and hoes, asking one of the helpers to watch Ajuwa for her. Shortly, she was back, and she and Ajuwa started walking home. As they walked home with Kika behind Ajuwa, Kika encouraged her to walk gently, so they took measured steps until they got home. For the next two weeks, Kika would not allow Ajuwa to follow her to farm despite Ajuwa's insistence that she was all right.

Kokome came home, and as he was thinking of the best way to tell his mother of his planned marriage to Ajuwa, Kika told Kokome how Ajuwa fainted in the farm. Later, she advised Kokome to marry Ajuwa because Ajuwa was very good and hardworking.

“Mama, I was just about to tell you that I have decided to marry her. I'm happy you have no objection. As a matter of fact she is pregnant with my baby!”

“Pregnant?” Kika shouted. “No wonder she fainted! Why didn't you tell me before now? Imagine a pregnant young woman tilling the ground under the heat of the tropical sun the way she did! Thank God she didn't lose the baby.”

“Mother, I'm also happy to tell you that I have secured a job as a driver in Lagos and would like to take Ajuwa to live with me. My employer offered me accommodation in his compound, and

it will be wonderful sharing it with Ajuwa,” Kokome told her.

“Really? I'm happy you have a job now as this will remove you from Ngwelle and Alumeku, the two villages bedevilled with fear, superstition and suspicion. Although I've been praying for an opportunity for you, taking Ajuwa away from me will create a vacuum in my life because I'm now used to living with her.

“However, I have lived with the fear that she would leave me someday. I will sorely miss her company; she has been such a wonderful young woman. I'm consoled that I'll have the opportunity to come to Lagos very soon to nurse her and your baby when she puts to bed,” Kika said with excitement.

3

WOMAN TO WOMAN

Kokome moved to the city to resume his new job and took Ajuwa along to live with him in the boy's quarters of his white boss. The boy's quarters were a one-bedroom accommodation with a small kitchen, a small bathroom and a toilet. Kokome and Ajuwa were happy to have this kind of accommodation which was different from what they were used to in the village. Electricity, running water and other facilities in the boy's quarter were good reasons for Ajuwa to be grateful to Kokome, who saved her from homelessness and shame.

Mr Edwards, Kokome's boss, was a man who had advanced in age. He lived with his equally old wife, and together they ran a wholesale shop where they sold animal feeds and fertilisers. Their three children were grown up and living in Europe and Asia, where they had their own businesses.

Mr Edwards hired Kokome to replace Waje, his former driver who died of lung cancer. Waje served Mr Edwards for twenty-five years before he died. He was a very good driver but a chain-smoker, whom Mr Edwards did everything

to dissuade from smoking excessively.

Waje was a very loyal and devoted driver, and Mr Edwards and his wife did their best to compensate him for his loyalty and devotion. They made sure Waje's children were given good education; they sponsored three out of his five children through university. They also built a small house for Waje in his village before he died. Because of the way Waje served Mr Edwards, they decided to employ another driver from Alumeku, Waje's village. Kokome was recommended to them by Waje's widow, who was a maternal aunt of Kokome.

Kokome gave a good account of his ability as an efficient driver, and Mr and Mrs Edwards were happy that they employed him. Few months after Kokome resumed work, Ajuwa gave birth to a beautiful baby boy.

Kika, in her excitement at the news of Ajuwa's delivery, sold off her goats and fowls and travelled to the city to take care of Ajuwa and her baby. Ajuwa's baby was named Onowe, was cute and light-skinned, and Kika was very happy for her handsome grandson. She spent three months nursing Ajuwa and her baby before returning to the village, feeling as a fulfilled grandmother.

Two years after the birth of Onowe, Ajuwa gave birth to a second child. This time it was a baby

girl. Kika, a very happy and fulfilled woman, came again to nurse mother and child. The baby girl, named after her grandmother, was dark-skinned and looked like her grandmother. Kika spent another three months nursing mother and daughter and overseeing Onowe before she returned to her village.

When the baby was six months old, Mr Edwards and his wife, who had noticed that Ajuwa was very intelligent and hardworking, advised Kokome to send her back to school to continue her education. They gave this advice because they observed how Ajuwa would wake up early every morning to sweep the whole compound and to water the flowers without being instructed to do so. They also noticed the enthusiasm with which she read their old newspapers.

Kokome had no objection to the advice but was worried about what would happen to the children if he allowed Ajuwa to go back to school. He therefore travelled to the village to discuss the issue with his mother. His mother was happy that Ajuwa would have the opportunity to get further education. She offered to come and live with them until Ajuwa was able to find a live-in maid who would look after the children.

When Kika went to the market to buy some things in preparation for her trip, she felt a tap on

her right shoulder and looking back, she saw an old acquaintance.

“Good afternoon, Ngozi,” she greeted. “It’s been a long time.”

“Good afternoon, Kika. I can see you are still the same Kika, who cannot see beyond her nose,” Ngozi blurted out.

“What do you mean?” Kika asked.

“What do I mean? So you are still the scape-goat, eh? After what you suffered in the hands of your in-laws, who accused you falsely of killing your husband, you are still groping about in the dark? When will you ever learn?” Ngozi asked.

“What’s all these about? My husband died about thirty years ago, and I have managed to move on with my life. Whatever my in-laws did to me is a thing of the past now; I have every reason to be the happy woman that I am. If you have nothing good to say to me, just leave and let me buy the things I’m taking to my son and his wife,” Kika pleaded.

“Yes, it’s precisely your son that I’m concerned about. One would have thought that you would do your best to protect him, being an only son. How can you allow an only son to put a curse on himself by living with another man’s wife?” Ngozi blurted out.

“Whose son and whose wife are you referring to? Would you get out of my way? The

problem with women like you is that you never mind your business. My son is happily married to the finest woman I have come across, and they are blessed with two children,” Kika proudly said.

“Aha, that's exactly what I mean when I said you don't see beyond your nose. Just imagine how deaf and blind you have been! The woman your son is living with is another man's wife! Is she not Ajuwa, the daughter of Oruru, who was abducted because of her strong-headedness? Your son was even one of the young men who abducted her and forcefully held her down for Ogor to have intimacy with her. Everybody in Ngwelle village and even in this village knew about this incident except you. The child she claims to have for your son is Ogor's; she gave birth to that child exactly nine months after Ogor had a series of forced sex with her. Apart from her hard-heartedness, she was suspected to be a witch because she survived four days and nights in Ogor's captivity without taking food or water, yet she remained strong and resolute,” Ngozi narrated to Kika, who stood staring at her.

“You had better think of something else to do instead of spending your time maligning innocent people,” Kika said and walked away.

“Woman, learn to open your eyes wider and listen more for the sake of your only son! Above all,

take actions to protect your only son. Ask him and see if he will not tell you exactly what I have just told you. Goodbye! Stop being foolish!" Ngozi snapped while walking away.

Kika swallowed hard and was lost in thoughts. She bought a few things from the market and rushed home. She got home a completely confused and restless person, wondering whether there was an iota of truth in Ngozi's revelation.

'Is Ngozi gibbering or is there any truth in what she said? How did she know Ajuwa's name? If what she said is true, what will I do? Ajuwa is such a good girl, and what Ngozi said about her is more like a fable than a fact. If Ajuwa is somebody's wife, how did my son come about her? Where did Kokome bring Ajuwa from? Where are her parents? Why did Kokome not arrange with his family to pay Ajuwa's dowry? Why did I accommodate her without asking any questions? Did my loneliness blind me to reasons when my son brought her to live with me? But can this wonderfully good lady be a witch?' These and many more thoughts tormented Kika and she spent the night with wide eyes.

She spent the next two days before her trip in restlessness. A day before she left for town, she got a surprise visit from Kokome's paternal uncle whom she had not seen for some years because of

the inhuman treatment that was meted out to her when her husband died.

Mekuye, her husband's elder brother, spear-headed the torment she suffered in the hands of her in-laws. Kika suspected that Mekuye came from Ngwelle to Alumeku for some sinister reasons. His visit therefore spelt troubles for Kika as this was coming a few days after her encounter with Ngozi.

As Mekuye banged on her door, she shrank with fear but quickly picked up courage and reminded herself that a hunter who does not have male dogs for hunting does his hunting with female dogs. She then made sure she tied her wrapper tightly on her waist and grabbed a handful of powdered pepper in her left hand before daring to open the door for him.

“What do you want in my house,” she asked, while opening the door half-way. Determined to tackle Mekuye if the need arose, she hid the pepper behind her back in readiness for any eventuality.

“Come out and meet me, you witch! You know I can't enter your house!” Mekuye hollered. “You coward, come inside and see if I will not smash your head with my pestle! Since you said I'm a witch, remember that a witch never loses. If you die in my hands, you will become a piece of meat and that is one gain, and if you stay alive, you will

be miserable which will be another gain. Haven't you done enough evil? What came out of your wickedness? You accused me falsely of killing my husband, but see what happened to you; you have lost your only male child. You even tormented your wife to death. Look at yourself and how miserable you look now," Kika shrieked.

"Woman, don't provoke me because I can kill you with my bare hand! What have you done with our son, Kokome? You want to kill him in the same way you killed my brother? How dare you acquire a defiled and recalcitrant woman for our son and allow him to claim a child he did not father? Now Ogor is seething with anger and going to every juju shrine in Ngwelle, swearing at Kokome. Why do you want to destroy what is left of our family?" Mekuye howled.

Kika, feeling that the pepper might not be enough to deal with Mekuye, rushed into her kitchen, grabbed a pestle and came outside; she blew the pepper into Mekuye's eyes. The pepper blinded Mekuye and he started writhing in pain, shouting "witch, witch!" He ran into neighbours who came out to see what was happening. Kika, mad with anger and frustration, held the pestle to smash his head, but the neighbours restrained her. They held her and tried to find out what the problem was, but she was incomprehensible as she

fumed and swore. However, Mekuye managed to escape from her and ran away.

Loaded with contempt and frustration, she packed a few things and travelled the following day, determined to find out the truth from her son. On arrival, Ajuwa ran out to welcome her, but she ignored her and marched past her. Ajuwa followed her wondering what had happened, but she marched into the house and sat down still ignoring Ajuwa. Onowe came, shouting “*guanny, guanny*” and opened his hands for Kika to carry him, but Kika ignored the child. Onowe burst into tears while Ajuwa watched in amazement.

“Mama,” Ajuwa pleaded while kneeling in front of Kika, “what's the matter? Is everything okay in the village?” Kika ignored her and turned her face away. Ajuwa went inside and brought a glass of cold water for her to drink, hoping the water would calm her down after the exhaustion from the journey, but Kika refused to take the water from her hand. She went inside again and carried baby Kika, who was asleep and placed the baby on Kika's laps but she ignored the baby.

Ajuwa, not knowing what to do, burst into tears and went back on her knees pleading, “Mama, I'm sorry for whatever I must have done to upset you. Even if you don't want to tell me what my offence is, please come and take your bath then eat

something. After you have rested, you might be able to tell your son what the matter is when he returns from work.”

Kika looked at Ajuwa menacingly and drew a long hiss. “I don't blame you! I blame myself who has been blind and deaf all this while. I blame my son who made me a laughing stock! Who are you? Who are your parents? Where did my son pick you from? Now tell me: are you the daughter of Oruru, the native of Ngwelle? Tell me who you are before I go mad!” Kika stood on her feet screaming.

Ajuwa, awe-struck, questioned her eyes and ears as she looked at Kika. 'Can this be the same kind-hearted woman I lived with and who treated me with so much kindness and consideration? Is she still Mama Kika or someone else? What could have happened to make her ask the questions she never asked before? Why didn't she ask these questions when I was in her house? What do I do or say now?' Ajuwa wondered, and with a confused mind, she grasped a piece of cloth and clasped little Kika on her back while dragging Onowe along. She walked outside to clear her head and inhale fresh air. Just then, she beheld Kokome, who drove in with his boss. Kokome drove into the garage, parked the car and took his boss' briefcase inside before coming to meet Ajuwa. He looked closely at Ajuwa and noticed that something was wrong

because she stood still on the spot even when Onowe ran to welcome him.

“What's the matter? You look sad; has mama come? Did she come with bad news?” Kokome asked, while holding Onowe with one hand and trying to give Ajuwa a one-arm embrace. Ajuwa stood still, tongue-tied, tears streaming down her face. Kokome held her and tried to walk her into their apartment, but she stood still with her tears-soaked face. He then left her and walked towards their apartment with Onowe, and surprisingly, he saw his mother standing by the door. He lifted Onowe to his shoulder and walked briskly to welcome his mother but had to stop because she came out and yelled.

“Kokome! Kokome! Son of Koriko, I thought I knew you, but it's like you decided to make a fool of me! Who is this woman you are living with? Who is Ajuwa? Whose daughter is she and where is she from?”

“Mama, stop shouting! Don't let my boss hear you shout! No one shouts here! Let's go inside before I lose my job.” Saying this, he rushed his mother inside and pleaded with her to lower her voice. “Mama, let me quickly bring Ajuwa in before my boss knows there's something wrong; then, you can gently ask all your questions,” Kokome pleaded.

Kika went in and sat down growling. “Oh, you don't want your boss to hear what is happening? He ought to hear and offer you the advice of an experienced old man! You told me he has grown-up children, and I'm sure he won't close his eyes when his children are doing the wrong things. I will shout as loud as I can if that would make him know my concerns and force him to come and talk sense into your head! Kokome led Ajuwa in and unstrapped the baby from her back and placed the baby on Kika's laps. Both of them went on their knees pleading, “Mama, please calm down, go and take a shower and eat then we can talk.”

“I'll neither eat nor drink until you answer my questions. Tell me who Ajuwa is before I lose my mind!”

“Mama, why waste time poking and prodding at irrelevancies?” Kokome asked.

“So you think a matter that has to do with life and death is irrelevant? Kika shrieked placing her two hands on her head.

“Okay, I'll answer your questions, but I want you to think back. Think of the ill treatment you received from my father's relations when father died. Think of the injustices you suffered. Mama, I'll tell you the truth, but whatever I did, I did it for you. You raised me up as a single mother

with no help from anyone. We slaved for food and for the little education I had, and yet you were magnanimous enough to release me to my father's family at an age when you needed me most to support you. You were falsely accused of killing my father, and you suffered loneliness and poverty just because you were a woman and I saw another woman who our archaic culture and inhumanity was leading to the same loneliness and ostracism that you passed through and I decided to come to her rescue. Yes, Ajuwa is the daughter of Oruru! She was inhumanly treated and unfortunately, I was one of the people who dehumanized her. Because of my youthful exuberance, I took part in her abduction. I did all the wrong things to an innocent young woman in the name of culture. I was part of it from the beginning to the end. In the process, I saw this young woman with an indomitable spirit and decided to help her as reparation. Mama, I remembered the stories of the inhuman treatment you suffered just because you were a woman and decided to protect a young, hardworking and resolute woman from the brutality of a cruel society! I offered to marry Ajuwa and be a father to her unborn child as a way of reparation but now I'm seriously in love with this woman who to me is a living angel!"

Kika, astounded, with a mouth that could

not close, picked up little Kika from her laps, and dumped the baby on her mother who was still kneeling in front of her. Springing from her seat, she placed her two hands on her waist and wailed.

“Hey! Hey! Kokome, you have killed me! So, it is true that you took Ogor's wife and seized his son? Abomination! Don't you know the implication of taking another man's wife? You want the gods to strike you dead or maim you, and then your father's people will say I did it? Oh, you want to die from the hands of Ogor, who I was told is seething with anger and going from one juju house to another pouring curses at you? Ajuwa! Oh Ajuwa! What did you do to my son to make him lose his senses? So you are truly the witch they said you were? You have bewitched my only son!”

As she was saying all these, she pounced on Ajuwa who quickly passed the baby to Kokome. Holding Ajuwa by the right hand, Kika sank her teeth into the palm of Ajuwa's right hand and bit her hard. Ajuwa screamed as blood gushed out. Kokome dropped little Kika, and tried to stop his mother, but she went into frenzy, slapping and kicking Ajuwa, who restrained herself from retaliating because of her respect for Kika. Ajuwa managed to escape from Mama Kika, and ran out of the house. Kokome tried to restrain his mother but she tore away from him and went after Ajuwa

screaming and calling her names. Kokome was afraid his boss would hear the commotion and that might cost him his job; so, he ran after his mother and tried to drag her into the house, but she raved, kicked and shouted as loud as she could. Then suddenly she slumped! Kokome was shocked! In his panic, he barked at Ajuwa to help him carry his mother inside and just as Ajuwa was about to heed, Mr Edwards appeared!

“Why all the commotion?” he asked.

Kokome could not say a word but pointed tearfully at his mother lying on the ground. Mr Edwards looked and saw Kika panting for breath.

“What!” he shouted. “Quick, Kokome, bring out the car! We must rush your mother to the hospital before she dies here! She needs cardiopulmonary resuscitation!”

Kokome rushed to the garage and brought out the car. With the aid of Ajuwa and Mr Edwards, Kika was lifted from the ground and put in the car. Mr Edwards gave Kokome some money and he drove off to St Joseph's Hospital. Kika was admitted in the hospital, where she spent six days and was resuscitated. Tests carried out on her showed she had heart trouble. Before Kika was discharged from the hospital, Mr Edwards asked for an explanation of the commotion from Kokome, who narrated everything to his boss. Mr

Edwards commended him for deciding to marry Ajuwa and wondered why his mother reacted the way she did.

Kika came back from hospital, a weak and tired woman but still continued to make trouble for Kokome and Ajuwa. She refused to eat food cooked by Ajuwa. To ensure his mother ate in order to have strength and recover faster, Kokome would buy food for her every day before going to work and when returning from work. This routine continued for two weeks before Kika got stronger and decided to be cooking for herself. Life in the house became hellish for Ajuwa as Kika continued to harass her day and night because she believed Ajuwa bewitched Kokome. Kika had now spent two months in the house causing sadness and sorrow for Kokome and Ajuwa. She swore she would not go back to the village until Kokome sent Ajuwa away from the house.

“I won't go back and become the laughing stock of the villagers. Besides, if anything happens to you, I will be accused of complicity in your actions and would be in for another round of troubles with your father's people, and this will take my life faster than God has planned. If you value your life, send this woman and her son away! I will help you nurse little Kika until you marry a decent wife,” Kika told Kokome.

“Mama, I can't understand this your meddlesomeness. This attitude can only lead you to self-destruction. Think of your health and all the troubles you have caused yourself and all of us. Look at the children and see how they are scared of you. Mellow down at least for their sake! The doctor advised you to take it easy because of your weak heart but you don't seem to care. Also, think of the impression you have created in the mind of my boss. I am sure you don't want me to lose my job, do you?”

“Mama, considering the inhuman treatment meted out to you by my father's family, I thought you would have become an advocate of justice for women. You have been unfair to Ajuwa for no justifiable reason. She lived with you and did her best to make you happy. When she was in your house, you were full of praise for her good conduct and hard work. She shared in your life and filled the loneliness you were forced to suffer. You were so pleased with her that you advised me to marry her. Because of the comments of spoilers, you now go against this woman who is like an angel. You want me to send her away. Do you have any consideration for the feelings of both of us? Mama, you were in love with my father before his sudden death; so, you know what it means to be in love. I'm seriously in love with Ajuwa, and have made up my

mind to share my life with her! I can't send her away; if you are ashamed or afraid to go back to the village, you can stay here with us and live happily. You must however rekindle the love you had for Ajuwa when she was living with you. You must treat her fairly and love her as a daughter," Kokome explained.

"Taboo! Abomination! Me, stay with you and watch you continue to commit sacrilege? God knows I object to this relationship and I'll do everything in my power to end it before it ends you! Just let me get strong enough to travel back and then you'll see the power of motherhood! You will see the power of the breast with which I fed you! Hopefully, I'll be well enough to go home soon. If I return to the village and Ajuwa is still in your house, then I'm not the mother who breastfed you!" Kika swore.

Kika spent another three weeks in Lagos inflicting pains and anguish on Ajuwa. She would wake up every morning swearing at and maligning Ajuwa, who in her humility bore the insults and maltreatment with resignation. Ajuwa spent her nights wide-eyed and her days mournful with tired eyes that yielded tears with every breathe she took, yet she continued to plead with Kika to consider her plight. Falling on her knees before Kika, she tearfully reminded her of the good times they had

together in the village. She also reminded her of what befell women just because they were women.

“Mama,” Ajuwa continued, “you suffered because you were a woman. Where does womanhood stand if you, who were unjustly punished by men for being a woman, now do injustice and marginalisation to another woman? Where lies the fate of women if fellow women cannot protect their own? Your son showed nobility and offered to protect me and my son and, you, a woman and a mother, decide to treat me poorly, exposing me to shame? When your son offered to protect me and my child, he did it out of a sense of equity, justice and to do justice for the treatment I received for being a woman with a mind of my own. Your son and I have fallen in love, and we have vowed that only death would separate us! Mama, you have a wonderful son whose help saved a woman. You once showed me love; you can still renew that love. Give me a chance and I promise I would be a good and caring daughter to you and a loving wife to your son.”

Kika looked askance awhile with eyes blazing like fire, and then, with a determined and deliberate effort, she blurted out, “Ajuwa, you are a witch! You have bewitched my son, but I swear I shall rescue him from your claws!”

“Mama, oh mama, why? Why do you want

to do to me that which was done to you? Why visit the injustices meted to you on me? Think of how you felt when you were branded a witch; think of how it affected your life. You should rid yourself of this characteristic fatalism of women?" Ajuwa cried.

"Ajuwa, you are a pretender! Your crocodile tears won't stop me from rescuing my son from your evil grip!" Kika affirmed.

Kika got stronger and insisted she must go back to the village. All entreaties for her to stay and recover fully before going were rejected. Kokome managed to take her to the doctor for final check-up. The doctor said she could go, but advised her to take her drugs as recommended. He also warned her to avoid unnecessary stress and try to cultivate peaceful habits.

As soon as Kika left for the village, Kokome and Ajuwa completed arrangements for me to come to Lagos to help them take care of the children so that Ajuwa could go back to school. I stole away from home and joined my sister in Lagos, leaving behind my sister Efesi, whom father was making arrangements to marry off as usual. Two weeks after I arrived Lagos, Ajuwa took the first major step of her life, a step that later dictated her future, that of her children and all of us. She started schooling. As we were savouring

the joy of Ajuwa's new stride in education and her first step to freedom, things took a new turn! Kokome turned malevolent!

His sudden unfriendly and brutish behaviour became a cause of concern for Ajuwa and me. He found fault with everything Ajuwa did. His hostile actions turned violent without provocation, and he started beating Ajuwa up and trashing her. These continued and I watched my sister take beatings and affront with bruises on her body without her crying out. She suffered in silence because she did not want Mr Edwards to know what was happening and possibly relieve Kokome of his appointment. My sister and I would crouch together trying without success to discern the cause of Kokome's sudden change. We gradually declined to the lifestyle of fear we were used to in my father's house.

'Must Ajuwa also suffer what my other sisters were suffering? Is womanhood a curse? Is mother right about women never having fair deals?' We could not find ready answers to these questions, but we decided we must take a stand and help ourselves as nobody was likely to do it for us. We decided to give Kokome the fight of his life without caring whose ox was gored. In deciding to fight back, we knew Kokome could lose his job, and that we could be thrown out of the house, but

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we felt we should show Kokome our physical and emotional strength. Our training, experience and the strength we developed out of hardship while mother was trying to make us relevant must not be in vain. The only constraint we had was the children, but we felt we would cross the bridge when we got there.

Kokome did not normally go to work on Sundays because that was the day Mr Edwards usually rested. On a fateful Sunday morning Kokome woke up as usual and picked up a quarrel with Ajuwa and before Ajuwa could say a word, he gave her two quick slaps on her cheeks. On any other day, Ajuwa would have run into the toilet and hid herself to cry but surprisingly, she stood her ground and pushed Kokome hard against the wall and gave him two heavy blows on his belly. Kokome was least prepared for what he got. Before he could recollect himself, I came over to join my sister. Seeing me, he tried to escape but I blocked and tackled him and he fell on the floor. We pinned him to the ground and rained blows on him. He fought like a dog, using his feet and teeth to fight back. As he used his hands, feet and teeth we too used our own bodily weapons to fight him viciously, inflicting injuries on his body as he also marked us with his teeth and nails. At a point we overpowered him because he was no longer fighting back or struggling to free himself from our

grips. We became afraid that he might have lost consciousness. We then quickly released him from our grips. As soon as we left him, he jumped on his feet, yelling and cursing. He wobbled inside and started throwing Ajuwa's belongings outside.

“Leave my house, you witch!” he screeched breathlessly. “You must be a witch to make me take the actions I took. How could I have offered to marry a woman who was pregnant with another man's child if not for the power of witchcraft? Thanks to my mother who opened my eyes to see whom you really are. You must leave my house with Ogor's son before I die because of you!”

As he raved and screamed, he flung Ajuwa's belongings out one by one. He grabbed little Kika and held her with one hand, pushing Onowe out along with Ajuwa and me. Not wanting to continue the fight, Ajuwa ran into Mr Edwards' house. He was having his siesta with his wife, and I stood outside with Onowe, who was scared and crying. The upheaval woke the white couple up.

“What's the matter?” Mr Edwards asked.

Ajuwa could not reply but stood still, crying.

“Why are you crying? Why all these blood stains?” Mr Edwards asked. Ajuwa still kept mute but continued to rain tears from her eyes. Mrs

Edward took over, and looking Ajuwa directly on the face she asked, “You have been fighting, isn't it? Now tell me what the matter is.”

“I'm sorry ma, it is Kokome. He has been beating me and wants me to leave his house with my son! He has thrown my belongings outside. I don't have anywhere to go. I don't know anybody here in Lagos,” Ajuwa cried.

“Kokome beat you, and threw you and your son out?” Mr Edwards asked in amazement. “He must be out of his mind. How can he be so cruel?” Mr Edwards stepped outside asking Ajuwa to follow him. Just like Ajuwa told him, he found Ajuwa's belongings scattered on the ground outside; little Onowe and I were standing by and crying. He walked into Kokome's apartment, and beckoned on him; he came out with baby Kika in his arms.

“What's all these?” he asked as he looked round the mess. Kokome kept mum, looking down. “Now, come to my apartment and tell me why you are taking this dastardly action,” Mr Edwards ordered.

With his head bowed, Kokome followed Mr Edwards still holding on to baby Kika in his hands and the baby was crying passionately for her mother. Kokome could not explain the cause of his action save to say that he was afraid that he might

die if Ajuwa continued to live with him. He pleaded for forgiveness and promised he would make it up to Ajuwa. Mr Edwards chastised him and advised him against being cruel to his wife. He also warned that he would not tolerate a repeat of such barbaric action from him in future. To be sure that Kokome was really repentant, Mr Edwards stood by and watched Kokome hand little Kika to Ajuwa, and Kokome went to work moving all the things he threw out back to the house.

Turning to Ajuwa, Mr Edwards said, “Now young woman, you and your sister must do everything to avoid violence. If in future Kokome becomes mean to you, don't hesitate to report him to me or my wife. As for your sister, you must warn her never to take the law into her hands. Quarrelling and fighting never solve problems. Just look at the injuries you inflicted on yourselves. It could have been worse but for the grace of God. In fact, any of you could have been killed in the fracas and whoever is alive will have the police to explain to and could end up in jail!”

Ajuwa went on her knees, thanked the Edwards and trailed behind Kokome as they went back to their apartment. Normalcy gradually returned and in less than two weeks, Kokome resumed his usual caring and wonderful attitude to his wife and children. Ajuwa continued her

education and I also enrolled for evening classes to improve myself. There was a feeling of fulfilment as each person in the house worked for the mutual good. When Ajuwa went to school, I took care of the children and when she returned she would take over to enable me attend my own classes. Kokome sometimes helped with household chores in addition to providing the finances. We were living our dreams: having education and living with a caring man. My exposure and that of Ajuwa to higher education gradually opened our eyes to the immense opportunity ahead of us. We were all happy and I looked forward to when my sister Efesi would join us so that she too could have higher education and gain the freedom that education could give. We remained grateful to Mr and Mrs Edwards, who were instrumental to our exposure to education and for ensuring that peace and love reigned in our home.

Mama Kika came to visit again, and was nice to all of us. She made us believe she had overcome her bigotry. She came with foodstuffs and was unusually friendly to all of us. Ajuwa cooked for her and she relished the food and praised Ajuwa for her culinary expertise. She played with the children and also chatted with me, asking me how I was getting on with the children. We were very happy about the change of things. Kokome

was particularly happy that his mother had finally come to terms with his decision to spend his life with Ajuwa.

Mama Kika said she would spend only one week with us in Lagos because she was going back to the village to host an important meeting. She turned down every plea for her to spend a little more time with us. To avoid falling out of favour with her, Kokome and Ajuwa took her for shopping and bought a few things for her, and she went back to the village. Two weeks after Kika returned to the village, the unexpected happened! Kokome woke up on a Monday morning to announce that he was travelling to the village that same day for a meeting with his mother.

“What kind of meeting are you going for when Mama left here just a fortnight ago? What about your job? Who would drive Mr Edwards when you are away?” Ajuwa asked.

“Ajuwa, I'm sorry I just have to go. It's important I must go for this meeting. It's a matter of life and death. I must go now!” Kokome insisted.

“If you must go, be courteous enough to go and seek for permission from Mr Edwards,” Ajuwa advised.

“It's no use because he'll not grant it to me. I'll sort it out with him when I come back,” Kokome said.

“Kokome,” Ajuwa pleaded, “don't take unnecessary risk with your job. You know jobs are not easy to come by. Besides, this job provides for all our needs, especially accommodation. Please think twice before you kill the goose that lays the golden egg.”

“Ajuwa, sorry I'm off. I have to catch the early bus!” Kokome said finally and left for the village, and for almost a month we did not hear from him.

Mr Edwards hired a temporary driver, and we were afraid that if Kokome failed to come back, Mr Edwards would throw us out of the house. We started thinking of what to do if Kokome failed to return. We decided we should do things to help the old couple so that they do not throw us out of the house so soon. I had done a few driving lessons with Kokome without the Edwards' knowing. I decided to do a few more lessons with a nearby driving school with a view to helping the Edwards with their driving since all they needed was for someone to drive them to their office and stay around to help with small errands. As I was rounding up my driving lesson, Kokome came back. We were happy that he was back, but had our fears whether Mr Edwards would accept him back. Surprisingly, he said he came back to move his property and take his daughter to the village. He

was told in the village that he would die soon if he continued to live with Ajuwa! He pleaded with Ajuwa to understand.

“Ajuwa, you may not understand but my father's family went to consult an oracle and it said that I would die soon in an accident just like my father did. The oracle said you are a witch. It also said that Ogor has been restless from the day he discovered you were with me and has been going to every known juju shrine in Ngwelle village swearing and devising charms against me. My people are worried that my father's lineage might go into extinction if I should die! The only reason they allowed me to come back here is to take little Kika away from you. They said I must bring her back because she is my blood.”

Ajuwa and I stared at Kokome and wondered what must have happened in the village which had such a discerning effect on him. Ajuwa pleaded with him to ignore the superstitious beliefs of the villagers, because fear and superstition were their hallmarks.

“What makes you believe that you will die now when we have lived together for almost five years? Why are you allowing your mother's fears and superstitions determine your future? When you left the village, your mother was very happy because you escaped from the fears and suspicions

that had retarded the progress of the villagers. Now you want to go back to the same unprogressive ways God redeemed you from because your mother is afraid of what people say. I beg you in the name of God to reject this plot to drag you down! Let's go to your boss and beg him to give your job back to you."

"Ajuwa, I have not come here for you to lecture me or insult my mother. I came for my daughter and for my belongings. I hope you will not make me resort to force. If you have no respect or feelings for your parents, it is your problem. I can't disrespect my mother who struggled all alone to bring me up. I don't have any plan to see Mr Edwards let alone beg for my job. My life is more important than the job. If I'm alive I will get another job," Kokome snarled.

"Kokome, I thought you loved me. Think of what you rescued me from, and consider what will happen to me and the children if you abandon us now. Have you thought of what will become of me and Onowe if you leave me and take away my daughter? I know you are a fair-minded man; don't let superstition ruin our life," Ajuwa pleaded in tears.

"Woman, stop your deceptive tears; hand my daughter over to me!" Kokome howled.

"If you must go, you'll have to go alone!

Onowe and Kika are my children. As long as I'm alive, I'll not allow you to take any of them to your superstitious and God-forsaken village," Ajuwa resolved.

"You want force, then force you'll get! I must take my daughter away and nobody in the world will stop me," Kokome hollered. He then pushed Ajuwa aside to enter the room where Kika lay asleep.

Ajuwa grasped the wall to support herself and signalled me to standby for action. I quickly got up, from where I sat and blocked the entrance to the main door. She took her own stand on the bedroom door, preventing Kokome from entering. A war of words ensued and the sleeping demon of unrestrained anger woke up from his slumber to ignite Kokome and Ajuwa as each of them started screaming and yelling. They were calling each other names; cursing and dissing, shouting the whys and wherefores to express their anger. Little Kika woke up and together with Onowe, they joined in the hullabaloo. They cried out loudly and clung to their mother's feet. The altercation pervaded the air, and Mr Edwards with his wife were forced to come out to find out what was happening.

"What the hell is happening?" Mr Edwards asked but looking closely, he saw Kokome!

“Where have you been all the while?” he asked him. “Why this disturbance? Why can't I find peace and quiet in my house?”

Kokome stood still and kept mute. In tears, Ajuwa spoke up and explained the whole saga to Mr Edwards, and pleaded with him and his wife to intervene. Mr Edwards was stunned and for some seconds, he fixed his gaze on Kokome without saying a word. When he regained his composure, he asked Kokome if what Ajuwa said was true. Kokome nodded his head and Mr Edwards and his wife were confounded.

“Have you lost your mind? You disappeared from your job without notice and left your family for over a month, yet Ajuwa continued to make excuses for you. Now you come back to say you want to abandon her and relocate to the village with your three-year-old daughter? I thought this issue of fear and superstition was settled over a year ago. Now, come with me; leave the ladies and let's talk, man to man.”

Kokome trailed behind Mr and Mrs Edwards, cowed as they went into Mr Edwards' living room. Mr Edwards made him sit down and asked him if he wanted something to drink. He swung his head right and left to signal no. Mr Edwards asked him to relax and tell him why he was bent on taking the action he wanted to.

“Sir,” he pleaded, “it's complicated. You'll never understand African voodoo and its effects. Ignoring what is happening is akin to opting for suicide in my tradition. It has to do with the judgment of the gods and that of men. No man who values his life will dare the gods, particularly when human beings are in solidarity with them. The bullets from the gods and men will not completely miss their target. Even if the gods were appeased and my sins were washed away, aggrieved men will disguise themselves as wicked and unforgiving gods, and cause evil to happen in the name of the gods. As I am talking to you now, I'm under an oath never to have anything to do with Ajuwa again. I shouldn't have gone home but having done so, I have been forcefully immersed in some kind of ritual that forbids me from having anything to do with Ajuwa. The only way out is to relocate to the village with my daughter. If I fail to do so, I would die in a few months from now. I love my job and I love Ajuwa, but my life and the commitment I made under the oath I took before my people and the gods scare me. Please, help me beg Ajuwa to let me go with my daughter. If she chooses to remain in Lagos, she can do so.”

“Are you saying nothing will make you change your mind?” Mr Edwards asked.

“Nothing, sir, because I don't want to die,”

Kokome lamented.

“Well then” Jane, Edwards' wife, took over and said, “you are an adult and free to do whatever you like with your life, but we are not going to allow you to mess up the life of little Kika with your fears and superstition. If you must go, leave Kika with her mother. If you insist on taking her, I will personally call the police to arrest you. Don't forget we know you up to the village.”

“My wife has said it all. We will advise Ajuwa to let you go, but you must leave Kika. My wife and I will see what we can do to help Ajuwa and the children. Thank God, she's gone far with her education and will soon graduate from high school. I'm sure she will be able to get employment. You may leave now,” Mr Edwards ordered.

Kokome stood up from his seat weeping in his heart! He managed to thank the Edwards and apologised for the trouble he caused them. As he stepped out of the house, Mr Edwards followed him to his apartment where he advised Ajuwa to let him go, stating that he had advised him to leave Kika behind. He stood by and watched Kokome pick a few things and reluctantly walked away, shaking his head in pity and disbelief.

4

NEW CHALLENGES

Kokome had gone but it was difficult for Ajuwa to come to terms with the reality of the situation. She loved Kokome for many reasons, especially for the sacrifice he made for her. As a young woman, she had hated marriage because of the cruelty and insensitivity heaped on women as exemplified by the way her mother and sisters were treated. She had suffered the humiliation of a public rape from Ogor and eventual homelessness because she wanted to stand her ground and refuse the servitude and brutality of the loveless and forced marriages she had seen.

Kokome, son of Koriko, had made a great difference. He showed her love and removed her from the village where women were treated with ignominy and allowed to survive only for men's sexual pleasure and for bearing children. He treated her with respect and returned dignity to her but his mother popped up like a bad coin to indoctrinate him on how to be a traditional man. The sudden rashness Kokome brought to practice was against his natural self as he came back to be a better and more caring man. Then, Kika, a victim of

the repressive system whose life had been largely ruled by fear of the people around her, worked hard and threw up enough venom to make her son succumb to the destructive effects of fear. Kika and Kokome were afraid that Kokome would die, so Kokome had to leave Ajuwa. If the cause of their fears was real, he might yet die because he had moved nearer to Ogor and the gods now, and the repressive system will ignite more fear into him. Day and night, she agonised over the fate of Kokome and what life held for her and her children.

I also worried about how we would survive and how long the Edwards would carry our burden. To continue living in the house of this old couple, we would have to find a way of rendering them some kind of valuable service, a service for which they would be made to retain us. I discussed with my sister and suggested that I offer to drive them free of charge in appreciation of the help they were rendering us. I reasoned that since their boy's quarter which we occupied was meant for the driver, we could retain the accommodation if they accepted me as their driver. There was however one constraint; I was yet to have a driver's licence. As we were thinking of how to present the matter to the Edwards, an opportunity emerged. The temporary driver they hired failed to turn up for work for some days without notice. On the first and second day,

Mr Edwards took a taxi to work. On the third day, I went to them in the morning to ask for the car key to enable me wash the car. They were very happy at my thoughtfulness, and they gladly gave me the key. I washed the car in and out, and took a step of faith by reversing it and positioning it near the entrance gate in the way the driver usually does. By the time Mr Edwards came out to ask me to fetch him a taxi, he was surprised to see that the car had been positioned at the entrance. He asked if the driver was around; I answered in the negative.

Shocked, he asked, “Who reversed this car?” Afraid of what his reaction might be, I kept quiet and stood looking at him.

“I asked, 'Who reversed this car?' I gave you the key of the car, and you are standing there moping at me.”

“Sir,” I stammered, “I did, but let me call Ajuwa to explain.”

“You better call her quickly before I do something you'll regret!” Mr Edwards snarled.

I ran inside and jabbered. “Ajuwa, please come and explain to Mr Edwards. He's mad at me for reversing the car.”

Ajuwa hurried after me; and standing before Mr Edwards, she genuflected and greeted him.

“Sir I wanted to come and tell you that

Siweku can drive, but I didn't know how to present it. She went to a driving school, and can drive except that she is yet to get her driver's licence. She can help you with driving until the driver comes back.”

“Really,” Mr Edwards chuckled, “you people never cease to amaze me with your abilities! The way Siweku parked the car, one would think a professional driver did it. It will be quite some fun being chauffeured by a beautiful young woman. I will test her driving and if she's okay, I can help her procure a licence. However, I'm not too sure I'll allow her to be my chauffeur even for a day,” Mr Edwards teased.

“Sir, allow me to drive you to work today as a test of my driving ability. I have a learner's permit with which I can drive,” I said with excitement.

“You, drive me? Do I want to take such a big risk? Besides, the law does not permit you to drive alone with just a learner's permit. You need a licensed driver by your side,” Mr Edwards admonished.

“I'm aware of the law, sir. I was just hoping that you have a licence and that would serve to fulfil the requirement of the law,” I said cheerlessly.

“Young lady, so you think I'll sit by you and

watch you experiment with my life? Oh no, I don't want to die of heart attack! Not from the anxiety of watching you drive in this Lagos with semi-mad drivers all over the place. Anyway, I would satisfy your courage by inviting my friend's driver to sit by you to evaluate your driving. But before then, Jane needs to know that you have learnt to drive and that you are willing to be my temporary chauffeur," he said chuckling. He called Jane and humorously said, "Guess who my next driver will be?"

"I seem lost, why make fun of a serious situation? Has the temporary driver sent any message of when he would resume work or has somebody recommended a new driver to you?" Jane asked, looking at her husband.

"Funny as it may seem, Siweku, Ajuwa's sister, is offering to drive me to work! Take a look at the car and see where it is parked. She reversed the car and parked it perfectly there to convince me she could drive; so I'm considering calling Mr Alex's driver to test her driving skill," Mr Edwards said to his wife.

"I'm thrilled! These young women are never daunted. I'll not be surprised if Siweku can drive because I've seen her and Ajuwa try their hands on many things. Do you know that apart from tending the garden, they bake and sew? They bake the bread and pastries we eat in this house and

sewed the new drapes in the living room. Test her and if she is OK, we can use her services until we are able to find a reliable driver,” Mrs Edwards responded.

Mr Edwards brought out his mobile phone and called his friend Alex to send his driver to him. In less than thirty minutes, Alex's driver was around. Siweku took the driver's seat while Alex's driver sat in the front with her. Mr Edwards sat at his usual owner's corner at the back and Siweku drove seamlessly to Mr Edwards' office. Mr Edwards did not need Alex's driver to tell him the result of Siweku's driving test because her driving was unbelievably perfect. Without any hesitation, he pronounced Siweku an excellent driver.

“Siweku, you amaze me. How long did it take you to learn to drive so well?” Mr Edwards asked excitedly.

“Sir, I spent quite some time in the driving school until I was told I was good enough to drive.” “Why did you decide to go to a driving school?” Mr Edwards asked.

“I was hoping to look for a job as a driver and salesperson to enable me earn some money to help my family, but now that you don't have a driver, it will be an opportunity to do a little to help you. You have done so much for us. Ajuwa and I have been thinking of how to show our

appreciation. Can you allow me to be your driver? You don't have to pay me because you've already done a lot for us. Ajuwa and I will be very happy to be useful to you," I pleaded.

"Young woman, you'll drive me until I find a reliable driver, and you'll be paid just like any other driver. Take it that you already have a job. I'll arrange for you to get a driver's licence as soon as possible," Mr Edwards said.

I became ecstatic and fell on my knees to thank Mr Edwards. While still at Mr Edwards' office, I phoned Ajuwa to break the good news. I spent the remaining day in the office helping with small errands. When I got home in the evening, my sister and I had a rapturous moment, but also thought of what to do about Ajuwa's children since I have been the one taking care of them after school. We also contemplated on the fate of our sister, Efesi, whom our father had already married off but who was waiting for us to come to her rescue.

Efesi was married off to Njoka in father's usual way, but because of the degrading treatment Ajuwa received, we advised her to play along until we found a way of rescuing her. She therefore pretended to cooperate. We made sure we secretly sent her birth control pills so that she would not get pregnant as Ajuwa did, but she was a wise young

woman who did not have to use the pills but used her wisdom. She was having her menstruation at the time she was escorted to Njoka's house, and this saved her from being violated. Having been saved from this initial violation, she applied her wisdom and courteously cajoled Njoka into believing that she had developed a health condition which caused her to bleed continuously within the last three months. For this reason she was not sexually exploited.

In Ngwelle, it was an abomination to have sex or even sleep in the same room with a woman who was bleeding, one of those superstitions they held on to. She was, therefore, assigned a separate room. On her part, she made a deliberate effort to maintain good relationship with Njoka and his family. They grew to love her, and arranged for her to be treated by herbalists to stop the bleeding. She followed them wherever they took her, but made sure she never took any of the herbs prepared for her.

Thanks to the Edwards that I had a job with a good pay while still attending my evening classes. Ajuwa had completed her secondary education with very good grades, and had made up her mind to go further by attending a part-time programme in a university. I had two more years to complete my secondary education and was also

looking forward to having tertiary education. With my pay and the money Ajuwa made from sewing and baking, we were able to afford the basic necessities of life while Ajuwa was looking forward to the possibility of securing a job that would give her a regular income. Relatively settled, our next agenda was how to free Efesi from the virtual bondage which father forced on her. Meanwhile, we had re-established contacts with our mother and our other sisters, and gradually mother was beginning to build up confidence.

She was now beginning to cooperate with us, and was working with us on how to free Efesi from the forced marriage father got her into. With mother's aid, we were able to smuggle Efesi into Lagos. Efesi left her husband's home pretending she was going to visit mother. Mother had arranged to help her disguise herself with our eldest sister's worn-out clothes. Dressed like our eldest sister, she secretly went to the place we had arranged for a driver to pick her up and bring her to Lagos.

Efesi's arrival in Lagos was a great triumph for us, and she quickly integrated into our plan as the presence of one more hand expectedly brought about increased productivity as each of us contributed our quota to the welfare of all. Also, the care of the children became a shared responsibility. I went to work in the day and classes in the evening;

Lucy Jonah

Ajuwa secured a part-time job where she spent the day from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. daily, and came back home early enough to care for the children when they come back from school. Efesi enrolled in an adult education secondary school, where she resumed by 9 a.m. and closed by 3 p.m. Monday to Friday. With these arrangements, we worked hard and cared for ourselves, and sent money home to support our mother and our sisters. We continued to work hard at our vocations and education and in a record time, Ajuwa graduated in Sociology. I also enrolled in Physical Education, and Efesi was to study History and Education later, and this was to become very useful for our future endeavours. However, our people in the village and the family to whom Efesi was given out in marriage were to react later.

5

KOKOME AND HIS KINSMEN

By the time the news filtered into the village that Efesi had joined us in Lagos, hell's pot of venom exploded and the villagers demonstrated their fury. Ogor, Kokome and Njoka, feeling humiliated, took the lead to check what they believed was our excesses. Father had become a weak old man who the villagers now disregarded for his inability to control his daughters. Mother on the other hand was brought before the elders for a number of interrogations where she feigned innocence but all the same, she was ostracised by the village women for her inability to bring up her daughters properly. She was, therefore, not allowed to be part of the village meetings and ceremonies.

Mr and Mrs Edwards had become very old and were making plans to return to their home in Boston, United States of America. They were gradually winding up their business and had put a lot of responsibilities in the hands of Ajuwa and myself. We had the onerous task of selling the wares they still had in the warehouse and also selling the office block and the warehouse itself.

We got a reputable estate agent to put up for sale the warehouse and the content together with the office. In a short time, we struck luck as the agent found a buyer who was willing to pay the whopping sum of one billion naira for the business. The couple were so happy with us that they willed their house to us. It was a big six-bedroom house with two sitting rooms, two dining rooms and two kitchens together with the boys' quarter where we lived. The house was built on a massive piece of land and with a vast expanse of undeveloped land surrounding the building. The gift was more than we could ever imagine in our life.

One day, as the Edwards were still finalizing plans to go back home, a bus loaded with some strange-looking people stopped at the gate of our premises. As the security guard was wondering why the bus blocked the entrance gate, Kokome came out from the bus and started banging on the gate. The security man suspected trouble and refused to open for Kokome. He called Mr Edwards' attention to Kokome's brashness and the strange-looking people in the bus. Edwards came out and saw Kokome. He asked him to come in alone. The sight of Mr Edwards subdued Kokome because he still had respect for his former boss. Kokome went in alone, greeted Mr Edwards and explained that he and the other people in the bus

were sent by their people in the village to come to Lagos to recover their wives and children.

“Sir, ever since my mother used diabolical means to lure me back to the village, things have been very tough for me,” Kokome explained. “I could not come back to you and my family because I was accused of taking another man's wife and son. I was put under oath and made to undergo some bizarre rituals to harden my heart against women, particularly, against Ajuwa. My community expects me to be strong-hearted as a typical Ngwelle man. I was asked to lead this mission to reclaim Ajuwa and Onowe for Ogor, Efesi for Njoka and to also bring Kika home to my mother.”

“How do you plan to do that?” Mr Edwards asked.

“We were instructed to use every possible means to bring them back home, and never to return unless we achieve our mission,” Kokome answered.

“So you believe you can just drive into my premises with a bunch of your kinsmen and capture people under my care just because your village people said you should do so? Have you ever stopped to think that these women are human beings with rights? Do you know how much knowledge and exposure they have acquired since

they came here? Are you aware that they are now university graduates and that they know their rights and obligations? Since you walked out on Ajuwa to settle with your mother in the village, have you ever cared to know how she and her children are faring?" Mr Edwards queried.

"Sir, to tell you the truth, it's not as if I didn't care, but my tradition has not allowed me to have a say or express my feelings for her. Women in my tradition are owned by men and must do their biddings. My people have been drumming this tradition into my ears. I'm probably the only man among the lot out there who still have a bit of feeling for women and that feeling is for Ajuwa. My feeling for Ajuwa is seen as a weakness. I'm considered weak, and have been made to lead this journey to prove that I am a man. I'm aware that I'm the only powerless person in this mission. Those people there in that bus can scale walls, disappear and reappear; they can transform into animals or flying objects in order to achieve their aims. I came banging on the gate because I didn't want them to display their venomous powers in your premises"

"So you are telling me that those people out there can come into my premises without my permission and capture people under my care because they have magic powers? Go out and tell them to wait for me. I need to hear first-hand from

them. I'll go inside and quickly change to something more decent then I'll come out to see them," Mr Edwards told Kokome.

As Kokome stepped outside the gate to talk to his people, Mr Edwards picked up his phone and called the police to urgently send a formidable team to prevent Kokome and his team from kidnapping members of his household. He also phoned Ajuwa and me, advising us and the children to remain indoors because of the security threat from Kokome and his entourage. As Kokome and his men waited in the bus for Mr Edwards, they were suddenly surrounded by armed policemen. Just then Mr Edwards walked out to meet them. He asked Kokome to repeat to the police what their mission was. Kokome was so taken unawares that he was agape, unable to speak. On realizing what was happening, two of the men in the bus blew some black powdery charms on the faces of two policemen who instantly got dazed and swirled in circle. When the Divisional Police Officer who led the team saw what was happening, he quickly dragged out the two men who blew the substance on the faces of the two policemen and sprayed teargas on their faces. A few of them tried to use their magic powers to escape from the police, fleeing out of the van with unmatched dexterity but as they did, the police quickly pelted them with

teargas. One of them remained in the bus and refused to come down and it took the efforts of six policemen to drag him out and in the process, the seat of the bus was pulled off.

Seeing how powerful these men were, the police called for reinforcement and with the speed of lightning, the reinforcement came. Assisted by the reinforcement, the police were able to handcuff and take them away. They were dispossessed of their charms, stripped to only their underwear and hauled into police custody. They stayed in police custody until their kinsmen from the village came to sign bail bonds for them. And that was after they had signed an undertaking not to continue their dastardly mission.

Three weeks after the incident, Mr Edwards and his wife returned home to their country, leaving their house and all of its contents for Ajuwa and us. The sudden realization of our instant wealth and benefits, and the possession of better education were far beyond our dreams or imagination! We thought of what to do with the massive house and the vast expanse of land surrounding it. We decided to use this immense windfall together with our various skills and experiences to help women. We agreed on converting the property into schools where we can teach and instil knowledge, self-defence and self-determination.

6

OUR MISSION

When ants set out to build a hill, they would gather together and line up to pick tiny particles of mud which they gradually lay one on one to eventually form a big anthill. In our own case, we have a big hill already built for us by the Edwards and we have a duty to develop the hill into a mountain to build on what the Edwards bestowed on us. We were aware that it was easier to start something from the foundation than to build from the top. Considering our background, what the Edwards left for us was monumental and beyond our dreams. We had vowed never to fail in any endeavour we set our hearts and minds on from the moment Kokome abandoned us in Lagos. We worked hard to live up to this aspiration, having achieved successes in everything we laid our hands on. Taking things circumspectly, we came to the agreement that if we convert the property to schools, it would earn us enough money to maintain it, give us a good living and provide the resources to teach women self-defence and self-motivation thereby developing others the way the Edwards developed us and carefully avoid

mindless cupidity.

Efesi's degree in Education and History became the tool to start us up. We applied for the registration of a primary and secondary school. Before the Edwards left, I had saved some money from my salary, which I hardly spent because Mr Edwards provided for almost all my needs. Ajuwa and Efesi also had some savings. While we were all poised to use our knowledge and skills to run the schools, I had the ambition of establishing a gymnasium to teach women self-defence; so I converted the garage into a gym while soliciting the assistance of an acquaintance to teach women kung fu and wrestling. As a graduate of Physical Education, I would use the benefit of my education to develop the physique and posture of women and if possible, men as well. We planned that Ajuwa's knowledge of Sociology would be used to conduct a study on the social behaviour of the people of Ngwelle and other men who took delight in dehumanising women. Together we planned to use our experiences and knowledge to reorient women and teach them to stand up for themselves and stop being fatalists. We had planned what to do, but we were also aware that we might be like cartilages for a while and would therefore need iron determination to become strong bones.

While awaiting the formal registration of

the school, we decided to start reorientation and physical fitness class. We placed a notice in front of the house and inserted a classified advert in the Daily Voice Newspaper. In no time, responses started streaming in. With a class of over fifty students to start and with different religious backgrounds ranging from Christians, Moslems and Animist, we knew we had a big task at our hands. We had the rich, and not-so rich in our gym class, but one thing was common to them all; they needed a place to feel free, talk about their never-ending marital problems in a free and relaxed atmosphere. They told their stories, took aerobic classes and relaxed over glasses of fresh fruit juice. Participants increased as we told the story of our own life. The story of the abduction of Ajuwa and how she was pinned down by four men for Ogor to rape her became 'a best seller'. Many women and men came to listen to the woman who survived dehumanisation and who was eventually rescued from the barbarians of Ngwelle to become a university graduate. Our classes swelled with people and in no time, we converted half of the whole house to a massive gym and motivational lecture rooms. The spirit of camaraderie pervaded our classes, and many women who hitherto hid the pain they were going through, opened up and enrolled with us.

Our kung fu teacher, a man, taught the women how to repel attacks and defend themselves. He also taught them wrestling. We joined his class and soon became experts in kung fu and wrestling. Our teacher did his job because we paid him but sometimes he felt we needed to be butch so that our lessons can be more interesting. He said this to mock us, but we reminded him that we were women who wanted to remain women and not to appear like men. From time to time, we invited psychologists to build up the confidence of some of the women who years of servitude had reduced to mere pawns and chicken-hearts.

It took two years to have our proposed school properly registered, and during this period, our gym and motivational classes had recorded over a thousand participants. We earned money from the classes we ran as the rich participants paid and even donated to our cause while those who could not afford the fee were admitted free of charge. By the time our application for the registration of our schools came through, we had run short of rooms for the start of our primary and secondary schools. With our savings and the money we earned from our gym classes, we erected more rooms in the open space in the compound to accommodate the school.

7

THE REVENGE

Our school was progressing; most women who attended our gym classes enrolled their children in our elementary and secondary schools. Our classes in aerobics, kung fu, wrestling and the psychological motivational classes had started having great effects in the lives of some of the students and testimonies were pouring in. Gradually, we and our institutions became the cynosures of all eyes. Some men whose wives passed through our schools came to find out the magic behind our training.

Alice, one of the women we trained, narrated how she repelled her husband's attack when he came back home late and drunk as usual to pelt her with blows.

“He came back late and very drunk as usual. As I tried to open the door for him, he raised his hand to punch me on the face, but to his chagrin, I grabbed the raised hand, twisted it hard, lifted him up into the air and flung him to the ground. He sprawled on the ground, dazed but appeared to be instantly sober. He was in that position for nearly ten minutes before getting up;

when he stood up, he walked past me, went into our bedroom, and sat on the bed with his hands on his cheek, cogitating. Since that day, he stopped raising his hands on me and never came back home drunk. We have a peaceful home now where we respect each other.”

We had many testimonies from the women we trained. Some husbands and family members who saw unexpected and positive changes in the behaviour of our students donated sums of money to our cause. The lives of many of the women changed for better as they stopped living in fear and braced up to the challenges of life in general and those of marital life in particular.

Some of the rich women we trained had gained immensely from us and had become more confident. They suggested we formed a society to be named 'Society of Women of Thunder and Tornado' with the acronym, SWTT. The name sounded thrilling because we had heard of “Men of Timber and Calibre.” Thunder and Tornado sounded fiery and much more intimidating than Timber and Calibre. It was shocking to think that women would bear this thunderous name. If we formed a society bearing that name, we would be confronting mighty men in the society, and I wondered whether we would be ready and able to live up to that name.

My sisters and I deliberated on this new project. Although I was averse to such a horrifying name, Ajuwa liked it. She said it suited her mission to confront society and the repressive rules and regulations against women. We then decided to use the name. The prime mover of this idea was a beautiful woman in her late forties, married to a very rich man who abandoned their marital home and their four children to cohabit with a younger woman of twenty-two. Although he abandoned the woman and their children, he was still giving her financial support. She had a beautiful home and a lot of money to spend, but could not come to terms with her husband's unreasonable action. Her association with us and her listening to Ajuwa's story gave her the courage to decide to stand against unreasonable men like her husband. Fifteen women, including my sisters and I, became the pioneers of the Society of Women of Thunder and Tornado. Of the fifteen, only six were married. My two sisters and I were unmarried and the other remaining six were single women who had suffered raw deals from men.

We continued our normal fitness, kung fu and wrestling programme, and started propaganda against men we termed enemies of women. Our motivational class took a new and fiery tone, and Ajuwa became cryptic as she spoke of men with

venom. We organised workshops and seminars and through it, she poured out her pent-up anger and disgust for men who she said mistook themselves for gods. She won as much admiration as animosity whenever she addressed any audience. We begged her to tarry awhile but she had more members on her side than Efesi and I who continued to remind her that there were many good men around.

“Kokome was a good man until his mother changed him. Mr Edwards whose benevolence we are enjoying is also a man. Don't forget the sacrifice Kokome made for you when he rescued you from public derision and homelessness. If he had not made that extreme sacrifice, all of us would have still remained in the village wallowing in poverty and ignorance. We are what we are today because of his generosity as a good man. Besides, we have worked and done business with good men. Even in our present pursuit, men have been the harbinger of some of our efforts and many of them have donated to our project,” we begged her.

“It will be difficult for you to understand the anguish I've gone through all these years. I have lived through these years with ignominy, pain and a broken heart. I have managed to remain calm outwardly despite being gradually eaten up inside. Yes, I have told my story of scorn to all who cared to hear about it but imagine the situation where four

men held me down for Ogor to rape, and how that situation forced me to agree to marry Kokome, who was one of those who held me down for Ogor! I'm grateful to the Edwards for the opportunity they gave me to further my education, and for the wealth they gave us. They exposed me to education and it opened my eyes to the fact that women are humans and that a woman has as much right as a man and can therefore be whatever she aspires to be. I'm going to do anything humanly and spiritually possible to avenge my humiliation! Sisters, I want you to work for my vengeance. I want to disgrace men the way they did to me," Ajuwa fumed.

"My dear sister," I pleaded, "what you were subjected to was inexcusable but you have showed incredible courage and the will to live above man-made limitations. You surprised not only the cynics but also the optimists and everybody who heard your story. You overcame what probably destroyed many women, and lived to be a heroine that many women and men now look up to as a role model. Do not let anger and bitterness becloud your reasoning and rob you of the gains you have made. You are a successful mother of a handsome son and a beautiful daughter. You are a great achiever and ought to be counting your blessings. Our avowed mission should be to educate and correct society so that it

can be better for women. Many men are supporting our cause because of your story; this support should comfort you and put you at great advantage. Let's use your experience to educate and build women, not to antagonize and destroy men.”

“Siweku,” Ajuwa called, “we have been through many things together, and I know you will not abandon me in my quest for revenge!”

We organized rallies, and whenever Ajuwa mounted the rostrum, the stage would turn thunderous as she spat fire and drummed up anger and hatred against those men who she dubbed the enemies of women. Before long, her apostles of hate grew daily and SWTT took a different tone. A woman donated a detached house in an exclusive part of Lagos for us to use as a centre for the reformation of men. The woman claimed her only son was killed in a fight between herself and her ex-husband.

“My husband and I had a big quarrel and to prevent him from beating me as he usually did, I strapped my nine months old son on my back and was running down the staircase to escape from him but he went after me and yanked off the wrapper with which I strapped my son on my back, forcing the boy to fall from my back. In his fury, he failed to look at the baby and angrily stepped on my son's head as he ran after me. By the time I realised that he

stepped on my boy, my son's near lifeless body had rolled down the staircase with bruises all over him. When he saw what he did, his anger subsided and he rushed the boy to the hospital where he was pronounced dead. The shock of the death of my son whom I bore after fifteen years of childless marriage sent me to rehabilitation centre where I spent six months before becoming normal. By the time I recovered and tried to return home, I found another woman in my marital home. I picked a few things and relocated to one of the properties I inherited from my father," the woman related.

Many divorced, dejected and single women joined the crusade. Before long, the reformation house became a place of horror and all the women jettisoned their religion for super power because they wanted to revenge or show men that they too can be heartless. Disgruntled and sex-starved women tricked men into this house where they raped them, beat them up and dispossessed them of their valuables such as wrist watches, money and credit cards. Some members of the club, who could not get men to marry them, and who wanted to have their own children, tricked the men they fancied into this house of horror. They raped the men for pregnancy and pleasure and through this inhumanity, many of these women got pregnant without husbands or

boyfriends. The more men were tortured the better Ajuwa and her group felt. Ajuwa gradually got used to getting her kicks from inhumanity to men as she watched and sometimes participated in the escapades.

Efesi and I begged her to stop the madness, but she did not listen to us as the torture of men excited her. On our part, we could not abandon her because she was our sister and instrumental to whatever success we had achieved. Efesi kept the school running and the student population grew by the day while I continued with the fitness, kung fu and wrestling training. I was satisfied to know that many of my erstwhile graduates who had very low self-esteem had become confident women as they got energised with improved looks and the ability to defend themselves against abusive men. From time to time, we went for SWTT crusades or rallies only to see our sister preach hate. On one occasion, we visited the reformation house, and beheld the horror of hell. We saw as many as eight middle-aged and handsome men, agonising, fire blazing from their eyes, and stripped naked and being mercilessly lashed with horsewhips and being forced to have sex with women in the full glare of some members of SWTT. The bodies of the men were heavily lacerated, and Efesi and I swore we would never visit the place again, but we continued to plead with

Ajuwa to stop the mad project.

“Sister, you must stop this inhuman treatment! No amount of this terribly dehumanising treatment will physically remove the humiliation you went through many years ago. Just look at the laceration on the bodies of these innocent men and tell me what they will tell their families when they get home!” I said.

“Your angry words lacerate my heart much more than the laceration on the bodies of those swine you call men!” Ajuwa would say angrily.

“Ajuwa had gone mad!” Efesi and I concluded. “What do we do? Her two children were in the university; we called them on phone from time to time. Ajuwa had no time for them any longer as she travelled from one town to another preaching her message of hate and gaining more followers. We did our best to shield her children from the madness that had become their mother.

One day, an enraged victim reported to the police his ordeal in the hands of Ajuwa and her cohort. The police set up a surveillance team to ascertain the authenticity of the report. The information filtered into the ears of Ajuwa and her sadistic group. They decided that they would make themselves invincible through the use of juju and other supernatural powers. They started going to clairvoyants, juju priests, wonder workers and

spiritualists to seek for magical powers. They paid huge sums of money to these people, were subjected to ritual bathes, had incisions on their bodies and wore charms and amulets on their necks, arms and waist. With these, they were assured that no power on earth would harm or defeat them. They were also assured that they could use esoteric powers to render the police powerless. They were given special charms to put in the many flower pots in the compound and at the base of all the beautiful flowers and shrubs that surrounded the house of horror. Ajuwa was not satisfied with these powers and all the bizarre potions she had garnered. She went further to acquire power to be able to conjure thunder in order to live up to the name of the society, Society of Women of Thunder and Tornado.

The police surveillance amounted to nothing as all the police officers could see was a patch of forest in the middle of a beautiful estate. After two months of surveillance that yielded nothing, the police gave up. More victims of SWTT reported their agony to the police but the police could not find the evidence they needed to prosecute members of SWTT, who continued their nefarious activities and campaign of hate. Ajuwa who believed that she and her group were invincible, decided to dare Ogor by carrying her

campaign to Ngwelle in order to confront him.

Two buses, loaded with members of SWTT, headed for Ngwelle. Ajuwa, and some of her officials led the convoy. They entered Ngwelle at about 7 p.m. when the farmers had returned from their farms and the men had had their dinners and were sitting outside, enjoying their palm wine. Suddenly the chief priest and custodian of the gods of Ngwelle blew his horn seven times. This was a symbolic alarm to indicate that there was trouble somewhere in the village. Young men dropped their drinking gourds and ran inside to put on their charms and amulet. They grabbed their machetes and guns. The older men turned to their private gods, and pleaded with them to spare their village and its inhabitants.

Ajuwa led her convoy to Ogor's house, and as they drove along the earth road, they saw young men running after them. By the time they got to the entrance of Ogor's house, they were besieged by armed young men who demanded their mission. Ajuwa, full of confidence, stepped out of the minibus with a warrior's courage and boldly announced that she had come to take her revenge on Ogor.

“I'm Ajuwa, the daughter of Oruru, whom Ogor humiliated and raped under the full glare of his friends who held me for him! I have come to

give him a dose of his medicine. Let him come out and confront his past!”

As the men gowered at her, they could not believe their eyes!

“Who is this daring woman and her group? Where is she from? Surely this cannot be Ajuwa, the daughter of Oruru who we hear so much about! Is this the woman who denied Ogor his son and went ahead to lock up our men in police custody? What does she want? Does she want to die in our hands?” they asked.

Okoh, one of the young men, stepped forward, facing Ajuwa squarely; he yelled, “Ajuwa, or whatever you call yourself, you better pack yourself and your horde of women back into your vehicles and vamoose before you all perish here and now!”

“Young man,” Ajuwa snapped, “you watch and see who will scarper! Bring out Ogor now or get consumed by fire! In case you don't know, these women are members of the Society of Women of Thunder and Tornado! Bring out Ogor or see us in action!”

Some of the young men moved to grab Ajuwa and her colleagues but the older ones restrained them, insisting that they were mere women who had lost their minds. More young men rushed to the scene firing bullets into the air as they

advanced. Commotion ensued as efforts to restrain the younger men from manhandling the women turned violent. With gun-shots echoing from all quarters; the scene became chaotic. Ajuwa saw men of brawn and the strength of number and might. Beholding the accompanying force, she turned to the supernatural! It was obvious to her that she and her group could not dare the determination and the physical force of the flock of young men surrounding them; so, she decided to invoke thunder! Muttering incantation with her head and both hands raised to the sky, she cried out loudly,

“Thunder! Come down here right now with your consuming power and rain fire and brimstone on Ogor and his household!” Before she brought down her raised hands and head, there was a flash of lightening and a deafening sound of thunder which caused tremor as the ground shook and the roof of Ogor's house and a few other houses were badly affected. Agadi, a Ngwelle powerful medicine man, tried to match Ajuwa's power; he directed the fire to the buses that brought Ajuwa and her group to Ngwelle. Before the throng could grasp what was happening, fire had started blazing from one of the two buses, but Ajuwa's car was not affected!

“Fire! Fire! Fire!” everybody shouted as

the fire of hell blazed out. Both men and women jettisoned reason for raw courage and the ensuing pandemonium floored some men and women while the ones standing stepped on those on the ground as they ran for life or went for the kill.

Some of the youth rounded up the women who tried to run into the remaining bus. They took them away for interrogation before King Mameri, the traditional head of Ngwelle. A few of the women had fainted and were laid on the ground. Ajuwa stood catatonic until two hefty men grabbed her and demanded explanation. She tried to look at the men and the wreck around but her sight was blurred. Rubbing her eyes with the back of her left palm, she looked again and saw the burnt bus. She also saw the pieces of wood and the roofing sheets scattered on the ground. As if she had just woken up from slumber, she asked, “Where are my colleagues?”

“Your colleagues?” Aliogo, one of the men who grabbed her, asked derisively. “Come with us and you will see your cohorts, you witch!”

“I’ll follow you anywhere provided you show me where my colleagues are.”

They tied her two hands to her back and led her to the court of the king of Ngwelle. There, she saw her colleagues trembling with fear. The ones that fainted were revived, and also brought before

the king and his chiefs. The king sent guards to bring Oruru, our father, and also to bring Anuta, our mother.

When the guards got to our house, they found father dead because the news of his daughter's escapade was too much for his weakened heart to withstand. The guards could not locate our mother because she had managed to escape as a result of earlier warnings from Efesi and me. They came back to report their findings, and this made the king snap in rage. He stepped down from his throne and went into the inner chamber with some of his chiefs. Alone with his chiefs, he asked, "What do we do with this witch who happened to be the daughter of Oruru? What do we do with a woman who brought her fellow witches from other lands to attack us in our own homes? We can easily kill these women but what happens after? We hear they have money and connections. The news of their evil adventure to our village is probably everywhere now and as such if any of them gets missing, the police will overrun this place!" As he was analysing the situation and asking questions, some of the chiefs who were impatient and angry shook their heads vigorously feeling he was wasting time. They felt the women should either be killed or be maimed. Chief Osuzo suggested that Ogor and Kokome be

invited to the inner chamber for their views since they were the ones directly affected. This suggestion was agreed on, and the two men were sent for.

They came into the inner chamber and the chiefs asked them what should be done to the captured women, especially Ajuwa. Kokome advised that the whole matter be handled with caution because Ajuwa had money and the backing of some powerful people. He reminded the chiefs of how Ogor, himself, Ochefu and the very powerful medicine men who went with them to Lagos were hauled into police custody during the failed attempt to take back their wives and children. Ogor confessed that he too had become afraid of Ajuwa, who, as it were, had become very powerful financially, physically and diabolically.

“Let us ask her to release our children to us with a threat that if she fails, she and her members should be ready to face the wrath of the whole community,” Kokome suggested.

“What happens if she remains adamant?” King Mameri asked.

“Then we would bare our fangs by resorting to our own spiritual and diabolical powers. If nobody knows what to do, I would request that the king grant me the authority to showcase some of our age-old powers,” Chief Jejebo boasted.

“Supposing the powers you want to use lead to the death of any of these women, won't we be in trouble?” the king asked.

“Nobody will die; we use these powers sometimes to correct our erring children,” Chief Jejebi insisted.

Chief Onunu agreed that a lot can be done using hidden powers to bring the women to their knees without killing them.

“It will be a shame on this community to allow women to do what these women did, and go scot-free. If we do not teach them any lesson, our women here will ask us to open our palms for them to excrete on. We must show them that we can bite. I agree with Chief Jejebi that these women be taught some hard lessons,” Chief Onunu reiterated.

After some arguments, it was agreed that Ajuwa be asked to release Ogor's son and Kokome's daughter, or be dealt with. The king and the chiefs emerged from the inner chamber and as agreed, they demanded that Ajuwa release their children as a condition to free her and her group. At the mention of this condition, Ajuwa shook her head violently and swore that she would rather die than release her well-brought-up children to the barbaric people of Ngwelle. Before she could finish her sentence, she received a slap on her face

from an invisible hand, followed by lashes of invisible cane on her back. Just as she was trying to grasp what was happening, cries broke out from all her members as they twisted and turned in pain as if they were also being flogged.

“Stop! Stop! Stop!” they cried. “Ajuwa, please give them what they want, and save us from this pain.” Ajuwa did not heed, but instead reached within her own cryptic powers to render the invisible hand powerless. The chiefs watched with amazement but went further to conjure bees to sting Ajuwa and her friends. The swarm of bees filled the court buzzing and stinging only Ajuwa and her friends. They stung members of SWTT all over their bodies but did not sting the other people in the court. The Women of Thunder and Tornado howled and cried in pain, and descended on Ajuwa who tried to bear her own pains.

“Ajuwa,” they yelled, “did you bring us here to die? We don't want to die; we have many things to live for; so, please give these people what they want.”

Ajuwa tried to use her own powers to stop the bees, but the more incantations she chanted the greater the number of bees that buzzed and stung. Anguish consumed the members of SWTT as some of them lay on the floor writhing in pains with tears pumping from their eyes and mucus and

saliva dripping from their noses and mouths. The pain had become unbearable as the bees stung them continuously. Surprisingly Ajuwa slumped to her knees.

“I will release the children!” she cried out aloud. “Please stop the bees! I can't bear it any more. Save me and my colleagues from this agony!”

“Oh, you can't bear the pain any longer? We thought you were invincible! The bees need to sting you more before we can believe you. Chief Jejebi release more bees to sting only Ajuwa to make her realise that we have powers in Ngwelle!” King Mameri commanded.

Chief Jejebi muttered a few incantations and the bees descended on Ajuwa alone, whilst she was still on her knees. The bees stung her hard and she screamed and screeched, swearing that she would release the children. As the bees continued to sting her hard, she slumped and fell flat on the floor, foaming from her mouth. At this development, the king, the chiefs and all the people present feared that she might die; so, Chief Jejebi quickly ordered the bees to stop and in a twinkle of an eye, all the bees disappeared but Ajuwa lay still on the ground. Fear and anxiety gripped the king and his chiefs. They were afraid that if anything should happen to Ajuwa, the

village would be in serious trouble because the police would swoop on them and probably herd them into prison, and so, one by one they stole away from the scene, leaving Ajuwa and her cohort alone in the court.

When the members of SWTT found they were alone at the court, they ignored their own pains and quickly lifted Ajuwa from the floor and tried to revive her. Carrying her along with them, they rushed away and hurriedly squeezed themselves into the only bus and Ajuwa's car and drove off. As soon as they were out of Ngwelle, they went into the nearest hospital and were given first aid treatment but Ajuwa was admitted for two days for observation and treatment. After the two-day hospitalisation, she became strong enough for them to commence their journey back to Lagos.

Ajuwa arrived in Lagos, completely subdued and looking ill; she was hospitalised for a week before she could regain her strength. The adventure to Ngwelle divided the members of SWTT as those who travelled with Ajuwa to Ngwelle became despondent wondering why they undertook such a dangerous adventure with Ajuwa whose dare-devil nature was probably borne out of the belief that she practised witchcraft. The group became divided while loyalty became selective. Those who benefited financially from Ajuwa stuck

to her while the richer women started pulling out of the club.

The house of horror where men were mercilessly beaten and raped was put up for sale by the owner, who felt it was no longer safe to use her house for the escapades. Ajuwa watched as her members withdrew gradually. Not long after, the police dug out the files of the men who had earlier reported their ordeal in the hands of the Society of Women of Thunder and Tornado. They revisited the address. This time, they found a house that was put up for sale. They looked for the patch of forest that was on the address and found none! Investigation led to the arrest of Ajuwa and the owner of the house. The police kept them in custody while they went in search of the men who had earlier reported them. The police needed corroborative evidence of the victims for proper prosecution, but out of embarrassment, the men refused to come out to offer the needed evidence for prosecution.

When the police could not get the evidence they needed, the two women were released. The arrest put to rest the activities of SWTT as the few members who were still loyal to Ajuwa fled. Abandoned by her friends, Ajuwa became completely broken, but thank God Efesi and I were there for her.

8

THE NEED FOR HELP

Ajuwa's excesses forced us to start searching for help. At first we were confused on where to go for help. We were not the Church-going Christians because the Edwards, who were our mentors and benefactors, never went to any Church. We had never gone to any Church formally except for weddings, burials and other social events, yet we needed help for Ajuwa. We loathed the ways of our father and most natives of Ngwelle who sought help from the gods. We did not want to go to the gods or spiritualists for help because deep down in our hearts we knew there was a God who has been caring for us all along. We did not want to seek for help from diviners and juju men because the powers Ajuwa got from those sources hardened her and led her to her present state.

We were therefore at a crossroads, confused and worried for our own dear sister whose humiliation brought to us the comfortable life we were living in. Because we were ready to try anything outside of esoteric powers, we adopted Christianity for possible solution. We read the Bible and learnt many things, among which was the message of forgiveness. The Bible teaches that God

expects his children to forgive as a condition for their own forgiveness and happiness. But it was difficult forgiving certain wrongdoings. For instance, how can we forgive father for what he did to mother and us? Can Ajuwa forgive Ogor and all those who were participants in her public violation? What about Kokome's mother, who demonically turned Kokome against Ajuwa? We asked these questions without finding acceptable answers; so, we decided to go to a church which was closest to us and where we see many people troop in and out on Sundays.

We were reliably informed that the priest in charge of the church had a lot of empathy and that he held two doctorate degrees, one in Philosophy and another in Psychology and that he welcomed everyone irrespective of faith or belief. We felt that a man like that who had understanding, kindness, knowledge and friendly disposition might be able to influence Ajuwa and also help us.

We therefore went to Rev. Fr Ayodeji who was the priest we had heard so much about. Being the priest in charge of the church, he received us warmly and was not only friendly but also very eager to teach us about Jesus Christ. He told us about the supreme sacrifice Jesus made for the salvation of the whole world. Listening to him was as refreshing as a glass of cold drink on a very hot

day. His sermons on sacrifice, love and forgiveness converted Efesi and me into the Catholic faith. We became Catholics and started attending Church and praying for Ajuwa to imbibe the spirit of forgiveness and sacrifice.

Meanwhile, Ajuwa became melancholic after it dawned on her that the powers she depended so much on had all gone. She did not have any more supernatural powers, and she was finding it difficult to accept the fact that she was a vulnerable mortal.

We reminded her of all the good things the Lord did for her which turned her disgrace into grace, for without the incident of her public defilement, she would not have been where she was. What happened was evil, but God's love turned the evil to good for her and all of us, but she was already hardened and so she rebuffed all our advice. Her children, who were now young adults in tertiary institution, also joined us in our Catholic faith and whenever they were around they would join us to plead with their mother, but she would simply jeer at us. Nevertheless, we were determined to convert her. We pleaded with her to read the Bible she had in her bookshelf. We cleaned it and gave it to her so that she could learn about the love of God and the supreme sacrifice Jesus made for the salvation of mankind. She reminded us that

she was not ignorant of the contents of the Bible.

“I've read most parts of the Bible but have chosen a more practical and direct source of power because the gods are more powerful and they don't promise illusive hope to those who believe in them. The Christian God is powerless and only offers perpetual hope to those who believe in him. Also, Christian religion celebrates men, and gives them superiority over women. Why must I embrace a religion that expects women to always defer to men at their own expense?” she argued.

“Sister, the powers you depended on have disappointed you. Why don't you try the Christian God? He is consistent and never fails. By now it should have dawned on you that evil cannot conquer evil but that only love can conquer evil. Besides, your claim that Christianity expects women to defer to men is not true. Remember that the men of Ngwelle who maltreat women are not Christians,” I reasoned with her.

We tried to impress the truth about Christianity on her, but she pointed out some complications in the Bible by relating some stories of unwholesome treatment of women in the Bible to buttress her point.

“Look at the story of Creation; see what Christianity did to it. There are two versions of the story of creation, but the Christian religion would

rather quote and use the latter version so that they can subject women to men,” Ajuwa said. “In Genesis 1:26-28, the Bible says God made man and woman to be like him. So, man and woman are equal and are like God. If this is so, at what stage did man become superior to woman? If everything created by God is good, why is menstruation considered unclean whereas it is made by God, who said everything he made is good? Genesis 2 tells a second story of creation which the Christians prefer, and it is partly responsible for the subjugation of women.

“I love Genesis chapter 3 because there you can see the hidden power of womanhood! Just imagine how Eve ate the forbidden fruit and gave the same to Adam, who was not a man enough to refuse eating it. He chose to disobey God because of a woman and went ahead to eat the forbidden fruit. In verse 12, consider the answer Adam gave to God when God asked him why he ate the fruit he told him not to eat, 'The woman you put here with me gave me the fruit and I ate it.' Where is Adam's sense of responsibility? In our everyday life, men tend to relegate their responsibilities when things go wrong. Note that women get blamed for the failures of men.

“Also Genesis chapter 5: 1-2 reads; 'This is the list of the descendants of Adam. When God

created human beings, he made them like himself. He created them male and female, blessed them and named them 'human beings'. God created us human beings, male and female and made us to be like himself. A number of women, including our mother have accepted roles and positions that are below what God created them to be. If God created human beings to be like himself, why then do women insult God by playing the roles of slaves? Is God a slave? It is because I don't want to be a slave that I abhor the Christian religion!"

"Sister, I'm happy you are at home with the Bible, which is however subject to spiritual interpretation. You can see that God loves both men and women. God endowed women with so much power that they carried the gods in their wombs. In Christianity, Jesus Christ took flesh from the womb of a woman, the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Bible records that Angel Gabriel saluted the Blessed Virgin Mary when he said, 'Hail, full of grace.' In the entire Bible, there is no record of any angel hailing any man. Also note that in other religions, the gods were carried in the wombs of women who gave birth to them and nurtured them for the service of mankind. The gods did not drop from the sky and men did not have to get pregnant in order to bear gods. This shows that God holds women in high esteem," I

argued.

“God holds women in high esteem, but men don't! Even heavenly beings and some so-called good men, admire the beauty of women only for the purpose of using them for their own pleasure, but God watches and keeps silent. Imagine heavenly beings using women for their pleasure as related in Genesis 6:1-4.

“Go to Genesis 12:11-16 and see how one of the powers of womanhood, which is beauty, was exploited by the great patriarch, Abraham. Sarai was the beautiful wife of Abraham, and Abraham used her beauty to protect himself, and obtain favour from the King of Egypt. Now listen to how Abraham exploited his wife: 'When he was about to cross the border into Egypt, he said to his wife, 'You are a beautiful woman. When the Egyptians see you, they will assume that you are my wife, and so they will kill me and let you live. Tell them you are my sister; then because of you, they will let me live and treat me well. When they crossed the border into Egypt, the Egyptians did see that his wife was beautiful. Some of the court officials saw her and told the king how beautiful she was; so she was taken to the king's palace. Because of her beauty, the king treated Abraham well and gave him flocks of sheep, goats, cattle, donkey, slaves and camels.'

“Because Abraham wanted to stay alive and

receive favours from the king, he traded his wife for his safety and pleasure. It did not matter to him that he was making his wife to commit adultery; he did not consider the feelings of his wife. He did not stop to think of the humiliation he was making his wife to go through by allowing the king to have her. In fact, he treated his wife as mere possession to be used the way he wished. If Sarai had on her own gone after the king, Abraham would have labelled her an adulterous wife, and she would have probably been stoned to death.

“Womanhood is power, yet women choose to be powerless and helpless and Christianity encourages them to take the back seat. However, I'm happy that a few wise women use their feminine power and beauty to put men in their right places. I may be down now but I'm not done with oppressive men yet!” Ajuwa insisted.

As she ranted and raved, we looked at her with trepidation, thinking, ‘Why does she only see the negative side of things? Why has Ajuwa become so negative? Why her sadistic approach to things? What can be done to change her perception about life?’

We sympathised with her for the dehumanising treatment she suffered and were conscious that the experience she went through left indelible marks on her. We were aware that

nothing can wipe away the effect of that sad experience, but we expected her to see the good that came from the evil that befell her and to see the hand of God in the generosity of the Edwards. We felt she should use her own blessings to bless others by using her wealth and knowledge to help the less-privileged instead of squandering her money on vengeance. Whenever we tried to make her see the sense in Christianity, she would quote Bible verses that fitted her vengeful beliefs. She had developed a new and inexplicable love for the Bible, which she read from morning to night just to prove that Christianity was not the answer to the problems of mankind, particular as it relates to the trauma of women. We became helpless as everything pointed to the fact that all may not be well with sense of reasoning.

We went to Fr Ayodeji to ask for prayer and counselling for Ajuwa. When the Reverend Father tried to have a counselling session with her, she raved, accusing the Church of championing the marginalisation of women. We became helpless but Fr Ayodeji was not deterred as he declared nine days of Novena with fasting for her, encouraging us to fast and pray, and to come for morning Mass for the nine days.

Two days to the end of our fasting, Ajuwa came to us to apologise for her actions. She agreed

to go to church for help, but she said the Catholic Church was too passive and powerless for her liking. She said she would rather go to a powerful church where prophecy and instant power abounded; a church where she could serve God and become a spiritual giant. We did not know what to say to her for the fear of starting another round of argument. So, we went to Fr Ayodeji and reported the new development to him. He advised us to continue our prayers without relenting and to treat her with love and care. We heeded his advice and continued the prayers and fasting. We also treated her with love and care, ignoring all her ranting and swearing. A week after we concluded our Novena, she made good her resolution to start attending her new and powerful church. We were worried that she might get into another round of unfulfilled expectations since we have come to realise one fact: power belongs to God who alone has the prerogative to use it in the ways he wishes. We continued praying, believing that with God all things are possible.

Our school continued growing and our physical training and counselling classes thronged with people as we began to apply Christian principles to our counselling. However, we did not stop teaching women how to fight in order to protect themselves from abusive husbands and

others because we believed that men who battered women would curtail their predilection for violence if they knew that the women could repel their attacks.

While Ajuwa was engrossed with her newly found love of daily prophecies and ritualistic sacrifices, which she sometimes performed by slaughtering pigeons and burning all kinds and colours of candles, she still got a shocker! We received a report that her son Onowe in the university was missing.

9

THE SEARCH

Onowe's disappearance triggered off a daunting challenge for us, and our concern shifted to finding him. We suspected that Ogor and the people of Ngwelle would be behind the imbroglio, having tried once to come and capture us in the compound where we lived with the Edwards. Ajuwa took the matter to her church. The church divined that Onowe was charmed away by Ogor, and that he was safe and sound in Ogor's house in Ngwelle! She was told that there was nothing to worry about because the church would use its own powers to bring Onowe back. She was asked to perform a number of rituals and to chant Onowe's name so that he could return to the mother who breastfed him. Not only was she performing the rituals, she also slept in the church for seven days to enable her pray day and night. We decided to be cautious by going to bring Kika home so that she too would not become a victim. We also reported the matter to the police and they went ahead with their normal investigation. Together with young Kika, we prayed day and night. Fr Ayodeji also joined us in our prayers. He assured us that God would bring Onowe back to us unharmed.

For twenty-one days Ajuwa prayed and fasted to no avail. For each day of her prayers and fasting, she slaughtered a pigeon and burnt dozens of red, yellow, blue, green and white candles and yet nobody saw or heard from Onowe. We became frantic just as Ajuwa became so dejected that she looked dishevelled as she would be seen wearing only one cloth day and night and repeating, “Onowe, come back to me for I'm the mother who breastfed you.”

We knew Onowe was missing but had hope that he would return unharmed as Fr Ayodeji and Ajuwa's church said, but we were afraid of the effect of Onowe's abduction on Ajuwa, who as it were, spoke to herself only and fed on only bread and water. We did not have to express our fears to Fr Ayodeji because he saw what was happening. Because Ajuwa's state of mind had degenerated, Fr Ayodeji decided to do something in addition to praying. He collected the addresses of Ogor and Kokome, and decided to travel to Ngwelle to see them and the king and also see the chiefs of Ngwelle. In the process, he planned to see Onowe if possible. We were not sure of what would come out of the trip but we obliged him, and he travelled to Ngwelle early in the morning in the company of another priest and two parishioners. They drove straight to the court of the King of Ngwelle.

When they got there, the king's messenger and a few people in the court were sceptical when they saw a vehicle with two men in cassocks and two other men inside. As they peeped to see the people in the car, Fr Ayodeji and the other people in his company came out of the car. One of the parishioners who came with him greeted them in Ngwelle language. This friendly gesture signalled a peaceful encounter as the visitors were welcomed. They were offered seats and the messenger went inside to inform the king that he had visitors. The king came out to receive them but had questions in his eyes and mind which he could not voice out immediately. Fr Ayodeji, realising the uneasiness of the king, greeted and informed him that he and his fellow priest were servants of God, and that the other two men were men of peace from his church.

“Welcome,” the king greeted. “I'm surprised you are here. No Christian priest has ever entered this court. Our children who live in the cities say our customs and ways of life are anti-God. They condemn everything we do and refuse to come home.”

“We have come to bring you good news from the God who made the heaven and the earth. He loves everyone and everything he made. You may be serving other gods because you do not

know the true God. This true God loves all his creatures which include you and me. He does not discriminate against class or sex. He loves those who serve him in the same way he loves those who do not serve him because they do not know him. Those who do not know him would be glad to know and worship him because what he expects from the people who believe in him is very little compared to what the gods in the form of idols expect from their worshippers. When you get to know this God whose love is free for all, irrespective of our sex or status in life, you will be a very happy person, and will be anxious to spread this love to all your subjects,” Fr Ayodeji sermonised.

The king greeted the Father and his companions once more and sent one of his messengers to summon some of his chiefs who arrived one by one, all of them visibly suspicious. The king thought of how to entertain his visitors and because he was not sure, he said, “I would like to offer you kola nut, would you eat our kola nut?”

“Why would we refuse your kola nut? It is the symbol of your traditional hospitality”, Fr Ayodeji replied smiling.

“Does your God recognise tradition?” the king asked, while ordering one of his chiefs to go into the inner chamber and asking the court messenger to bring kola nuts. The court messenger

brought a bowl of kola nuts and placed the bowl on the stool in front of the two Reverend Fathers and their companions. Fr Ayodeji requested the king to bless the kola nuts but he declined, explaining that the prayers to his gods may not be accepted by Fr Ayodeji and his colleagues, who served a different God.

“Father, pray to your God who you said loves everybody irrespective of sex or status.”

“Yes, we would pray to our God, but remember that there is only one God, who different people serve or worship in different ways. By tradition, you are an older man and the king of this domain and tradition expects you to give your royal blessing to these kola nuts,” Fr Ayodeji explained.

The king was surprisingly pleased and stretching out his hand towards the kola nut; he prayed, “May your God, who you said loves everybody, extend his love and blessings to all the people of Ngwelle.” After this short prayer, he asked Fr Ayodeji to pray to his God and break the kola nuts.

Fr Ayodeji took up one kola nut and prayed in the name of Jesus to the Almighty God, asking God to bless the king, his chiefs and Ngwelle people and to let his peace and love reign in the hearts and minds of everybody in Ngwelle and the

world at large.

He then broke the kola nuts and instructed the court messenger to serve the king and chiefs first, before serving them. The prayer and the friendly disposition of Fr Ayodeji and his colleagues disarmed the king and his chiefs; with caution, Fr Ayodeji started friendly discussion with them. Gradually he digressed into education and the reason for both male and female children to be encouraged to have the highest level of education that they were capable of acquiring. After the Reverend Father had spoken, the king told him that they had two major constraints; finance and the refusal of their educated children to come home because they detested their ways of life.

“We labour and deny ourselves comforts in order to educate our children, but they tell us we are barbaric and abandon us to go and live in the big cities where they lead their life the way they like! Some of them don't even visit home. We have had cases of those who lost their parents but refused to come home to bury them because they say our burial tradition is archaic and inhuman to the female gender! If our children can respect our tradition which our ancestors handed down to us, and make some efforts to help us modernise Ngwelle, our agriculturally rich land would see

some modernisation. Instead, they prefer to build their beautiful houses in the cities and reside there, leaving Ngwelle dejected and undeveloped. If we had children like you who respect tradition, Ngwelle would have been a haven of progress,” the king lamented.

The discussion continued with some of the chiefs telling the Father the story of their children, who left home for good without caring to know whether their parents were alive or dead. Fr Ayodeji and his colleagues listened with rapt attention as the king and his chiefs opened up. Father thought of what the king and the chiefs said, and concluded that Ngwelle people were capable of being converted to Christianity if someone or a group of people can teach them how to love one another.

“The gods you worship and your ways of life are what your ancestors handed down to you many years ago. Nobody should blame or detest you for doing the only thing you know how to do. Nevertheless, culture and religion are dynamic. Progressive people should be willing to learn how to tailor their culture and religion to present-day realities without necessarily abandoning what is good and noble in their culture.

“Your children who refuse to come home probably do so because they fear you would not

listen to them if they try to teach you how to blend culture with modernity and religion. If you can forgive your children who abandoned you, we will help you bring them home to visit you but you must first be willing to moderate your culture to accommodate modern changes and the worship of the only true God, who forgives and loves without demanding so much sacrifice,” Fr Ayodeji preached.

“Man of God, did you say you can help bring our children back home?” the king asked.

“Yes, we can help bring some of your children back home if you promise you would forgive them and learn a few things about love and forgiveness from us and your children,” Father reiterated.

The king made eye contacts with his chiefs and they nodded in agreement. Then he spoke up and assured Fr Ayodeji that nothing would give them greater joy than see their children involve themselves in the development and progress of their ancestral homes instead of investing their resources in the already developed towns and cities where they reside.

“Your children will come home to join hands with you in developing your ancestral home but you and your people must be willing to embrace changes. For instance, we heard that one

of your sons in a university was mysteriously abducted from his university. As a result of that abduction, he has been deprived of his studies. For a student to be away from his studies for over two months is an invitation to failure! If this community wants to progress, your children in higher institution of learning must be encouraged to study hard because they would be the ones to use their knowledge to develop the community,” the Father revealed.

“Who is this student you are talking about and where was he abducted?” the king asked.

“We heard his name is Onowe, a 300 level law student. We heard the young man is hidden here in your domain. For this community to develop, education must be given a pride of place. If we must work with your children for the development of Ngwelle, you should discourage such acts like this,” Father admonished.

“Onowe is our son born by a woman called Ajuwa, who happens to be one of the greatest witches of our time. I'm not aware that he was abducted and kept in my domain.” Turning to his chiefs, he asked, “Is Onowe in this domain?” The chiefs were downcast and kept quiet! The king took a straight hard look at his chiefs and said, “No wonder it is said that a wealthy house owner can be blind and sometimes deaf to happenings in his

household. Is it possible that Onowe is actually in this domain without my knowledge? Where can he be? Can he be in Ogor's house? If this is true, then I'm actually blind and deaf to happenings in my domain," he said to himself.

Then turning to the Reverend Father and his colleagues, he said, "I'll have to investigate this allegation. I'm appealing to you to go and give me a few days to investigate the truth of what you said. I'm tired of the rot and the isolation of this community and would therefore work with you to encourage our children to come home and develop our homeland."

The Father thanked the king and appealed to him to hasten the investigation so that Onowe could quickly return to his studies. He assured the king that he would come back after a week to teach the king and his people more about the only true God whose love and care for all mankind endures forever. He also appealed passionately to the king to make sure Onowe was released. The priests and their team left Ngwelle and travelled to the neighbouring town where there was another Orthodox Church. They informed the priest in that Church of their mission and appealed to him to start gradual evangelisation in Ngwelle. They returned to Lagos the following day without bothering to see Ogor and Kokome because they

believed their friendly encounter with the king would yield a better result.

Arriving in Lagos, they invited Ajuwa, Efesi and me to brief us on the outcome of their journey but Ajuwa refused to answer their call. Efesi and I went to Fr Ayodeji and his entourage to welcome them, and they narrated the outcome of their journey. Fr Ayodeji advised us to continue praying because God was going to perform miracles. He assured us that Onowe would be released, and that many more good things would happen to change Ngwelle for good. He appealed to us to be patient with Ajuwa because with prayers and therapy, Ajuwa's attitude would also change for good.

Ajuwa continued her spiritual exercise and fasting on only bread and water. Apart from her weird appearance, she grew lean and looked worn out. Her steps became sluggish and her speech crawled out of her mouth in syllables with uncontrolled saliva sometimes dropping from her mouth, yet she still shared her prophetic visions with us. To make her happy, we listened to her. They were endless visions of evil everywhere, and the need to perform one ritual or the other. Although we played along with her, we refused to carry out the rituals; yet, she would go ahead and perform them. Her conduct and appearance were

clear indications that her physical and mental health had declined. We were still at a loss on how to effectively help Ajuwa and all we could do was hope and pray for her health and the return of Onowe. Fr Ayodeji had been of immense help but whether he would be our Moses remained to be seen.

10

DIVISIONS

The king of Ngwelle summoned his chiefs and sought to know whether it was true that Onowe was in Ngwelle. Chief Jejebi confirmed the allegation and went further to reveal how he travelled with Ogor to the university town to charm Onowe away.

“All I did was go secretly to the university with Ogor and use our power to charm away our son. We felt challenged that a mere woman was challenging the powers of Ngwelle! We decided to do this silently since our previous attempts failed because the adventure was given unnecessary publicity. Onowe is hale and hearty, and is being gradually indoctrinated into our traditional ways of life. Everything has been put in place to make sure Ogor takes good care of him.”

“Chief Jejebi, so you went to charm a son of Ngwelle away from the university where he was studying for his betterment?” the king screamed.

“And you did this without my knowledge? Apart from preventing the young man from continuing his education, you have also forgotten that Ajuwa has magic powers of her own and connections which can easily plunge this kingdom

into chaos? It was the gods of Ngwelle that saved us from being overrun by police when we almost killed her with bee stings. That she survived that deadly torture was due to her own cult powers. You want to bring the force of evil and that of the law upon Ngwelle and send me to either jail or my grave? Has this kingdom and the chiefs become so unruly that this kind of action could take place without my knowledge?"

"Your highness, try and reflect on what Ajuwa did to this land. Imagine a mere woman leading a team of women into our revered land and ordering Ogor to come out to be raped! Imagine a mere woman invoking thunder to destroy people and property in Ngwelle! The people of Ngwelle are not known to be cowards; a mere woman should not be allowed to give our enemies the impression that we are weak. We brought Onowe home to learn to be a man and to cure him of the influence of a recalcitrant woman. Our plan is to initiate him into manhood and teach him the ways of our people. So far he is cooperating with us," Chief Jejebi explained.

"Just listen to yourself! Where is your own son? Why did you not charm him to come back home? Your son has refused to visit home for over ten years, and you did not deem it fit all these years to charm him back if you believe it is good to charm

people against their will. Why have you not initiated your son into manhood? Why has Ajuwa, who is reacting to the barbaric and inhuman treatment meted to her, become the focus of hate to the whole of Ngwelle? Oruru's insensitivity to her daughters was due to his ignorance, and we ought to be exposed enough now to start correcting our wrongs. From the things we have heard and seen, women are no longer mere women as we used to think. They are now strong forces to be reckoned with, and our community should join the enlightened world to give women the respect they deserve," the king said.

The court rumbled as opinions became divided. Some of the chiefs shook their heads in defiance while a few others nodded in agreement. Chiefs Jejebi, Onunu, Osuzo and Aliogo felt something was wrong with the king; so, they advised him to consult the gods because he was never known to be cowardly. Chief Agadi and a few other chiefs pitched their tent with the king and openly commended him for taking a stand for fairness.

As Chief Jejebi and his group stood up to leave the court, the king ordered them to sit down and listen to him. "You must go right now to Ogor's house and free Onowe from your charm; bring him here for me, so I can release him to the Reverend

Father from Lagos. He will be back here in a week time to take Onowe back to continue his studies.”

Chief Aliogo sprang from his seat roaring, “Sacrilege! Our king has gone mad! What business does he have with a Reverend Father? Does he want to denigrate our gods? Onowe will not be released! We will team up with Ogor and ensure that our son, Onowe, remains in Ngwelle until he imbibes our culture and our way of life! He must be brought up as a man and not as a woman. It is sacrilegious for a woman of Ajuwa's character to bring up a son of Ngwelle and indoctrinate him against his own land.” Seething with anger, the opposing chiefs marched out of the court.

The king glowered at them as they marched out and holding his fist tight in anger; he smashed the wooden stool in front of him quivering, “Don't say I didn't warn you! Onowe must be released and whatever the government decides to do with you will solely be your business!” Then looking at the three chiefs who took sides with him, he instructed them to mobilise the youth and storm Ogor's house to effect Onowe's release.

As early as 5 a.m. the following day, about twenty youths hit the road marching on their mission to Ogor's house, singing victory songs as they danced ominously along. The sleeping village woke up, and the people trooped out to see what

was happening. They saw a horde of angry young men exuding raw energy as they marched along. They knew that something must be wrong but could not say what; so, with mouth agape and darting eyes they stared at the youth as they marched past. A few of the onlookers followed behind, anxious to be the first to know the motive behind the early morning drama. The youth arrived at Ogor's house and surrounded the compound.

They hollered for Ogor to come out and answer for his misdemeanour. The house looked dead, and so they shouted again, "Ogor, come out with Onowe, you enemy of progress! Come out now before we storm your house!" They raved and kicked the door, singing war songs but nobody came out except the goats and chickens that ran out from their huts in obvious fear.

"Are there no people in this house?" they shouted louder but still no response! They tore at the house, kicking down the door and pulling down part of the roof, rushing in but found nobody in the house! They searched every nook and cranny and combed the shrubs and bushes around the house but found no single person! Disappointed, they marched back to report to the king.

"To where have Ogor and his household

disappeared? Where in this community are they hiding?” the king wondered. While the youth were still in the king's court, he summoned his chiefs and the elders of the community to be present, but the opposing chiefs refused to appear. He related to the crowd his encounter with Fr Ayodeji, who informed him that Onowe was abducted from his university.

“Our community stands to gain a lot if we open our doors to modern ways of life. When I look at our neighbours and see the progress they have made, I feel a sense of failure. We have progressive children scattered all over the country and abroad, and they spend their money to develop other towns. They refuse to come home because we stick to the past. Onowe is our son no matter where he chooses to reside. If we accept the beacon of light, which Fr Ayodeji and his team are willing to beam on our community, our lost children will come back home. Bringing back our children to help to develop our community is worth any sacrifice.

“The gods who our forefathers worshipped and who we are still worshipping have not brought us much benefit. Our children abhor our gods whom they say are unjust and vindictive and therefore feel ashamed to claim Ngwelle as their native home. This is something we must work hard

to change! The first step to make this change is to release Onowe to Fr Ayodeji, who has promised to introduce us to a progressive and forgiving God, who loves without discriminating against anybody,” King Mameri revealed.

The court reverberated with sighs and hisses as everyone looked into one another's eyes to decipher their minds. Then a silence followed that was palpable and driving fear into feeble minds. The silence endured for what looked like eternity; then, Chief Agadi ended it by clearing his throat.

“Hm!” he blew out. “The king is asking us to do something never done before in our custom and tradition! It's not going to be easy but since the king is the custodian of our tradition, we should be able to go along with him if he's willing to make the change he's advocating. But we are likely to run into problems considering the powers of Chief Jejebi and his group.”

“I'm the king of this community and I have decided to lead my people aright by flinging our doors open to all people of goodwill irrespective of their religions or beliefs as long as they are willing to encourage our successful children scattered all over the country to come back home and develop their homeland! As I said earlier, our gods are known for punishing offenders without rewarding

obedience, and they do not care about our progress. While our gods kill, maim, and impoverish us for our offences, they do not help us by rewarding our devotion to them. We offer sacrifices of fowls, goats and rams to our gods, but they give us nothing worthwhile in return except the power to hurt our fellow human beings. Our gods seem satisfied with seeing us to continue sowing seeds of hatred and living as the community of pariahs. The only interaction we have with our neighbours is to fight over farmlands. That our gods have failed us can be seen from the fact that our neighbours who worship the true God are progressing while we remain backwards.”

“If I'm allowed to speak, I'll thank the king for the change he's advocating,” Okoh, one of the youth members in the court, heaved a sigh and fell on his knees. “We, the younger generation have always wondered why our community continues to be backward. I will make sure the youth of Ngwelle stand behind the king to ensure that all dissenting voices are silenced. All we need now is a pronouncement from the king instructing us to bring about the release of Onowe at all costs! Once this is done, I will personally mobilise our youth to do all that is humanly possible to effect his release.”

The youth applauded Okoh, and vowed to ensure the desired change. They reiterated that all

they needed was a royal proclamation for the release of Onowe and that as soon as this was done, they would sniff out Onowe no matter where he was hidden.

Gbemedu, an elder and an unusually huge man, stood from his seat, eulogised the king and said, “The chosen one, I'm in full support of a change and whatever peaceful action the youth might take to dig out where Onowe might be hidden, but any matter left totally in the hands of the youth is most likely to become like harmattan fire, which once kindled, can become very difficult to put off. I'll beg you to pardon my emotional outburst which is as a result of my fear of people like Chiefs Jejebi, Onunu, Osuzo and Aliogo, who would ordinarily kill for the slightest reason. If the youth confront these Chiefs, who obviously are the brains behind the disappearance of Onowe, we might inadvertently set Ngwelle on fire. I'm afraid of the consequence of this proposed charge. If you give a royal order to the youth to take any action to release Onowe by all means, this might lead to shedding innocent blood. I'm therefore proposing that you tell the youth to tarry awhile, while we, the elders, rub minds on how to effect the needed change without violence.”

Doubting eyes turned toward Gbemedu, who remained unmoved. The entire court was

animated with whispers; each person, seeking the opinion of the other, whispers sounding out like the whistling from a forest of palm trees on a windy day. The king also joined in the whispering consultation that lasted for over five minutes. Then he spoke up.

“Chiefs, elders and youth, I think we should listen to the voice of reason! Our brother, Gbemedu, has spoken wisely. I'm dismissing this court now, but I plead with you chiefs and elders to remain behind for further discussions. My dear youth, sheathe your sword for now. I shall send for you as soon as possible,” the king announced.

The youth marched out, grumbling, disappointed that they were not allowed to vent their anger and display their exuberance. The king, the chiefs and elders drew closer to confer on how to handle the situation without causing chaos and bloodshed. They argued, disagreed and continued discussion into the late hours of the day before they eventually reached an agreement. Among other things, they would persuade Chief Jejebi and his group to come to the court to listen to the voice of reason and release Onowe immediately. This was because failure to do so might bring the force of law into Ngwelle and if this happened, it would spell doom for the whole of Ngwelle. Chief Agadi offered to lead the team of elders to meet with the

defiant chiefs and plead passionately with them to have Onowe released. The release of Onowe and the anticipated change for progress in Ngwelle might be determined by the outcome of the meeting with the recalcitrant Chief Jejebi and his cohorts.

11

DISSENSION AND SANCTION

Before the cocks crowed the following day, Chief Agadi, Gbemedu and a few elders took the rebellious chiefs unawares for as early as 3:30 a.m.; Gbemedu was at the door of Chief Agadi. As he was opening for Gbemedu, the other chiefs arrived to meet them at the door. They all marched straight away to Chief Jejebi's house and in no time they were there. Chief Agadi knocked on the door, and a young woman opened and seeing the entourage, she ran inside to call the chief. The chief came out with sleepy eyes, and a piece of loincloth tied round his waist. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his left arm, and seeing the personalities in the entourage, he tightened his loincloth and rushed back into his inner room. As members of the entourage were wondering why he rushed back, he re-emerged with a chewing stick in his mouth, apologising that he had to go back to wash his face and rinse his mouth to avoid looking unpleasant to the respected gentlemen of Ngwelle. Having explained his unexpected reaction, he asked, "Chiefs and elders of Ngwelle, I greet you. Please sit down. Why this early morning visit? I hope my household and I are safe?"

“We are messengers of peace and decided to come this early morning to speak sense in a fresh morning spirit,” Chief Agadi said.

Chief Jejebi welcomed them again and asked the woman who opened for them to bring them kola nuts. The kola nuts were brought and passed to Chief Agadi, who prayed for peace, stability and progress in Ngwelle before breaking one of them. He gave a piece to Chief Jejebi to eat first, and then he took a piece for himself before passing the remaining pieces of kola nut to others. As they chewed the kola nuts, Chief Agadi stood up and said, “My good brother, the one and only powerful chief, the power behind the invincibility of Ngwelle, we salute you. As I said earlier, we are the messengers of peace from the king and elders of Ngwelle. There is an adage which says that when you join your upper and lower lips together, you can use your mouth to whistle successfully. We want to join our upper lips to the lower ones and blow resounding whistle. It is also said that it is the firewood we fetch in the morning that keeps us warm in those nights when harmattan cold bites hard. Our land has remained peaceful all these years because we think together and speak with one voice. We want to continue to speak with one voice in order to avoid disaster in our land. A divided Ngwelle will not be a blessing to anybody.

We are being challenged to accept a change from our traditional way of life to a modern one, which in many ways is at variance with the ways of our forefathers. Whether or not we would accept this change has to be a collective decision. The king has therefore requested that you come to our revered court with your followers to discuss this change and possibly accept it. We are here to beg you not to allow the case of our son, Onowe, to cause disaffection in our united community. Come to the court and state your mind and let us share the wisdom of our forefathers for the peace and progress of Ngwelle.”

After the plea, Chief Jejebi looked up and breathed down, saying, “Chief Agadi, you have spoken well. I want to assure you that I will not live to see anybody make mockery of our revered tradition. I shall answer the call to the court, but I will not be a party to selling Ngwelle to a foreign religion and way of life.”

“Well done, Chief!” chorused the entourage.

“Kindly follow us to the houses of Chiefs Onunu, Aliogo and Osuzo, and prevail on them to come to the court as well,” said Chief Agadi.

“I’ll follow you because of my love for Ngwelle, but you will be the one to talk to them. This is because we had earlier agreed not to come

to the court. If you don't mind, let me quickly change my clothes,” Chief Jejebi said as he went inside. Within a few minutes, he came out. Together, the chiefs and elders went from one chief to the other, preaching peace and cooperation. The presence of Chief Jejebi encouraged the chiefs to listen to them. They finally agreed to come to the court but were united in their resistance to change.

The following day, the court was packed full as all the chiefs, elders, men, women and some youth crammed into the available space to listen to the king and to see whether Onowe had been released. Chiefs Jejebi, Onunu, Aliogo and Osuzo marched in amidst jeers and booing. The discussion in the court took a dramatic turn as Chief Jejebi and his group took a stand and admonished the people to resist any attempt to allow a foreign religion to come and erode their God-given tradition. To counter him, king Mameri stood up from his throne and said, “Men and women of Ngwelle, today is a day for us to decide whether we are to remain in the traditions of old or move to modernity and make progress like our neighbours! The fear of change is human and for this reason, I can understand the stand of Chief Jejebi and his supporters, but are we going to allow fear to mar our growth and progress? Are we going to continue to treat our women with disdain? Are we satisfied that once our children

step out from our land, see the light and then they turn their back on us? Are you happy that our progressive children are spending their money on the development of other towns and cities at our expense, just because we choose to live in the past?"

"No!" The people shouted thunderously, shaking the court and bringing more people to the premises, spreading themselves round the court and others peeping through windows.

"I'm not through yet," the king calmed his subjects. "Stop shouting; listen to me! Listen to the atrocities we committed in the name of tradition! Where are our women? Ngwelle women, where are you? What reason do we have for treating you the way we do? Have we not heard of women who are great achievers in our neighbouring communities and in the big cities?"

"It is here in this community that Oruru arranged for his daughter, Ajuwa, to be abducted and carried to the house of Ogor to be forcibly defiled in the full glare of his abductors! That degrading treatment meted to our own daughter turned out to be a blessing in disguise for her. Ajuwa is a very rich woman today but unfortunately, she erroneously decided to avenge her humiliation by bringing a gang of women to humiliate Ogor. What did we do to her? We poured

oil on the fire to make the flame grow wild, subjected her to a horrible treatment that would have led to her death but for the grace of God. While I was thanking God for not letting her die in our hands and avoiding the wrath of government on us, Chief Jejebi and Ogor went behind my back to abduct Onowe, Ajuwa's son, who was studying in a university. Sons and daughters of Ngwelle, do you know that it took a complete stranger, a Catholic priest named Fr Ayodeji, for me to know that Onowe has been charmed away from his university and hidden in this village for over two months?"

The rumbles and agitated murmurs from the people drowned the voice of the king who was forced to sit down in order to calm the people. The young men got agitated and flexed their muscles while the women beat their breasts with tears running down. King Mameri begged the people to calm down and listen to him.

"My people, he continued, I'm the king of this land, and I have now decided that my people should make progress! Let us try Christianity or Islam! If they fail us, we will not perish because we can always go back to our ways. But these religions will not fail us because they didn't fail our neighbours who have been serving one God and not many gods. Look at the progress they are

making and compare it to our backwardness. See their beautiful and successful women who build houses for their parents and even buy cars for them. When we look at them from a distance, they seem to us like goddesses. Why can't our daughters look beautiful and progressive? Our neighbour's sons bring white men to their homes to develop it, and provide jobs for their youth. They bring their friends to celebrate festivals and to bury their dead parents. Where are our own progressive sons? Some of them are counted among the richest people of this country, but they chose either the Islamic religion or Christian religion, and abandon us to our traditional religion that thrives on ignorance and punishing offenders without rewarding faithfulness. Some of them tell us that our gods are vindictive. Instead of listening to them, we shun them and they run from us. We want our sons and daughters to become proud of their lineage and come home! Chief Jejebi, Ogor and whoever is following them should produce Onowe and hand him over to me in the next twenty-four hours before Fr Ayodeji comes back.”

A cry rent the air from the crowd: “Bring back Onowe! Bring Back Onowe!” The court nearly descended into mayhem as some youth tried to manhandle Chief Jejebi and his followers.

“Stop,” the king barked. “Enough of this

barbarism! Chief Jejebi is an honourable man, and we should uphold the honour of his name and his chieftaincy. I'm dismissing this court and I have the confidence that Chief Jejebi and Ogor would do the right thing. They know that we are in the eyes of the storm as government searchlight will be beamed on us now. As a respected chief in Ngwelle, he will not allow the police to swoop on us. You should all go to your respective homes, maintain peace, and come back to this court in two days time.”

The people left the court and poured into the street, cursing and buzzing. They went to their different homes but a group of youth took to the streets, marching and chanting, “Bring Back Onowe! Bring Back Onowe!” They marched round the village and headed for Ogor's house, but as in their previous attempt, Ogor's house was empty! Disappointed, they went to their different homes.

The day turned to dusk and the sun withdrew its bright light but men and women stood or squatted in front of their doors discussing the proposed change with the moon providing a substitute for daylight. 'What does it mean to be either a Christian or Moslem?' they wondered. 'Would it mean changing our ways of life? Even if we were forced to change our ways, would it not be

a welcome development given the air of freedom, dignity and self-esteem we might enjoy?' The people continued their discussion until they were overcome by the force of nature, sending them indoors to sleep and dream of what the future will hold for them in a new world proposed by their king.

The cocks crowed to announce the dawn of a new day. Ngwelle woke to high expectations from the new day. Although the community had another twenty-four hours before going to hear from their king, they kept up the discussions on the fate of Onowe and the decision of the king that would follow.

In Lagos, Ajuwa's unending fasting arising from her fanatic anxiety over the fate of her son had worsened her health. Fr Ayodeji, Efesi and I were worried because despite her obviously declining condition, she insisted that she was in good health. We begged and cajoled her before she reluctantly surrendered herself for medical treatment. She had to be admitted into the mission hospital. While in hospital, Fr Ayodeji visited her daily to pray for her, counsel and direct her mind to reconciliation and positive thoughts. Efesi and I also made regular visits and assured her that Onowe would be found safe and sound, even when we were not sure this would be true.

The hospital workers made her to eat and gradually her flesh began to fill out to cover the bones that nearly lanced out of her skin. As Ajuwa's body showed signs of improvement, her speech got more coherent and her reactions became better co-ordinated and reassuring. While still in hospital, Fr Ayodeji decided to travel back to Ngwelle to follow up on his evangelisation and the release of Onowe. Before embarking on this trip, he got in touch with the priest in the neighbouring town who assured him that the winds of change were blowing in Ngwelle even though Onowe was yet to be released. He requested the priest to get in touch with the king and inform him that he would be in Ngwelle two days after the agreed date in order to make sure that Onowe was released to him.

Meanwhile Chief Jejebi, Ogor and their cohorts had sworn they would never release Onowe as doing so would amount to cowardice. On the day the king's court met to receive Onowe as planned, Chief Jejebi and his group refused to come to court, so Onowe was not released to the king. The king was enraged and asked the youth and the warriors of the town to produce Onowe and the dissenting chiefs and Ogor by any means, but to go into action only after the town-crier had called the attention of everybody to the new

development.

On this proclamation, the people went wild and war songs rent the air. The youth showed their readiness by hitting their chests with their clenched fists while the warriors kissed the king's sword of office in the tradition of warfare as they marched out of the court chanting war songs. The town-crier quickly went round the town announcing the proclamation of the king and warning everybody who knew where Onowe was to inform the king.

To avoid any skirmish in his shrine and possible bloodshed, the high priest of Ngwelle in whose shrine Onowe was hidden called and advised Chief Jejebi, Ogor and their followers to come and remove Onowe from his custody as he was not willing to face the wrath of the warriors of Ngwelle and possible invitation of the police. Chief Jejebi reacted that it would be over his dead body. Ogor became afraid that he might lose his life and even that of Onowe now that the chief priest had decided to wash his hands off the whole saga. Without the consent of Chief Jejebi, Onunu, Osuzo and Aliogo, Ogor went to the chief priest and removed Onowe from the shrine. Afraid of being mobbed, Ogor disguised himself and Onowe, and secretly sneaked him to the king's court. On arrival at the court, he removed his disguise and fell on his knees.

“My king,” he sobbed, “I confess my wrongdoings.”

The king looked at Ogor with disdain and shook his head. Looking closely at Onowe, he noticed that the young man appeared hypnotised. Being short of words, he placed his right hand over his mouth and exhaled heavily. As the king and leader of his people, he quickly recollected himself and sent for the town-crier. He instructed him to quickly call the youth and warriors back because Onowe had been released to him. The news spread like fire on dried leaves on a windy day, and in no time, the court and the grounds around were filled with people. On the right hand the king held Onowe, who was looking like someone in a trance. He sat him on a chair beside his throne and made Ogor stand in the middle of the court. Addressing the people, he said, “My dear people of Ngwelle, I am happy to tell you that our son Onowe is with us now. Ogor is here to tell you where he hid him and what he did to him because right now, the young man is disoriented. He has not uttered a word since Ogor brought him to this court. Ogor, can you tell the community what has happened?”

“My king and the good people of Ngwelle, I bow down and salute you all. An adage says that what brings down the wall is within the wall. I do not have any defence. In our community, a man

must show strength as a man and show off the power of his charms. All these blinded me to good reason. I should not have cast a spell on Onowe who is my son and take him away from the university where he was studying. Since Chief Jejebi and I brought Onowe to Ngwelle, I have been wondering what to do with him. He understands very little of our language and finds it difficult to eat our foods. I kept him in my house until the king discovered he was here in Ngwelle. To save my head and that of my household, I had to move my family away from our house and took Onowe to the house of the high priest because I believed nobody will see him there. Onowe is here now because the high priest refused to keep labouring him after he heard the proclamation of the king. My good people of Ngwelle, as I stand before you, I feel ashamed because what I did is capable of bringing harm to Onowe physically and mentally,” Ogor concluded in tears and the people jeered and booed him, forcing questions from every corner of the crowd. The jeers, boos and constant cat calls made him to stop his narration from time to time to wipe off tears and allow the people's emotions and reactions to calm down. When Ogor finished narrating his story, the king, looking around, was surprised that the high priest was not among the people gathered in his court.

“Where is the high priest? Why is he not here? Has he teamed up with Chief Jejebi and his cohorts? Okoh, go and look for him and if you find him, bring him before me!”

As Okoh stepped out to look for the high priest, two young men followed him. They squeezed their way through the thick crowd and were about to give up when the high priest, who was sitting behind a tree a little distance from the crowd outside, sprang to his feet and said, “Okoh, here I am, but don't touch me! I didn't want to come inside because my honour in this community is fast diminishing. I'll present myself to the king.” Ostensibly rueing his actions, he manoeuvred his way through the crowd and entered the hall. He went straight to the front row and standing before the king; he said, “My king, here I am.”

“What do you know about this matter before us?” the king asked.

“My king and the people of Ngwelle, we have an adage that says that men help fellow men to fulfill their destinies. It is in line with this proverb that I accepted to keep Onowe when Ogor brought him to me, saying the young man is his son and that he is trying to protect him from the people who were trying to kill him. I was later shocked when I heard the town-crier announcing the king's proclamation concerning this same young man. I

got to know what was happening only through the gong and announcement by the town-crier. That Onowe is here now is due to the fact that I insisted that Ogor should take him away from my house and hand him over to you, my king,” the chief priest explained.

The rumble in the court rose to a crescendo and the commotion from outside drowned all other talk. Ogor stood still as deliberations and discussions were halted. For about ten minutes, the palace whip kept calling for order which never came until the king stood up again and hit his bare hand hard on the stool in front of him. The stool split into two as he exclaimed, “Stop this commotion and let's talk sense! Anybody who has anything to say should come up here and speak. This is a matter that concerns the whole community. We have to decide what to do to Ogor, Chiefs Jejebi, Onunu, Osuzo and Aliogo. Out of all of them, only Ogor is here now but before anything else, what do we do to restore the body and mind of Onowe?”

Agadi stood up and casting his gaze on Onowe, he cleared his throat and said, “My brothers and sisters of Ngwelle, when problems come, solutions also emerge. Human beings create problems and other human beings have the solutions. As long as there is life, there must be

problems and there will be solutions. Yes, it is clear that Onowe is under a spell, but this spell is man-made and can therefore be dispelled by man. When one juju doctor ties a diabolical knot, another juju doctor will loosen the knot. My king and people, leave the problem of the spell on Onowe to me. By this time tomorrow, Onowe will be free from the spell cast on him.”

The roar of Agadi! Agadi! soared until the whip shouted for the people to be quiet and to listen. Curious to hear more, the people lent their voices and their ears and eyes, as the people clamoured to hear and see what was said. One by one, people rose to speak. There was unanimous condemnation of what Chief Jejebi and Ogor did. There was also a call for the chief priest to explain why he did not know when Chief Jejebi and Ogor went to abduct Onowe and bring him to Ngwelle. The people felt that the High Priest, who was supposed to be the oracle of the gods, should have known that Onowe was hidden in Ngwelle! The people therefore asked the king to force the High Priest to explain his silence.

“Yes,” the king retorted. “High Priest, kindly explain to the people why you were not aware of the nefarious actions of Chief Jejebi and Ogor. Why did the gods not tell you that the duo went all the way to the university to kidnap

Onowe?”

“My king and people of Ngwelle, I'm only a messenger of the gods. I can only see or hear what the gods show me and what they tell me to say. I'm a mere mortal! If the gods chose to be quiet, it's their fault, not mine. As I said earlier, I never knew until I heard from the town-crier,” the High Priest claimed.

Another round of angry rumble erupted; the atmosphere went wild and the people started shouting: “Where are the gods, where are the gods”!

“Yes, where are our gods indeed?” the High Priest also asked. “I think the evil in the land have defeated and silenced the gods! My role in this community is fast diminishing. If I cannot hear from the gods to direct my people, I had better bow out as the High Priest. May my king and people ask the gods for a new High Priest because I cannot continue to serve in a capacity where I cannot be of use to my people?”

“Well spoken, this incident has shown that the gods can err,” retorted the king. “We cannot therefore blame the High Priest who works according to the directives of the gods. The need for a new High Priest is not paramount now as that will be addressed later. The most urgent matters are the restoration of the mind of our son and what to do to

Chief Jejebi and his dissident group. Ogor is here begging for forgiveness but whether we will forgive him or not will depend on the ability of Agadi to remove the spell cast on our son. As for the dissident chiefs, they had better come here and apologise to the community or face the wrath of the customs for the harm on a Ngwelle son,” the king charged.

The elders and all the people present in the court agreed that there was the need to give Agadi a chance to restore Onowe to his normality before taking any further decisions. The people therefore left the court one by one leaving behind Ogor and a few elders and chiefs. The king, the chiefs and elders deliberated further on how to handle the matter without causing chaos. They agreed that Ogor should follow Agadi to his house to ensure that Onowe was freed from the effect of the spell that was cast on him. Also Ogor should find a way of getting across to Chief Jejebi and his group to persuade them to come to the court to listen and see reasons why they should respect the custom of the land. They agreed to hold the court in two days when Onowe's condition must have been restored.

The day and night seemed to have taken cognisance of the anxiety of the people of Ngwelle because they passed quickly to the joy of the people who were expectant of a better future. Onowe was

restored to normal state of mind and was shocked to find himself in Ngwelle. He tried to escape but he was restrained by the king who assured him that he had nothing to fear because Fr Ayodeji would be coming to take him to Lagos the following day.

The court held and Onowe was formally presented to the cheering crowd and the entire community assured him of their love. Ogor explained that he could not persuade Chief Jejebi and his supporters to come to the court. The king said that he might have no alternative than to apply the customs.

“Times have changed, and we must also change with time. This is the age of equity and justice, and we must strive to be seen as people who are mindful of the rights of our fellow human beings and their obligations to society. Changing our ways of life will demand discipline of everyone. Our unforgiving gods and anachronistic traditions have ruled our lives up to this moment. What have we gain from them? Our so-called gains have been selfishness, debauchery, moral decadence, marginalisation of our women, and insensitivity to the plight of the weak and vulnerable. God is offering us a chance for change and to have a breath of fresh air and freedom from the vices that have ruled our lives. Fr Ayodeji and his team will be here tomorrow to dedicate all those

who are willing to become Christians to the true God. He will also take Onowe back to his mother so that the young man can go back to his studies.

“I have instructed the town-crier to go round Ngwelle, and invite all those who are willing to surrender their life to God to throng out tomorrow to meet Fr Ayodeji and his team. As for me, I have decided to become a Christian! I took this decision because I want to be fair to my people and to see my kingdom progress in the same way our neighbours are progressing,” the king announced.

A surge of “long live the king! We will follow you” rocked the court as the people trooped onto the street, singing and dancing, “We will follow our king, good or bad, we will follow him.”

The day turned into night, forcing the people of Ngwelle to withdraw to their homes to ponder on what awaited them. They had tried staying awake to contemplate the proposed change but nature forced tiredness on them. They resigned finally to sleep in order to regain their strength for the following day. And then the night yielded its light the next morning in its eternal journey of time to Ngwelle and the rest of the world.

The following day dawned with the cocks crowing diligently loud and clear to announce a new day. As at 5:30 a.m., the sun with its might

gradually glided in to displace the early morning mist, giving the day once again the pride of place. The bright morning sun kindled the spirit of the people as they went about their daily activities in their farms and homes. The men went to work in their farms and to tap palm wine; the women fetched fire-wood for cooking and water for household use in addition to their roles on the farm. As the people went about their various jobs, they discussed what Christianity held in store for them.

At about 4 p.m., the men started returning from their farms and the women also put finishing touches to the dinner they were preparing for their families, but the day was not like any other day when men ate early dinner and gathered in small groups to enjoy their evening palm wine. This was because the town crier went around beating his gong to announce the invitation from King Mameri.

“All those who want to be Christians come to the court! Come and meet Fr Ayodeji and his team and be dedicated to the true God!” the town crier went around announcing.

12

THE ANTIDOTE

Fr Ayodeji came with his team including the Anglican priest in the neighbouring town. A number of Ngwelle people trooped to the court to see the men of God who would bring about change in their ways of life. The people gave the visitors warm welcome and before anything, the king formally presented Onowe to Fr Ayodeji. Thereafter, a prayer session commenced. After the prayers, the 'Reverend Gentlemen' preached to the people about the unconditional love of God who gave his only begotten son for the salvation of mankind. The men of God told them that salvation is free to all mankind irrespective of sex, status or race.

They sermonised on love, forgiveness and the equality of all mankind before God, regardless of their gender. They preached on life after death and appealed to the people to keep God's commandments in order to become citizens of heaven where there is neither toil nor pain and where there is no sickness and no want. Bibles and rosaries were distributed to those who could read and only rosary to those who could not read. The king offered his court as a temporary church and

catechists were assigned to teach the people about Christian doctrines.

In Lagos, Ajuwa had recovered considerably but she was still hallucinating from time to time and asking for her son, Onowe. She had been discharged from hospital. Efesi and I continued to show her love and care. Whenever she asked for Onowe, we would assure her that Fr Ayodeji was working hard to bring Onowe back to her. Although she sometimes showed some doubts, our care and concern, the medical care from the hospital team and the personal attention from Fr Ayodeji gave her the confidence that Fr Ayodeji was capable of many good things including miracles.

When Fr Ayodeji returned to Lagos with Onowe, who still expressed surprise at how he ended up in Ngwelle, Ajuwa's joy was indescribable. She clasped her son to her breast and excitedly prattled, "Fr Ayodeji, you are the only god I know! Father, so you brought my son back alive? How did you do it? How did you find out where they hid him? How did you escape their bee stings in Ngwelle? Oh, Father, I can't thank you enough! How much can I pay you for this miracle?" Turning to her son, she reclined on his shoulders and rained tears of joy on him.

"My dear son, so I can be alive to see you

again? What a big relief to see you alive! I will never let you and Kika out of my sight again!”

Fr Ayodeji had watched the agony of motherhood shown by the mental and physical torture Ajuwa had been going through from the moment her son was abducted. Seeing the ecstatic effect Onowe's release had on Ajuwa, he warned her against arrogating the wonderful works of God to a mere human being like him.

“All powers belong to God; so, you must thank him for the release of your son. As I have told you, God is love and those who believe in him must love. God gave his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, to die for the salvation of the whole world because of his love for all of us. God used me to effect the release of your son from captivity because he wants you to be happy and have the fullness of life. The best way you can thank him is to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ. You must learn to forgive those who offend you so that you too can fully receive forgiveness from God. Bond with your son for a few days and leave him to go back to his studies.”

“Father, they will go for him again! Ngwelle people are evil!” Ajuwa gabbled.

“God has changed Ngwelle people! Most of them, including the king, have declared for the true God. In addition, the king has decided to hand

over those who kidnapped Onowe to the police! Ngwelle is now a safe haven for all her sons and daughters,” Fr Ayodeji revealed.

This revelation shocked all of us. Ajuwa found it hard to believe that the king, who masterminded the bee-sting that nearly took her life, could become a Christian. All the same, the rapturous joy of Onowe's return was so overwhelming that we were singing, dancing and crying at the same time. We crowded round him and wet him with our tears of joy. As all these were happening, Onowe said very little and still kept wondering how he got to Ngwelle, a village his mother had told him was full of evil. Before Fr Ayodeji left us, we had dinner with him after which he prayed for us and advised Ajuwa to learn to trust God from whom all good things come.

Onowe's return had a magical effect on Ajuwa's health; she bounced back to health within two days of her son's return. She cooked for him and chatted continually with him, bombarding him with many questions. Our bonding was electrifying as we renewed our lives the way it used to be. We prayed and thanked God for his goodness and for using Fr Ayodeji to bring Onowe back to us.

We implored Ajuwa to stop hunting for miracles because miracles were free gifts from God to his children. We reminded her of the many

miracles God worked in her life free of charge and without her going to perform rituals or sacrifices. We begged her to de-emphasise the pursuit of powers and surrender her life to God. Her daughter, Kika, pleaded with her in tears to eschew rancour and be a happy and fulfilled woman because God had given her all she needed to be happy. We sat together praying and thanking God and pleading with Ajuwa to give God a chance in her life until late in the night when sleep crept in to force us to go to bed.

We slept for a few hours and woke up the following morning to a dramatic change in Ajuwa. She called us for prayer and then told us that she had learnt a lot from her unwillingness to forgive and had therefore decided to forgive everybody who offended her, including Ogor. Her declaration was consoling like a bath of cold water on a hot day. We were elated to hear this redeeming news and looked forward to her giving up her hunt for other-worldly powers.

The following day was a Sunday and we all went to Church to give thanks to God for Onowe's safe return. Onowe and Kika spent another one week with us before they returned to their universities for their studies. Ajuwa was full of praise for Fr Ayodeji and she continued to follow us to church but later, she started

complaining that the celebration of Mass was too solemn for her liking. She said she wanted to worship in a vibrant church where she could show her excitement and participate effectively in the service. She wanted to be able to express herself in her worship of God by singing, dancing and testifying verbally to the goodness of God in her life. Before we could bring her complaint to Fr Ayodeji, she went with a friend to a growing church, known as 'Heaven and Earth Reapers Assembly'. The church had a population of about fifty members and about half of that number were children and teenagers. The music that blared from the loud speakers in the church was so scintillating that many passers-by used to stop by to listen and dance to it. She invited us to the church saying that attendance at both the Orthodox Church and her newly found church would nourish our spirit, soul and body. We honoured her invitation to the church and were able to see why she opted to attend both churches. We danced, sang and joined in the excitement and witnessed the zeal and energy of the pastor who danced with so much energy that we were almost carried away. However, we noted that the only sermon he preached was on prosperity. The temptation to imitate Ajuwa in her attendance of both churches was very strong, but we decided to tarry awhile to see the effect this new venture

would have on Ajuwa. However, we never forgot the joy and excitement we felt in the Heaven and Earth Reapers Assembly.

13

THE SHAM

Ajuwa divided her time between St Anthony Catholic Church and Heaven and Earth Reapers Assembly manned by a pastor called Abel. Once in the week, the pastor will visit her at home and pray with us, and we were very happy at his show of love and concern for our welfare. Whenever he prayed with us, he would pray with so much energy and passion that one would feel that God would hear his prayers immediately.

A few months after joining the church, Ajuwa started withdrawing large amounts of money from our school account. Initially Efesi and I did not want to ask her what she was using such large amounts of money for, but when she withdrew three million naira at once without any sign of investment on the school or any other business, we had to ask her what she was doing with money. She gave us a shocking answer.

“Oh, I didn't tell you; I have been sowing financial seeds in the church for a great dividend here on earth and in heaven. In fact, the pastor said whatever we sow we will harvest a hundred folds here on earth and in heaven. I plan to give more money to the pastor for the many rewards he said

sowers will reap. A member of the church came to testify to how he turned a billionaire after he sold all he had and gave the proceeds to the pastor to sow the seeds for him,” Ajuwa revealed.

“Ajuwa!” I cried out. “Must you always search for supernatural gains? Haven't you learnt enough from all that has happened to you? Look back and see all what God has done for you. Did you pay God before the Edwards bequeathed their house to us? Did you bribe God before he saved you from Ngwelle people when you went on the adventure that nearly took your life? How much did you pay to God before your son Onowe was released from abduction? Open your eyes to see what is happening to you. Ask God to heal you of this propensity for the paranoia. Let him lead you to worship he who is the only true God in spirit and in truth.”

“Siweku, I understand your fears but if I don't try, I wouldn't know whether I would succeed or fail. I will heed your advice and be careful by not giving more money to Pastor Abel to sow it for me. I will wait and reap what I have sown before sowing more,” Ajuwa conceded.

She continued to attend both churches saying the solemnity of the Mass filled the spiritual gap in her soul while the vibrancy in the Heaven and Earth Reapers Assembly satisfied the

social gap in her life. Efesi and I continued to pray to God to grant her peace and succour to live a happy and contented life. Our prayers were answered in many ways. Our schools continued to grow and our students passed their public exams creditably. The patronage for our gym increased as more women and a handful of men came for our aerobic and kung-fu training. The motivational programme continued to draw many women to us as Ajuwa's story of forced marriage, open rape, and her eventual success in life served as a pull for many to strive to defeat man-made obstacles.

For one year Ajuwa continued with her patronage of both the Catholic Church and the Heaven and Earth Reapers Church. Pastor Abel became more of a family member than her pastor because he visited us almost daily. Ajuwa looked happy but her children, Efesi and I had our fears because Ajuwa regressed to a state where she could not do anything without first consulting Pastor Abel.

The challenges of life had changed my perceptions on marriage, and I had to eat my words on remaining single. Efesi had also reconsidered her decision to remain single; so, one by one we fell in love with the men we met in the societies we belonged to in our church, and preparation for marriage became our engagement. As preparation

for marriage became our next agenda, we were surprised to receive invitation from the King of Ngwelle asking us to come home for a ceremony to destigmatize us. Our mother had been ostracized for allegedly falling foul of tradition by not having proper control of her daughters who disobeyed tradition. She was banned from all the village meetings and gatherings. The king arranged for a ceremony to destigmatize our mother and the three of us.

This ceremony would involve our mother and three daughters going to the king for reintegration into our homeland. The king and people of Ngwelle will organise a formal reception, prayers and the renunciation of the curses placed on Ajuwa, Efesi and our mother. The ceremony would include feasting and dancing. Mother was happy that she would be alive to witness this ceremony which will make her to raise her head again in the community. When Ajuwa was informed of the ceremony, she developed cold feet. She said nothing would make her set her feet on Ngwelle. I understood Ajuwa's reaction but I was somehow happy that this was happening as I had all along been nostalgic about my birth place. I was not indicted for any offence against Ngwelle tradition, but I was seen as a collaborator because I escaped from the community to join Ajuwa.

I had been longing to go home since my last visit. I longed to see my mother and sisters, and socialize with childhood friends. I also wanted to breathe in the unpolluted green and fresh air of Ngwelle and to see what changes Christianity had made in the life of Ngwelle people. I longed to eat our fresh food, particularly my favourite roasted yam with freshly processed red palm oil. I longed to see my mother's new house which we sent money for her to build but I had never seen since it was completed. I wanted to see how her chickens fitted into this new house and whether she still relied on them for her wake up calls. I also wanted my fiancé to visit the land of my birth and for our traditional marriage to be celebrated there. Efesi was home-sick as well, and was excited about visiting home and having her traditional marriage celebrated in Ngwelle. She had never visited home since we smuggled her into Lagos.

Ajuwa's refusal to visit home became a serious concern for us, and we did not know what to do. We tried to convince her to honour the king's invitation, reminding her that the king and many people in Ngwelle had accepted and taken up Christianity. She told us to give her some time to consult Pastor Abel before deciding whether she could go. A week before our proposed trip, we were shocked to hear from Ajuwa that Pastor Abel said

that none of us should travel to Ngwelle because it could be risky for us to do so.

Although we did not agree with Pastor Abel, we knew that if we must travel to Ngwelle, Ajuwa must go with us because it was her public humiliation and consequent reaction that led to our stigmatisation. Because we did not know what to do, I sought Fr Ayodeji's advice. He advised us to pray and have faith in what God can do. He reminded me of the many miracles God had done in our lives. He told me to remember that with God all things are possible.

“By now,” he reiterated, “you should trust God, who touched the heart of King Mameri and made him to become a Christian and who is working hard now to convert most of his subjects. Remember that you cannot run away from your home forever; so, this invitation from the king himself should be a good opportunity for you to triumphantly visit Ngwelle. It will be in your interest to learn to trust God and believe that he is bigger than your fears. If you trust God, you will tell him your fears, and trust that he will take care of them. Fear is a monster that inhibits people from reaching out to accept what God has set before them.”

I related the encouraging message of Fr Ayodeji to Ajuwa, and pleaded with her to trust

God who has been doing many things for her and for all of us. “There has to be a trial before a triumph,” I reminded her. “God compensated you by turning your public disgrace to grace. He allowed what you went through so that his grace will flood your life.”

“You can go without me,” Ajuwa insisted. “My children and I will never set our feet again on the land of Ngwelle!”

We were tired of isolation from our people, and we did not want to be seen as disobeying the king. We therefore sent a message to the king. We told him that we could not come to Ngwelle as a result of what Ajuwa and her son suffered in their hands. We continued to work and pray while making gradual preparation for our weddings.

Meanwhile, Ajuwa was yet to reap benefits from what she sowed into Pastor Abel's church. She started feeling bad despite Pastor Abel's overwhelming and persuasive prayers. He kept assuring her that she would reap what she had sown in more ways than she could ever imagine. He ran Ajuwa's life and spent most of his time with her. Whenever we were alone with Ajuwa, she would complain of Pastor Abel's overbearing attitude, but when she set her eyes on the pastor, the story would change.

One day, something unusual happened. We

were reviewing the works of our students when we heard altercation between Ajuwa and the pastor. Ajuwa was screaming and threatening to kill Pastor Abel. We quickly left what we were doing, and rushed into the room where they were. We did what we could to intervene. Ajuwa told us that she was demanding the reward of what she sowed into his church or a refund of her money. She said the pastor insulted her by telling her to forget about the money because he would marry her and make her a co-pastor in his church. Fuming with anger, she held the pastor by the throat. Our intervention saved the pastor and he quickly took to his heels.

“I’ve been fooled,” Ajuwa sobbed, “this pastor has squandered my money. He thought he could continue to deceive me by offering to marry me!”

“Sister, take it easy,” I pleaded. “Learn from this and stop being defrauded by promises of supernatural powers or gains. Thank God he did not take everything away from you.”

“I’ve been duped,” she continued to sob. “With my education and exposure, I still fell victim to the intrigue of a dropout whose knowledge of religion is founded on a mere three-month Bible studies in a sub-standard Bible school which he was forced to undergo after being rehabilitated as a drug addict.”

“How did you know this?” I asked.

“All of us in his church know this. He tells the story of his drug addiction and eventual rehabilitation by a man of God as a testimony to every new entrant to his church. He tells us God turned his life around and that God will also turn our lives around the way God did his. This is the main attraction for me and others who have been going to his church. Siweku, my sister! You and Efesi warned me! James, one of the persons who left his church, also warned me but I didn't listen to any of you.”

“Stop lamenting and thank God because it could have been worse. Let's continue with our work and by the grace of God, you will regain the money you lost. Now that you know who Pastor Abel is, you may want to reconsider your decision about your membership of different churches. Concentrate on a church that practises simple faith and beliefs in God. Fr Ayodeji, a priest of the Catholic Church, has demonstrated in more than one way the power of God in the lives of His children. Through Fr Ayodeji's intercession, God healed you, rescued your son from captivity, converted you and made you forgive all those who humiliated and offended you. God also used him and a host of other servants of God to convert the king and people of Ngwelle to the extent that the

king, who was hitherto an oppressor of women and all that women stood for, is now warming up to what the civilized world believes about women. Please rescind your decision and go to Ngwelle for the ceremony.”

“Siweku,” she sobbed, “apart from the warnings of Pastor Abel, I'm afraid of going to Ngwelle. The thought of what I suffered and the abduction of Onowe frightens me!”

Efesi and I thought of how to make Ajuwa happy; we decided that we would invite our mother, sisters and our half-brothers and half-sisters to Lagos for a small traditional marriage ceremony. While we were thinking of how to organise this, we received another shocking message.

14

KING MAMERI

As we were planning for our traditional marriage to take place in Lagos, Fr Ayodeji informed us that King Mameri sent a message that he will personally come to Lagos to lead us home to be de-ostracised.

“It sounded like a fairy tale. The king of a kingdom that had no regard for women will be coming to Lagos for the sake of women? Well, we shall wait and see. Father, I hope he doesn't come, but what do we do if he actually comes? Ajuwa's memory of what she suffered in Ngwelle still lingers. If the king comes, I hope Ajuwa won't relapse into depression at the sight of the king?”

“Ajuwa has nothing to fear because Christianity has changed King Mameri. He is coming to Lagos to lead Ajuwa and two of you home. His proposed visit should be cheering news. He will also visit some sons and daughters of Ngwelle residing in Lagos to encourage them to come home and help develop their motherland because things have changed. He is supposed to be in Lagos next month. I will ascertain the exact date of his coming. The three of you should be happy that the king has humbled himself to the extent of

personally coming for you. Ajuwa should also know that the king has personally reported the kidnap of Onowe to the police and that Chief Jejebi and Ogor are being interrogated,” Fr Ayodeji explained.

Although the news of King Mameri's proposed visit was unnerving because of our fears; yet, it will be an honour for our king to humble himself and come to Lagos for the purpose of leading us to our home like a caring father. Efesi and I thought of how to handle this delicate matter because of Ajuwa's aversion to setting foot on Ngwelle soil. We then decided to work on the psyche of Ajuwa by breaking the news of the king's proposed visit with feigned excitement.

“Ajuwa, can you imagine King Mameri is personally coming to Lagos for our sake? He's coming to Lagos to lead us to Ngwelle for the rites that will remove ostracism from you, mother, Efesi and me?” I asked. “We've never heard that King Mameri left his domain to honour anybody, but he wants to do what he has never done for our sake. It's so exciting! Shouldn't we make special preparations to receive him?”

“Did I hear you right? Did you say King Mameri, barbarian is coming here?” Ajuwa cried out angrily. “Oh, Siweku, I thought you love me;

you are heartless to the point of inviting that evil doer to come here and finish the work he started? It is unbelievable to think that you, my own sister, can be this wicked!”

Ajuwa's outburst was intimidating and I was so shocked that I could not respond. I stood lost for words for a while. I did not know what to say or do, but the rain of tears from my eyes spoke for me as Ajuwa apologetically came over and held me to her bosom.

“Siweku,” she cried, “I'm very sorry for those hurting words. I didn't mean them. I didn't have to throw a tantrum. You have been there for me all through my trials. I don't know what life would have been without you. I'm so confused. I wish I could run away from here but where can I run to? You, Efesi and my children are the ones who have been standing by me in all my trials. I'm so afraid of setting my eyes on King Mameri. I need help to behold him and not see the demon that I believe he is.”

Still bemused, I held on to Ajuwa; I was unable to say a word, and torrents of tears rained from our eyes and mucus dripped from our noses, forcing us to turn our clothes into napkins for cleaning our tears. Our power of speech was lost and we clung to each other, crying. Efesi, who had stepped out before this drama, walked in. She saw

us clasping each other and weeping; she too joined us in our theatre of tears. When I saw Efesi weeping as well, I knew someone must take control. I let go of Ajuwa and said, “All the tears in the world will not solve the problem at hand. We cannot stop the king from coming to Lagos or coming to our house. We cannot start another round of unhelpful rebellion at this stage! Let us fast and pray and leave everything in God's able hands.”

“I agree with you,” Ajuwa sighed. “We shall fast and pray for three days and ask God to take control.”

We all agreed and gave ourselves the task of fasting and praying for three days for God's will to be done. On the third day, we had peace because Ajuwa told us that she had a revelation that everything shall work out well. She therefore agreed that we should prepare to host King Mameri and whoever he might be coming with.

We booked hotel accommodations for the king and his entourage in a four-star hotel and arranged to treat them to a banquet in our house. We sought out some natives of Ngwelle in Lagos, and invited them to join us in giving a befitting reception to the king. Some of them who knew Ajuwa's story and the role the king played in punishing her with bee-sting were surprised at our

acceptance to receive the king. Some others felt that they would have nothing to do with a pagan and oppressive king, who did not practise fairness and justice.

Efesi and I became vanguards for the transformation that was taking place in Ngwelle and for how the king had become a Christian. A few sons and daughters of Ngwelle who had also heard about the changes in their homeland as a result of the king's conversion to Christianity joined us in the planning for a befitting reception for our king. We held meetings with some of them and decided to surprise the king by organising a popular cultural troupe in Lagos to perform at the special reception. We also arranged to prepare special Ngwelle delicacies for him.

As Efesi and I engaged ourselves in the task of organising the people to accord the king a befitting reception, Ajuwa immersed herself in prayers to God to take control. She did not stop with the three-day fasting, she continued with praying and fasting and from time to time, she would reassure us that God had taken control and that there was nothing to be afraid of. Her assurance was calming as one could see the peace that exuded from her. Our fear that she could slip back into depression had been completely proven wrong, so we looked forward with joy to the

honour of receiving our king in our house, an unprecedented event in the history of Ngwelle people.

As we excitedly prepared to receive the king, I pondered, 'So life can harbour many secret detours and mysteries waiting for mankind to labour and toil without finding immediate answers? Could it now be said that Ajuwa's faith in God and her willingness to forgive opened the secret of peace and happiness to her? How do we reckon with the uninformed and uneducated who stumble on some of life's secrets and mysteries even in their simple everyday lifestyle? Back in our village and even right here in Lagos, many people lead very simple lives without deep thoughts in religion or questioning authorities. They do what they are told to do and submit to their superiors as the natural way of life and they have peace, happiness and good health. Why do some of us complicate life? Why do we lose ourselves in unending search for power and recognition? Ajuwa spent time and money searching for power from every strange sources but all it brought her was trouble, sorrow and ill-health. Ngwelle people, in their quest to dominate their neighbours, subjected their people to perpetual tyranny; in return, they reaped poverty and backwardness. What lessons should we learn from all these? Ajuwa's

experiences ought to be enough lessons for human beings. We should all know that power, health, wealth, happiness and all the good things of life come from God and that he alone can give us peace. As we labour and toil, we should pray to God, who turns impossibilities to possibilities. We should give love a pride of place in our lives. We should strive to forgive, knowing that we too are not perfect and so need forgiveness.'

Having pondered this thought over and over, Efesi, some indigenes of Ngwelle and I continued our preparation for the king's reception. We paid the cultural troupe and a caterer who specialised in local cuisine while waiting to know the actual day the king would come. Just as we were wondering about the day of the king's coming, Fr Ayodeji sent a messenger to inform us that the king would arrive in four days time. Before Fr Ayodeji's message, Ajuwa had informed us that the king would arrive on that same day that Fr Ayodeji told us. Ajuwa also revealed that the king would come in the company of Kokome and a few of his chiefs. She said both the king and Kokome will beg her for forgiveness.

At first we doubted Ajuwa's revelations, but the message from Fr Ayodeji concerning the date of the king's arrival convinced us that Ajuwa, who had been praying and fasting, was in the spirit.

She foretold of an unprecedented reception and honour when we would eventually go to Ngwelle, but she warned that we should not accept any honour from Ngwelle because God had prepared greater honours for us.

The four days were long, considering the anticipation and the fact that most of the preparation for the king's reception had been concluded, but our anxiety shortened the hours and the days because the king eventually arrived before we were fully ready to receive the king and his entourage.

Before the king got to our house, we assembled illustrious sons and daughters of Ngwelle, our friends and clients, our students and the cultural troupe. He went to visit Fr Ayodeji first and Fr Ayodeji escorted him and his entourage to our house. They drove in amidst eulogies by the cultural troupe stationed outside the entrance to the school hall to herald the king's arrival and to usher him and his entourage into our compound.

As they came out of the car, with Kokome trailing behind the chiefs, Ajuwa, Efesi and I met them and went on our knees in courtesy to the king and his chiefs. The king was surprisingly overwhelmed and the astonishment on the faces of his chiefs were transparent. The king held us up. As we rose from our knees to lead the king and his

entourage into the house, Ajuwa surprised us by walking over to Kokome and giving him a hug! Kokome was so shocked that he stood still; he could not reciprocate Ajuwa's friendly gesture. Ajuwa held his right hand, and led him into the house. We were so shocked by Ajuwa's dramatic behaviour that we almost forgot what we planned to do. It was the same Ajuwa who quickly reminded us of the traditional way of giving water to friendly visitors to wash their hands as soon as they enter inside the house. We quickly brought some water and all the chiefs and Kokome washed their hands. The cultural troupe continued singing praise songs of the king while two Ngwelle men helped us with the presentation of kola nuts. The king prayed in our traditional way but ended the prayer in Jesus' name and requested Fr Ayodeji to close the prayer.

We gave him and his chiefs some of the delicacies we had prepared for them before they came out to the hall for the formal reception. We also served Fr Ayodeji whom Ajuwa had begged to stay with us throughout the ceremony. While they were eating, Ajuwa led Kokome to the back of the house, and after a few minutes she invited us. When we got there, she told us that she had decided to tell Kokome that she had forgiven him, and that she wanted us to confirm this to him. She added

that she would do everything within her power to reconcile him and the children. We watched Kokome, who could not utter a word but openly gaped in tears.

“Uncle Kokome,” I called, “Ajuwa forgave you a long time ago. She just wanted you to know that she had done so. Feel free and enjoy yourself, knowing that it was your kindness to Ajuwa and your employment to the Edwards that brought us this far.”

Looking at Ajuwa, then Efe and me, he managed a self-reassuring smile and said, “Ajuwa, so you can forgive me? I wronged you very badly. Christianity has now opened my eyes to many things I didn't know before. Even my mother, who used diabolical means to confuse me, regretted her actions at last. All I can say right now is thank you,” Kokome said.

“We shouldn't keep the priest and the king waiting. We shall talk later; I want you to relax and enjoy yourself. We have all made different types of mistakes, but I thank God who has opened our eyes to the healing balm of forgiveness!” Ajuwa reassured Kokome.

We rushed back to meet our guests who were still relishing their meals. Ajuwa instructed the caterer to serve food and drinks to the people who were waiting to accord the king a royal

reception. She told them that the king and his entourage would soon be with them. As the caterers were serving food and drinks, the tempo of the music slowed down to a slow melody while the people ate and drank amidst bonhomie and chats. The king and his entourage completed their meals and were ushered into the beautifully decorated school hall where all our guests were waiting. The audience stood up in reverence to the king and waited for him to sit down on the special chair prepared for him before they took their own seats. The praise songs, the sheer size and beauty of the hall and the unusual reverence from the audience kept the king animated and happy. The chiefs looked around the beautifully decorated hall and the gaily dressed guests sitting around the king and felt very happy.

The master of ceremonies, also an indigene of Ngwelle, set the ball rolling by formally introducing the king and his chiefs to the audience. The king responded with a shaky voice by blessing all the people present and telling them the purpose of his visit. Then standing up to his position as a king with royalty and authority, he raised the symbol of his kingship and said, “My dear children, when I decided to come to Lagos to see my children and take them home for formal integration, I never expected what my eyes are beholding now.”

Turning to look at Fr Ayodeji, he continued, “I thank the Almighty God and Fr Ayodeji, who have made this possible today. The land of Ngwelle was enveloped in darkness and ignorance because we thought we had juju and the might of our gods. We never looked beyond our borders, save to fight for farmlands and terrorise our neighbours with our cultic powers. We used our powers to marginalise the weak, particularly our women who we treated with disdain. The story of our daughter here,” pointing at Ajuwa, “and what we did to her is a typical example of the way we treated our women.

“We had pride in our juju and charms. Yes, we had all those powers and what did the powers bring us? Poverty and misery! The mere mention of Ngwelle brought fear to our sons, daughters and our neighbours. Our diabolical powers brought us estrangement from our neighbours, and our enlightened children abandoned us. Development eluded us and all progressive elements avoided us.

“I have come today to tell our daughters and all other indigenes of Ngwelle residing in Lagos that we have changed. Christianity has changed us! We want all our children to be proud of their homeland; we want them to visit us with their friends and bring development to Ngwelle. We want them to know that we are receptive to their advice and suggestions on how to develop

Ngwelle.

“My dear children, I want to confess that what I see here today is beyond my imagination! I never knew that our daughter, Ajuwa, would allow us into her house and give us a cup of water. I could never have dreamt of this elaborate reception which has further strengthened my resolve to work for the growth of Christianity. I have tasted and seen that the Lord is good. I hereby beg our daughter, Ajuwa, to forgive me and my subjects for all the wrongs we did to her.

“To the glory of God, many of our sons and daughters in Ngwelle have embraced the Christian faith now. Fr Ayodeji is working hard to bring us a secondary school that will teach general knowledge and the Christian faith. I entreat all of you here to fear God and be fair to your fellow human beings. Thank you and once again, God bless all of you.”

The king's speech drew loud applause and more eulogies from the band. A wealthy son of Ngwelle who said he had not visited home for twenty years got on his feet and grabbed the microphone saying, “This is the happiest day of my life! All these years I had lived in Lagos like an outcast, a man without identity and without history. Since it has taken the need to de-ostracise the women from Oruru's family to make the king come

to Lagos, I will accompany Ajuwa and her sisters to my homeland. I promise the king and the people of Ngwelle that I will use the resources the good Lord has given me for the betterment of Ngwelle. I will also mobilise my friends to assist in the development of Ngwelle.”

A few other speeches of affirmation were made before the band set the stage on fire with popular Ngwelle music and everybody danced either on their feet or on their seats before tiredness took its toll and the day took its rest with the setting of the sun. The king and the chiefs retired to the hotel that was booked for them, but we asked Kokome to stay behind for some chats. The king would spend three days in Lagos to enable him meet other Ngwelle indigenes after which we travelled in a convoy to Ngwelle.

Fr Ayodeji stood by us all through the reception and promised to follow us to Ngwelle as our visit would be another opportunity to further evangelize the people. To enable us integrate Ajuwa's children into their homeland, we arranged for them to follow us to Ngwelle. That decision shocked Onowe, but Ajuwa assured him that all would be well because she believed that God was in control. As we made preparations for the journey, Ajuwa, though happy at the turn of event, soaked herself in prayer of supplication to God to guard

and guide us. She would wake up every morning to reassure us that all would be well but that we must not relent in our prayers.

The success of the reception and the excitement about our unusual trip to Ngwelle did not only ignite our zeal but also made three days look like a few hours. We shopped for our mother, our sisters, their husbands and our other half-brothers and half-sisters. We also made provisions for foods and drinks for those who might come to rejoice with our mother. Soon, the day of our trip sprang on us like a leopard, and as early as 6 a.m., we hauled ourselves into two separate cars for the majestic journey to Ngwelle. A few indigenes followed us in their own cars. A convoy of nine cars including Fr Ayodeji's and a police escort hit the road with us en route to Ngwelle.

As we drove steadily on the high way, Ajuwa, who shared her children between our two cars and made Onowe and Kokome to sit in the same car, sat quietly immersed in prayers until we reached Ngwelle

15

REINTEGRATION

We arrived at Ngwelle by 12:30 p.m. and drove straight to the court where a mammoth crowd was already waiting to receive us. As the king stepped out of the car to enter the court, he asked his chiefs to lead us. Two of them led us from the front and the other two were behind us. Fr Ayodeji followed closely behind us and the chiefs. We were led into the court with praise songs and dancing, and were given seats near the king. Our mother was invited to sit between Ajuwa and Efesi. I sat next to Efesi with my nephew and niece by my right hand. The king ordered the musicians to stop the drumming and singing and waved to the crowd to keep quite.

Suddenly, there was rumbling and whispering and all eyes turned to the entrance of the court. I became anxious and turned to look at the cause of the sudden distraction and I saw Chief Jejebi with three other men standing in front of the door to the court. I was seized with fear. Thinking that they came to cause trouble, I whispered to Efesi, who in turn whispered to mother, who turned to whisper to Ajuwa but Ajuwa waived her off. The anxiety raised by the presence of these men was like that of a husband waiting for his wife

in labour to deliver their first child.

The king took control of the situation and said, “Chief Jejebi, why are you waiting at the door? Come in with your men.”

Chief Jejebi strolled in, followed by Chiefs Osuzo, Onunu and Aliogo. Chief Jejebi looked round and seeing the jubilant crowd and Ajuwa, my mother and the rest of us, he wiped his brow, nodded his head and said, “My king and people of Ngwelle, I salute you all. I'll start by telling you a story of what ignorance and lack of exposure caused many years ago.

“A young man lost his father while he was still a baby. His mother brought him up with love and care and did her best to protect him by shielding him from immorality and indecency. He grew up to be a hardworking and reliable young man. As a young adult, he saw young men of his age wooing girls and giving them gifts. He became curious to know why they did this and they informed him that they wanted to sleep with the girls. He thought those young men were simply stupid.

“Why waste your energy and resources on something you can get free of charge? My mother gives me everything I ask for; so, when I get home today, I will ask her to sleep with me. She has never denied me of any good thing and I know she will allow me to sleep with her free of charge if it is a

good thing. If sleeping with girls is a good thing, I will not have to beg and waste my resources as you are doing,” he proudly asserted, beating his chest.

“Abomination! Sacrilege! It is an abomination, a sacrilegious act and a desecration of all that is human and Godly to have to sleep with your own mother!” shouted the young men he spoke to. They seized him and dragged him to the king of the land. On interrogation, the king found out that he was ignorant about sex because his mother had shielded him from immorality without bothering to educate him about sensual love. The king spoke to the young man and made his mother to release him to join the social and communal activities of his age group.”

He cleared his throat and raised his voice: “I was like that young man! I thought I was a brave man and knew everything, but I know now that I knew very little and that I'm not a brave man. The brave ones are you people who are not afraid to embrace change. I'm not brave enough to accept changes in our ways of life. However, I have come to see that there are good things in the new way you have chosen because despite my uncompromising attitude, the king sent a prominent son of Ngwelle to bail me out from police custody.

“Until we were arrested, I never knew the

enormity of the crime we committed. After the police explained the implications of what we did, it became clear to me that we have been wallowing in ignorance. Our assumption that power and might were right was controverted by the police when they explained aspects of the law concerning what we did to me. I had already concluded with Ogor that we might die in jail or take the path of least resistance by committing suicide. Sadly, Ogor committed suicide before the king made sure that I was granted bail. I was not only granted bail, but this afternoon, I was also told that the charges against us had been dropped but unfortunately Ogor did not live to hear this good news. I have come here to thank the king and our great daughter, Ajuwa, for ensuring our freedom. I apologise for all the wrongs I did out of ignorance.

“However, I cannot become a Christian because I'm not brave enough to be one! Besides, the land of Ngwelle still needs a mediator between her children and her gods and ancestors. I shall be the one to mediate for our sons and daughters who are not Christians and even for those of you who are Christians or Moslems because we must not abandon our ancestors. I will however submit myself for more enlightenment in order to be better informed even as I mediate between our children and our gods and ancestors. Men and women of

Ngwelle, forgive me and my followers and let's continue to be united even when we serve different gods. If I will be accepted, I want to join in this ceremony of de-ostracising and re-integrating our daughters back to Ngwelle.”

The voice of the people in the court reached its highest pitch as they praised God. Chief Jejebi and his men remained on their feet until the king asked them to sit. They took their seats and the king continued, “My dear people of Ngwelle, I salute you all. It has been a long day today! We left Lagos very early this morning to make sure that this ceremony for which you are all gathered here takes place not later than today so that our daughters and other indigenes of Ngwelle who followed us can rest from the long journey.

“The presence of Chief Jejebi and his group is a testimony that we are on the right course. As he said, Ajuwa and I had to arrange for their release in order to foster peace and unity among our people. We thank God that we all have learnt our lessons. Our choice of religion should be free. Nobody should force anybody to accept any particular religion, but whatever religion we choose, we should ensure that love, peace, equity, and justice hold sway in this kingdom. I'm the king of all the people of Ngwelle, whether Christians, Moslems or idol worshippers.

“The ceremony of destigmatising our daughters and their mother is now a mere formality because of the grandiose reception our daughters gave me and my chiefs in Lagos. The reception they gave us in Lagos is much greater than what we had planned for them. I was almost tempted to tell our daughters that they have been reintegrated into Ngwelle community without any formal ceremony, but I thought of the expectations of all of you here and the joy you will get from seeing these great women. I didn't want to deny you the opportunity of seeing these women from whom I have learnt a great lesson of humility and forgiveness. Our daughter, Ajuwa, was seriously wronged in many ways; she was desecrated, called a witch, abandoned and stung almost to death by diabolical bees. Her only son was kidnapped by the repentant Chief Jejebi and Ogor. Her attempt at retaliating on Ogor who raped her openly almost took her life. I championed the punishment that almost took her life, yet she magnanimously forgave me and my people.

“We are going to pray for these women and formally welcome them back to their home. Before then, I hereby publicly apologise to our daughter Ajuwa for what we did to her in the name of our culture, and for the pain I personally inflicted on her. I need not ask for her forgiveness because she

has shown that she has a big heart and a forgiving spirit,” King Mameri said.

He then called Ajuwa, our mother, Efesi, Ajuwa's children and me. We came to the middle of the court, and sat on the seats that were provided for us. He stretched forth his hand and asked the chiefs and elders to join him as he prayed over us. He declared right there that we were no longer under any curse or stigmatization and that we and our mother were free and integrated into Ngwelle community as other sons or daughters of Ngwelle. After he had prayed with his chiefs and elders, he asked Fr Ayodeji to conclude the prayer. Fr Ayodeji stepped forward and prayed in the name of Jesus. After the prayers, we surged forward to embrace our sisters and brothers. Foods and drinks were served and we ate and drank with our folks. Singing and dancing commenced and we joined in the merriment.

Kokome, who sat quietly all through the ceremony, stood and asked the king for permission to speak. The king ordered the singers to stop. Kokome came forward. First, he knelt before the king and then turned to face Ajuwa.

“Ajuwa, I wronged you very badly, and even though you said you have forgiven me, I still feel duty bound to publicly ask you to forgive me and my mother who misled me,” he pleaded.

“Right now my mother is very ill and might die any moment from now, but she will die happily if you can forgive her. My mother lived a greater part of her life as a lonely and sad woman because she was accused of causing the death of my father who accidentally fell from a palm-tree. Your presence in her life removed the darkness that overshadowed her from when I was only three years old. She found happiness when you came into her life, but fear, ignorance, suspicion and the defeatist attitude of women made her turn against you, thereby robbing her of the happiness she had found. It also robbed me of my happiness and a promising career. Women's belief in fatalism and adherence to archaic traditions which promote their marginalisation by men have been the bane of womanhood. I thank God who kept me alive to see a day like this when womanhood is given a pride of place. If you can forgive my mother in the same way you forgave me, she will die happily.”

The court stood silent; tears dropped from the women's faces; men wept in their hearts too as everybody in the court watched Kokome in amazement. Ajuwa also wept but she quickly pulled Kokome up and assured him again that she had since forgiven his mother. She went further to tell Kokome that she would personally visit Mama Kika, who at one time, was of great help to her

when she needed help most.

As the ceremony was going on, the Ngwelle people who followed us from Lagos reaffirmed their commitment to work hard for the development of Ngwelle. The people were happy and there were resounding cheers from them. Just before the king declared the ceremony closed, Gbemedu, the huge peace maker with the equally huge abdomen, who had been a moderating factor in Ngwelle, stood, cleared his throat and spoke.

“My king, chiefs, elders and all you good people of Ngwelle, today is a great day in the annals of Ngwelle. Before now, we, the men of Ngwelle thought that we were gods, but our exposure to Christian religion and what has happened today have taught us a great lesson. We know now that men are gods who know that they are not gods. Men can become gods only when they know that they are not gods and that power, might, wealth, wisdom, and knowledge, come from the Almighty God. If human beings were to be gods at all, that appellation should go to our women who bear their servitude with humility.

“These women cook for us, farm for us, offer their bodies for our pleasure, carry pregnancies for us and care for our children. By their humility and submission, they allow us to continue to be the men; so, we cannot be men

without our women.”

After this beautiful oration, all the women present jumped up screaming rapturously and the men drooped their heads, presumably in deep thoughts. The king closed the ceremony, and we moved over to my mother's house where she had assembled some village women to rejoice with her.

Our mother's joy was exhilarating as she danced and danced, singing aloud that her daughters who were humiliated had become the instruments for the transformation of Ngwelle.

Refrain: *Rejoice with me, rejoice with me
Women of Ngwelle, rejoice with me.*

I was despised because I had only daughters
My daughters were marginalized
Ajuwa was publicly desecrated
Efesi was forced into marriage
Siweku managed to steal away.
(Refrain)

My daughter's son was kidnapped
I was ostracized from my fellow women
I lived in desolation but bore my humiliation
My desolation became my consolation
Today, God has wiped away my tears
And placed me on a high pedestal.
(Refrain)

My daughters became the instruments
For the emancipation of women in Ngwelle
And the salvation of our men who were gods
Rejoice and rejoice with me all you women
And thank this new and powerful God
Who turns disgrace into grace and glory
And reminds men that they can't be gods.

(Refrain)

Our mother sang and danced with so much excitement that Ajuwa, Efesi and our other sisters wept tears of joy for her. While the dancing and eating were going on, I was lost in thought.

'So mother can be this excited? How did she manage her life all these years when she was excommunicated from fellow women in her society? To think that she bore her disgrace in silence because of us showed how far mothers can go for the protection of their children. She had rejected our many attempts to smuggle her to Lagos because she did not want to leave her other daughters who were married to men in the village. She bore her agony as a mother, and stood behind her daughters.'

As these thoughts ran through my mind, I got up from my seat and went on my knees before our mother while she was still dancing; I danced with her on my knees. Mother held me up. Ajuwa,

Efesi and my other sisters who could not hold their emotion, joined us in the victory dance. We danced and sang songs of praise until tiredness forced us to retire to sleep.

We slept in the new house we built for mother for the first time since she moved into it. As early as 4 a.m., the cocks resumed their duty, crowing as a wake-up call for mother. Surprisingly she woke up to start her daily routine. I also woke up and walked to the small hut behind the house where the cocks were kept. I did not wake up to do any work but to observe the cocks crowing and flapping their wings. This time I was not angry with them but happy that they did not forget their duty. I also thanked God for the cocks, for they must have helped mother to live through the years of her ostracism.

Mother occupied herself as usual with the task of preparing our breakfast, but our elder sister also brought breakfast from her house. I had my steaming roasted yam with peppered salt and palm oil, while Ajuwa and Efesi took the pap and *akara* which our elder sister Ekoma brought. After breakfast, we went to visit our relations. The lives of our elder sisters had improved tremendously. It showed that their husbands treated them better because of Ajuwa's exploits and their conversion to Christianity. We were happy to see how

Christianity changed Ngwelle as many fetish objects that used to hang on the doors and entrances of houses had been removed. On the second day, our sisters came to mother's house and spent two days with us. They gazed on Ajuwa, touched her, pinched her and hugged her in wonderment.

“Ajuwa, so you actually had the courage to come to Ngwelle for a vengeance mission on Ogor? What if you had actually died from the bee-sting? Didn't you know that people can be stung to death from the stings of those diabolical bees?” Ekoma asked.

“We thank God you are alive and that what you did saved us and transformed Ngwelle. When we look at what you, Efesi and Siweku have become in life, we thank God that we are women and that women can make the difference. Ajuwa my sister, may God reward you for your sacrifices in more ways than he has already done, in Jesus' name,” Omiko, my mother's second daughter, prayed.

“Sisters, thank God for me. I did a lot of foolish things, and took unnecessary risks in my attempt to avenge the public desecration I suffered, but the love and mercy of God saw me through my adventures. The Lord is good, and I hereby implore all of you to be good Christians.

Forgive those who offended you and love your neighbours as you love yourself. It worked for me and I know it will work for all mankind irrespective of their religions and beliefs.”

Fr Ayodeji, who had earlier accompanied us to our mother's house, spent two days in Ngwelle, evangelizing and preparing for the proposed mission secondary school before he returned to Lagos two days ahead of us.

After four days in Ngwelle, we decided to travel back to Lagos but made arrangements to see Kika first. When we arrived at her home, her neighbours were watching over her to see her take her last breath. Ajuwa flung herself on the dying Kika and on her knees, she wept over her, begging her not to die. She got up from her knees, lifted Kika and placed her on her laps weeping and begging her not to die yet. She asked us to go quickly to the next village to get a priest to baptise Kika before she died.

We could not get a priest immediately but we brought a catechist who baptised Mama Kika thereby making her a Christian on her deathbed. As soon as the rites of baptism were concluded, Kika opened her eyes and seeing Ajuwa, a faint smile broke out from her sagging mouth, but she breathed her last peacefully in Ajuwa's arms. We all wept for this kind woman whose life was flawed by

injustices, fear and superstition. We continued our journey to Lagos but Ajuwa assured Kokome that she would play a major role in the burial of his mother.

16

THE HONOUR

When we returned to Lagos, we commenced preparation for our traditional wedding which would take place in Ngwelle. The king had indicated that he would like to meet our would-be husbands, and mother was also gearing up to showcase her daughters and would-be husbands. Ajuwa was of the view that we fix the date of our traditional marriage to coincide with the time Kika would be buried to ensure that we minimise the number of times we travel the road between Lagos and Ngwelle. We agreed with her because we too wanted to be part of Kika's burial ceremony.

The burial date was fixed and we planned to be in Ngwelle two days before the burial to enable us to complete the traditional marriage ceremony before the burial.

The days to our traditional marriage moved so fast like a sweet dream, and we were on our way to Ngwelle along with our grooms, their parents, their friends and some of our own friends. We arrived at Ngwelle late afternoon and checked our guests into the only guest house in Ngwelle, which had been abandoned by the owners because of the pagan practices in Ngwelle, but had to be

refurbished at our instance to take in our guests.

After checking our guests and grooms into the guest house, we went over to our mother's place. Thereafter, we went to the king's court to present our gifts and to inform him that we had arrived with our husbands to-be and their families. Later that evening, our grooms and their families followed us to our mother's house to be formally introduced to our family. They met our mother, our sisters and their husbands, our half-brothers and their wives, our nephews, nieces and other extended family members. The formal introductions were made and foods and drinks were served.

The following morning we took our guests to the king's court. He received them warmly. He told them that we were very special to him, and that he and his chiefs would be present at the traditional marriage ceremony later in the day. We spent a short time with him and went away to prepare for the ceremony.

The ceremony started by 2 p.m. with the formal payment of the dowry and the usual parade of maidens for the grooms to choose their real brides. Prayers were said, followed by eating and drinking. The master of ceremonies invited Efesi and me together with our grooms to the dance floor. As we came out to dance, the party became

electrified as everybody jostled to dance with us and to spray us money. The king and his chiefs joined in the 'spraying-mania' and the dancing floor was coated with different denominations of currency notes. Our mother and sisters danced so well that one would think that dancing was going out of fashion and they were in a hurry to catch up. Everybody had fun, and I was particularly happy that I had my traditional marriage in the land of my birth.

While all the dancing and merriment was going on, and everyone got so excited to the point of abandoning the cares and worries of this world, Ajuwa looked sober and kept herself busy with either helping to direct affairs or praying her Rosary, the habit she acquired after Pastor Abel swindled her.

The dancing and 'sprayingmania' which got everybody excited did not seem to affect her because she kept her cool. We danced and danced until our feet were fatigued and we could no longer continue because of tiredness. We retired to our seats but some brawny young men and women continued to dance until the master of ceremonies announced that the king wanted to say something before leaving. The dancing stopped and we were all ears!

The king took the microphone and said,

“My dear people of Ngwelle, our in-laws and other guests, what I want to say now is what I should have said on the day our daughters came to Ngwelle for destigmatizing ceremony. I delayed saying it because I didn't want to shock our people who were gradually adjusting to the notion of equal rights for men and women. Today, I pronounce our daughter Ajuwa a chief in Ngwelle. I shall bestow upon her the title of ‘The Trail Blazer of Ngwelle’. Ajuwa whenever you are ready to come and accept this title formally, let me know so that my chiefs and I can prepare the ground for the celebration as this will be the first time a woman will be so honoured in the history of Ngwelle.”

The party went wild; the young men and women jumped up, jumped down, and romped around. The eyes of the chiefs and some elderly men in the party popped in amazement! Our mother screamed until she started panting for breath. We kept still, knowing that Ajuwa had earlier prophesied about it. Ajuwa stood and looking unperturbed went on her knees and thanked the king for considering her for such a great honour.

“Your highness, King Mameri, I am indeed grateful for this great honour. I thank God for using you to bring change to the land of Ngwelle. I'm

being honoured for my wild adventures borne out of my false belief in the capacity of human beings to use powers from the supernatural to achieve mysterious feats. Sourcing for horrible feats that are capable of inspiring awe in the sight of men and women and thereby making the perpetrators to be like the gods is not honourable. I would have preferred to be honoured for the little my sisters and I did for women in Lagos, before I was ignited by the fire of revenge which nearly consumed me. I hope and pray that my new focus together with the hard work of my indefatigable sisters will be employed for the benefit of Ngwelle women.

“I pray the Almighty God to give me life to do what I need to do. I also pray that the good Lord will grant you long life to honour me when I must have contributed to the progress and enlightenment of the women of Ngwelle. Once again, I thank you for freeing our women from servitude. May Almighty God continue to give you the wisdom you need to continue leading Ngwelle in the right direction.

The gathering went dead as everybody stared at Ajuwa in wonderment! They could not understand her. They wondered why she would want to delay accepting the king's honour. They were surprised that she did not show any excitement. They wondered why she did not jump

up in jubilation for being the first woman to be given such a great honour. Our mother, who was confused, went over to Ajuwa to advise her to apologise to the king for her lack of enthusiasm and to accept the king's honour now.

Efesi and I went over to our mother and whispered to her to let Ajuwa be. Although many people in the gathering did not understand Ajuwa, the king understood because he had started reading about the life of philanthropists and great men and women of God. He looked at Ajuwa, smiled and said, "My dear daughter, I understand. I pray that the Almighty God grant you your heart's desire." He then blessed the gathering and left with his chiefs. We retired to sleep but the party crawled into dusk with the youth still dancing, drinking and eating until they were fagged out.

The following morning we travelled to Alumeke for the burial of Kika. We met Kokome and his father's family in a big altercation. His father's family argued that Kika was their wife, and for that reason, her body must be carried to her husband's compound in Ngwelle for burial. Kokome disagreed with them, arguing that since his father died while he was still a child, no member of his father's family ever cared for his mother. He wondered why the same people, who branded her a witch and left her to live a solitary

life in Alumeku, now wanted her body. The argument was still going on when we arrived at the village. We tried to intervene, but we were shouted down. They lifted the casket and were trying to run away with it when Ajuwa went right in front of them and shouted, “Stop!” They looked at the person who was ordering them and saw that it was a woman. As they were wondering the audacity of a mere woman, a voice from the crowd was heard shouting, “Run! Run! Run! This is that terrible woman called Ajuwa. The woman who charmed Kokome to marry her while she was pregnant with another man's child, and also called up thunder with her evil power! She is capable of many things including sending all of you to jail!” All eyes turned to Ajuwa, who now boldly challenged them to try and run away with that casket if they had the guts.

“What is wrong with you people?” she queried. “You did not allow this woman to have peace during her life and now in death, you still don't want her to rest in peace? What do you want to do with the corpse of a woman whose life you ruined by branding her a witch and preventing her from enjoying the little comfort her son was providing for her? You also branded me a witch and gave charm to this innocent woman to charm her son away from me, thereby leaving me and my

children alone to fend for ourselves. Kokome also left his job to come and idle away his time among you. You removed Kokome from his family and his job so that he could continue to live in the same ignorance, superstition and poverty that are the hallmarks of Ngwelle and Alumeku. If you don't want to join hands with Kokome to give his mother a befitting burial, leave now or else I will call the police to arrest all of you. Those who want peace should join hands with us to give Mama a befitting burial.”

One by one the troublemakers left, leaving the people who were willing to cooperate with us for the burial of Kika. We got a priest from the next village, and he conducted a funeral Mass for her. We laid her body to rest in front of her house. After the burial and the reception that followed, we went back to Ngwelle to spend the night and left for Lagos the following day.

17

DIFFERENT STROKES...

On arrival in Lagos, we launched ourselves into preparation for our Church wedding ceremony. Although we had chosen to have a modest wedding reception with very few guests, we decided that those few guests will be treated to a lavish banquet. As we made preparation for the weddings, Ajuwa's countenance was beyond comprehension. We were the ones who were about to wed but she was the one whose excitement was boundless. We would see her singing praises to God, praying her Rosary, and tidying up the house. We were happy for her, but were at a loss to her unusual bonhomie. We were happy because she had recovered fully from the depression she suffered when Onowe was kidnapped. We adduced her unusual joy to her attachment to the Bible, praying her Rosary and her Divine Mercy devotion. We were also happy that her attention had shifted from herself to the people around her and humanity in general. She no longer desired anything for herself and willingly gave up most of her flamboyant dresses and expensive jewellery. She gave some of these jewellery and dresses to her daughter, to Efesi and me. She sent some to the

king to give women in the village and gave some of her movable possessions to the Church to sell and give the proceeds to the poor. We saw her do all these without knowing why, but we were comforted that she was very happy doing what she was doing.

She had invited Kokome to Lagos after the burial of Kika. A week before our wedding day, she summoned all of us including Kokome and her children to a meeting. We thought it was to discuss the final details of our wedding because Ajuwa was the one who had eyes for the minutest details. As we assembled for the meeting, waiting for her to tell us what details we failed to take into consideration, she invited us to prayer. After the prayer, she told us that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss our future as she would not be around to continue to work with us. Looking at her with disbelief, we strained our ears to hear what she was saying. She kept quiet, while her eyes surveyed all of us and then she focussed her gaze on Kokome saying, "My dear friend, I call you a friend because that's what you are to me now. I'm happy that you are here. I will always remember that God used you to bring us to where we are today. If I were to marry again, I would wed you in the same way my sisters will be wedding their spouses, but I have higher callings now. In

appreciation of what you did for me by accommodating me in your mother's house when my father rejected me, and also for offering to marry me and be the father of my unborn child in order to protect me and the child, I will like you to be reintegrated into this household which you were part of its original ownership. I'm therefore formally handing over Onowe and Kika to you as their father.”

Turning to Efesi and me, she continued, “My very dear sisters, your support and loyalty to me in my wild adventures cannot be valued in gold or money. Your love and care kept me alive when the fires of revenge nearly consumed me. You rescued me from the strong clutch of Satan, and introduced me into Christianity. Despite my making a mockery of God's word, you kept faith in me and continued to pray for me. Through you, I got to know the true God, who used Fr Ayodeji to save me from death and to save Onowe also from the hands of Ogor and his cohorts. I had spent a good amount of money, time and energy looking for power and miracles, but God used both of you and Fr Ayodeji to show me that 'it is neither by power nor by might but by the spirit of God.' Thus, what looked impossible became possible!

“I called this meeting because I'm aware that you will move out of this house after your

weddings. You will be coming here only to do your work. Onowe has been posted to a Northern state for his Youth Service, and Kika will soon graduate. From all indications, the young man and woman are likely to seek for greener pastures elsewhere; so, this house may lack permanent residents. For this reason, I want us to share the assets we have in common into three. One-third for each of you: Siweku, Efesi and Kokome and his children. This is necessary because as soon as the nuptial knots are tied, both of you will belong to different families. As for me, I don't need anything except a small allowance every month for food until my proposed bridegroom would accept me. I don't know when it will be but I will devote all my energy and zeal to working for him until he accepts me as his bride. I will be very happy if you can assign the boys' quarters to me for my work and devotion until I'm accepted; then I will move away."

We were dumbstruck! We looked at Ajuwa with mixed feelings of respect, fear and wonder. We had respect for her because of her selflessness and considerations for others; we feared her because we could not understand her and we wondered about her because of her strong will to live a life of sacrifice. We were not sure exactly what she wanted to do with her life, but we could attest to her devotion to her religion. We noticed

that she completed the 20 decades of the rosary every day and was also faithful to her Divine Mercy devotion, which she prayed daily at 3 p.m. and 3 a.m. We didn't know what reply to give to her. Her statement that we would belong to the families of our husbands was stating the obvious even though we did not give a serious thought to it. The mention of that fact drew Efesi and me into serious thinking. We knew we would move into our husbands' houses and continue to come to the house to do our work having in mind that Ajuwa would remain in the house. Because she was talking of moving away, we now knew why she invited Kokome to the house. Efesi and I went out to confer on what to say to her and when we came back, Efesi spoke first.

“Sister, we have heard what you said even though we do not quite understand your intention of moving into the boys' quarters to wait for a bridegroom who will accept you. We hope that with time we might be able to understand what you mean but permit me to say that if it becomes necessary to share our so-called common assets, the bulk of it should go to you and your children and some percentage to Siweku. As for me, I do not think I contributed much to these assets. You and Siweku brought me out of darkness and virtual slavery and for this I am indeed grateful. Giving

me anything at all is not important because I have been given what I need to live my life. That you gave me the opportunity to be educated is more than enough. Besides, I love teaching and as long as I'm allowed to continue to teach and earn a commensurate salary, I will feel happy and fulfilled.”

Before she could respond to what Efesi said, I added, “My dear sister, what Efesi said is right to some extent. I want you to know that I will remain grateful to you for what you did for me, our family, and the women of Ngwelle and in fact the whole of Ngwelle people. In line with what you said earlier, if there is need to share anything, the bulk should go to you, your children and Kokome, whom you have forgiven and accepted back as a friend and the father of your children. You may not want anything for yourself, but your children and Kokome do have need for your own share of the property. This is because they are beginners while we have already found our feet. If you would take at least sixty percent of the assets, Efesi and I will gratefully accept the remaining forty percent.

“If your children are willing to work in the school, we can put them through on the management of the schools and the property, and will happily work with them.

“Our wedding is just a week from now, and

I think we should devote time and energy to putting finishing touches to the wedding plans instead of talking of sharing assets. The men whom we are getting married to know we have a commitment to keep the schools running. Your usual foresight made you bring back Kokome and for this I thank you. We need the presence of a man in this house now that we will douse the cold war between men and women. For now let us push the issue of assets sharing to the rear burner until after the wedding.”

Kokome wanted to say something but Ajuwa motioned him to keep quiet. She then heaved a sigh and said, “Yes, we should concentrate on the wedding, and make sure you ladies have a very successful ceremony. I'm happy that we all know that you will soon belong to another family. It might look absurd but that's what every woman looks forward to. I congratulate you for choosing your spouses by yourselves. How I wish father were alive to see two of you marrying the men of your choice and to see the change that has taken place in Ngwelle. May his soul rest in peace. Thank God we still have our mother who must be learning new dance steps now. It was such fun seeing her dance the way she did during the traditional ceremony!” Ajuwa laughed, just as she used to do before the fire of revenge nearly consumed her.

We changed the agenda of the meeting to final preparation for our Church wedding which was just a week ahead. Even though we told mother that we wanted to have a modest white wedding, she arrived the following day with our sisters, their husbands and children, many friends, and extended relations. We were grateful to God because it was during the holidays, and students were on vacation. We used up every available space in the house, and converted some of the classrooms in the school into bedrooms to accommodate the people who came with mother. The large number of the people in the house and the excitement of our mother, our siblings and mother's friends created a kind of ceremony before the main ceremony as singing, chatting and laughing filled the house. The following day, after they had rested from their travels, they were anxious to be of help. They had come with all types of food items to cook for the wedding. They wanted to be sure that they played major roles in the preparation for the wedding and the reception. We pleaded with them to make themselves as happy as possible and to concentrate on looking after themselves because the wedding reception would be held in a hotel.

Our preparation and the rapturous excitement of our family reunion rekindled us with

a fresh spirit and before we could sniff in enough of this freshness, we were brought face to face with the day before the wedding. Like a sudden rain in the middle of dry season, excitement and happiness drenched us and we felt reinvigorated and energised. Our nuptial Mass was celebrated by Fr Ayodeji, who preached a beautiful sermon on the need for spouses to love each other selflessly in order to be able to accommodate their inadequacies and to always forgive. He emphasized that as humans, we were not equally talented and therefore what we do or give will necessarily depend on the amount of talent we have, as no human being can give what he or she does not have. The ceremonial signing of the register was done and the Mass was over within an hour.

The reception took place at Hotel de Excellence and the usual reception ceremonies of cutting the wedding cake and all the accompaniment took place. Guests were treated to a sumptuous buffet and exotic wines and music. We jigged the bridal dance with our husbands and were showered with money rain, but mother stole the show as she danced and danced and got bathed with sweat even in an air- conditioned pavilion. In less than three hours, we were done with the reception.

The ceremonies were over now; we

relocated to our new homes and the reality of what Ajuwa told us dawned on us as we gradually moved our personal belongings into our new homes. We knew we would resume our work in the school after our honeymoon, but we never bothered about who would remain in the house.

We had assumed that Ajuwa and Onowe, who had just graduated from university, would hold the fort. Now that this might not be, the presence of Kokome became a stronghold in the circumstance. We decided to ignore the issue of asset sharing because we felt that Ajuwa's inebriation and devotion to religion would gradually cool off and that she would still serve God in quiet.

When our honeymoon was over and the students had resumed from the long vacation, we resumed our work. To our surprise, Ajuwa had made good her desire to move into the boys' quarters. She now revealed to us her desire to go into the nunnery in order to shut herself from the glamour of the world so that she can love and serve God with all her heart, mind, strength and spirit.

18

ANew LIFE IN CHRIST

Now settled in the boys' quarters and awaiting the reply to her application for admission into the nunnery, Ajuwa came out only when necessary. She kept herself busy studying the Bible, feeding her spirit with biographies of the saints and martyrs, and praying her Rosary and Divine Mercy devotion. She lived an abstemious life, becoming completely indifferent to all forms of luxury. Whenever we needed her help for anything either in the school or in the gym, she would willingly oblige, but she removed herself from our day to day routine.

She would wake up early every morning to walk a distance of three kilometres to Mass. Once a week, she would come to the gym to preach about the love of God and the need for forgiveness. She would admonish the participants never to use their physical development to malign or terrorise others, but to see it as fitness training for service to God and mankind, for good health and for self-defence if the need arose. She would also come to the assembly hall once a week to preach to the students on the immeasurable love of God and the need to keep his commandments, admonishing them to

obey their parents and to shun immorality. She became our prayer warrior as we would call her to pray whenever we had challenges.

One day, she was in her room praying as usual when commotion broke out in the school. A new student suddenly fell, and went into an epileptic feat and started foaming from her mouth during morning prayers at the assembly ground. All the students and some teachers in the assembly ran away, leaving the student who was banging her head on the ground. Efesi and I were scared but we quickly called Ajuwa to come and pray for the student. Ajuwa rushed in and raised her hands up to heaven saying, “Lord Jesus, have mercy and heal this girl for the greater glory of your name. Blessed Mother Mary, help us pray for this child to be restored fully for your honour and for God's name to be glorified forever and ever in Jesus' name.”

Immediately after this short prayer, the seizure stopped and the student opened her eyes to the amazement of all, including Ajuwa herself. We helped the child up, cleaned her and dressed the bruises she sustained on her elbow and head. Ajuwa advised us to go about our work and leave the child with her for further prayers. She took the child into her room in the boys' quarters and spent over an hour praying to God to heal her

permanently from the seizure. When the mother of the child came later in the day to take her home, Efesi related to her what happened. She did not show any surprise, but explained that her daughter had been taking daily medications to control the seizures. She wondered why the medications sometimes failed to work.

She revealed that for the past five years, the girl had suffered many seizures and doctors had prescribed all kinds of medications which would work for some time and then become ineffective. She said that this present seizure was the third in two weeks despite the medications she had been taking. She had kept the child away from school to avoid embarrassment, but had to change her mind when she realised that the child would have to live a life that should be as normal as possible and that education was one of the assets she needed to lead a near normal life. She asked if we would allow her to continue coming to our school because she might still have epileptic attacks.

We assured her that we would obviously allow her to continue coming to our school because the problems of health and disabilities are not like wares that people purposely go to buy in the market. We promised her that we would keep our eyes on her daughter and also help her find an expert neurologists to attend to her. She thanked us and

took her daughter home. She said she would report the incident to her present doctor in the hope that he will prescribe a more effective medication.

A week after the incident, this woman who had earlier lost her husband in an accident died in her sleep! When Ajuwa heard of the death, she was devastated. She pleaded with us to waive the girl's school fees. She also begged Kokome to allow the girl to live in the house, and attend school from there. The girl moved in and Ajuwa kept praying for her every day.

Meanwhile we all forgot that the girl's mother had told us that the girl was taking medication for seizure control. By the time Efesi remembered, the girl had lived in the house for six months without her medication and without re-occurrence of the seizure. When we interviewed the girl, she told us that she deliberately did not remind us of the medication because she believed Ajuwa's prayers had healed her. We took it with a grain of salt, but were happy that she did not have any more seizures. Ajuwa continued to live her life of abstention and prayer for the family, for the church and for the whole world. One day, she was walking to morning Mass as usual when a naked mad man accosted her!

“Pray for me!” he shouted. Ajuwa tried to run away from him but he went after her. “Pray for

me! I say pray for me and I shall be well again!” Afraid that the mad man might attack her, she said nervously, “okay I'll pray for you but move away from me.” Rather than move away, the mad man came closer and grabbed the edge of her dress and crashed on his knees in front of her, still holding unto her dress. Trembling with fear, Ajuwa uttered some words of prayer asking the Lord Jesus to heal the man. As she ended the prayer in Jesus' name, and was about to run away, she heard the mad man surprisingly say, “Amen.” Still holding to Ajuwa's dress, he added, “Thank you, ma; your prayer has healed me. Can I have your address?” Ajuwa looked at the man with trepidation and wonderment and took to her heels but this time, the mad man did not go after her. Ajuwa kept this incident to herself without telling anybody until two weeks later when a handsome well-dressed young man came to the school compound to look for her. At first, she did not want to come out but thinking that the person might need some help, she stepped out. As she came out, the man fell on his knees with tears dripping down his eyes.

“I'm the mad man who ran to you for prayer two weeks ago. When I saw you coming that day, my spirit told me your prayer will heal me and it happened! Silver and gold I do not have for now, until I'm able to locate my parents. My parents are

rich and can pay you millions for what you did for me. I escaped from an asylum and found myself here in Lagos. I don't know how I came here but permit me to be your servant until I can locate my parents to pay you.”

Ajuwa looked at the young man with fear in her eyes and disbelief in her mind, and could not utter a word! The young man drew nearer to her, and again held the hem of her dress saying, “Ma, you are a gift from God to mankind. Do not deny the human race of the special gift God has given you. Accept me as your servant and help me to locate my parents. My name is Samson and I'm the only son of Chief Kadera, a business mogul. I remember my father had two homes, one in Abuja and the other one in Port Harcourt. He is married to my mother and Juliet. Juliet, the younger wife, lives in Abuja while my mother lives in our Port Harcourt home. I have five sisters: three from my mother and two from my step-mother, Juliet. If you can help me locate my parents, they will pay you whatever you charge them but before then, let me serve you.”

Still mystified, Ajuwa asked, “Are you sure you are the stark-naked mad man that unnerved me and made me almost urinate on myself on my way to Mass two weeks ago?”

“Yes, ma, you remember I held unto your

clothes and insisted you should pray for me,” the young man answered.

“How come you are now looking very clean and well clothed,” Ajuwa asked.

“The people who sell wares under the bridge where I live clothed me when I suddenly realised I was naked. I didn't know I was naked before you prayed for me. The moment you prayed for me I felt embarrassed that I was smelly and stark naked; so, I begged for a piece of cloth to cover my private part. When those people observed me for a few days and saw that I looked well and behaved normally, they gave me decent clothing and fed me but I still stay under the bridge because they say they don't trust me enough to take me to their homes. Since the day your prayer healed me, I have been earning a living by helping them to run small errands and pack their ware at the close of each day.

“I did not know how to locate you but they advised me to go to the same spot where you prayed for me and track you down to wherever you go. I first traced you to the Church and from there I followed you home without your knowing. I have been around this premises for the past three days, and was afraid to come in, but today I decided to brave it.”

Not knowing what to do, Ajuwa prayed and

thanked God for him, gave him some money and asked him to come back in three days to enable her to reflect and seek the face of God.

Reluctantly, he went away but not without pleading passionately to be allowed to serve. After he had left, Ajuwa was thrown into confusion because she did not know what to make of the situation. The next morning, when we came to work, she related the story to us stating how confused she was. However, she said she would go to Fr Ayodeji for advice. We too could not fathom what was happening but we prayed that God's will be done. We reminded her of the epileptic student who she prayed for and who was later living in the house without any more seizures.

Ajuwa continued with her religious devotion, praying, singing and studying the Bible and other religious books and as she did these, she exuded joy and peace. Her radiance was incomprehensible as she now looked more beautiful than when she adorned herself with beautiful clothes and jewellery. She was a beautiful woman who used make-up to further enhance her beauty, but she looked more beautiful now without make-up. The change we saw in her simple way of life, the joy and peace that she exuded and her alluring appearance was awesome and all we could make of these was that it was the grace of the

Almighty God. We were happy that Ajuwa was using the same zeal and commitment with which she sought for diabolic power to seek the face of God and serve him and humanity. She was no longer seeking power for vengeance but to serve and do the work of God. She went to Fr Ayodeji and narrated what happened between her and the mad man who had become normal. Fr Ayodeji was as confused as Ajuwa but advised her not to arrogate any power to herself.

“Continue in your work of charity and prayer. Pray for anybody who asks for your prayer and leave God to do his work. With time the Church will be able to discern the plan of God for your life. Your application to be a nun is still being considered and you will be informed as soon as a clear directive emerges. As for the young man, locating his parents is quite easy since he remembered their names, their location and business. If you wait for a while, I will google the name of Chief Kadera, and phone or email him to come and ascertain the authenticity of Samson's claim.

The Father quickly googled Chief Kadera and it popped up but with the adjective, late! Reading further, he found out that the chief died four months earlier but was able to get the deceased's address. The discovery was

disheartening for both Fr Ayodeji and Ajuwa as they felt very sorry for Samson, whose hope of happily reuniting with his family was now threatened. Fr Ayodeji asked Ajuwa to bring Samson to him whenever Samson came again and he also made arrangements to send somebody to Samson's mother in Port Harcourt to authenticate Samson's claim before sending him to Port Harcourt. When Samson came back to Ajuwa after three days, she took him to Fr Ayodeji who agreed to house him until his true identity was ascertained. Relieved, Ajuwa came back home and continued her vocation of praying and meditating on the scriptures.

Meanwhile, Samson's testimony of his miraculous cure had started drawing people to Ajuwa. The gate to the compound was thronged by people waiting for Ajuwa to pray for them. This was an embarrassment to Ajuwa whose wish was to be left alone to go into the nunnery and live a secluded life devoted to prayer. She complained bitterly to Fr Ayodeji because unnecessary attention was being focussed on her. The Father encouraged her to pray for as many people as she could without wearing herself out. He explained that most times, God's plans and will for his children can be at variance with what his children want for themselves. As Ajuwa prayed and

miracles confirmed her prayers, she could no longer hide! Invitations for healing prayers and motivational talks flooded in, and we had to create a small office and hired a secretary for her to help her organise the invitations and appointments. While all these were happening, Ajuwa remained humble and calm, and spent nights and days praying. Money and presents flooded in from people whom God used Ajuwa to help but she directed whatever was brought to her to the Church. She continued to live in the boys' quarters eating just enough simple meals to stay alive.

Meanwhile, Samson's mother was located in Port Harcourt and she came to Lagos to see her son whom she was told died in a dump site. Mother and son beheld each other and torrent of tears was released as they clasped onto each other.

“How's my father? Why did he not come?” Samson asked. Mrs Kadera kept quiet for some time while Samson impatiently asked again, “Why did my father not come for me and how are my sisters?”

Ajuwa and Fr Ayodeji watched Mrs Kadera as she could not bring herself to tell his son that his father had died. She was afraid of the effect the news would have on Samson, who as it were, might still be in delirium. The refusal to answer the question seemed more dangerous than the possible

effect of the news; so, the Reverend Father decided to handle the situation.

“Samson,” Father called him, drawing him closer to himself. “It’s wonderful for you to see your mother after many years. For this, we give God glory and praise! Before we sent for your mother, we knew something unpleasant had happened. That your father is not here is sad but there are things that happen in life that we cannot understand. Your miraculous healing by an ordinary woman on her way to Mass is one of the wonders of God. Some of the things that happen to us might make us sad while others might make us happy, but in all we must learn to give glory to God. It is sad to tell you that I discovered from the Internet that your father had passed away to the world beyond before I sent for your mother! Sad as it may be, we thank God that your mother found you well and alive as we believe this will help to further console her.”

As Samson stood agape, blinking his eyes, his mother’s tongue loosened and she found her speech. “My son,” she moaned, “thank God you are alive and well. I was counting my remaining days in this wicked world, but seeing you alive and back to sanity gives me the assurance that God hears the prayers of the afflicted. Seeing you alive and well, I can pray for a longer life now. Your

father had a stroke when he was told that you were dead. Juliet, his concubine, told him that you were hit by a refuse truck while you were scavenging for food in a dump site in faraway Kano. He showed him the photograph of the accident and this affected your father so badly that he had a stroke. For six months, doctors battled to save his life but they could not. Efforts to send him overseas for treatment were thwarted by Juliet, who claimed your father said he would prefer to die than live a worthless life. It was after the death of your father that we discovered that he had secretly legalised his marriage with Juliet in the registry while he married me only by native law and custom. Juliet has appropriated your father's entire assets to herself and her children. As I speak to you now, your sisters and I are facing eviction from our home in Port Harcourt because Juliet has gone to court to prove that she is the only legal wife of your father. For reasons we could not understand, your father willed everything he had to Juliet and her daughters. I'm not going to further sadden you with our tale of woes because getting you back sane and alive is more than what money can buy.”

Hearing this, Ajuwa bit her lips so hard that it bled, and tears streamed down from her eyes. Fr Ayodeji stood up from his seat, and took a few steps and then sat down again looking at Samson's

mother with visible concern. He kept quiet for some time and before he could say anything, the fighting spirit in Ajuwa refused to lie low. Now ignited, she heaved a sigh and said, “Samson, now I know why God sent you to me. God will surely fight for you. Juliet must not cheat you, your mother and siblings of your rightful inheritance. I shall hire a lawyer for you and your family, and I will back you up with fasting and prayer.

“Not so quick, Ajuwa,” Fr Ayodeji admonished her, “We need to get the facts right.”

Turning to Samson's mother, Fr Ayodeji asked. “Are there proofs that Chief Kadera married you according to the native law and custom of your people?”

“Yes, Father, some of his siblings who accompanied him to the traditional marriage ceremony are still alive and are angry at what he and Juliet did. They are willing to testify to the fact that I am the only wife their brother married properly by paying the dowry and performing all the traditional marriage rites. He did not pay any dowry on Juliet, who was said to be a girl-about-town in Lagos when my husband met her on one of his business trips. We did not know anything about her existence until my husband told me that his girlfriend was delivered of a baby boy who died few hours after delivery. We thought that was the

end of the affair until we discovered that the lady was cohabiting with him in his Abuja home. We did not know that she got pregnant again until my husband announced that she had delivered a set of twin girls. I never saw her and her twins as threat to my marriage because my husband was a good provider. That he secretly married her legally and willed all his property to her and her twins is beyond my comprehension.”

Samson, who all the while was staring at his mother as she told the story of Juliet and his father, gave vent to his feelings and cried out aloud, “My God, is this your plan for me? How do I repay this woman who gave me back my life? What do I do to help my mother and sisters in my helpless situation?” Turning to his mother, he asked, “Mom, so dad died for my sake? How I wish he were alive to see the wonderful work of God. That woman you see sitting there prayed for me, and God used her to heal me. I had promised her that my father would pay her for what she did for me. What do I do now?” He held unto his mother with tears streaming from his eyes.

“Stop crying,” Fr Ayodeji said. “Ajuwa does not expect any payment from you. The best payment you can make is to ensure that you and your family become good Christians. Just like Ajuwa said, we shall help you get a good lawyer to

get back your inheritance. Meanwhile, get ready to follow your mother to Port Harcourt to see your sisters and assure them that all is not lost. After bonding with them, you may come back and stay in the mission house if you desire to do so. Before you come back, we will endeavour to get a good lawyer for you.”

The cheering news was more than what Samson's mother could contain. “Is this possible?” she asked. “Is it possible for me to have back my son who was said to have died? Is it possible for the dead to be alive? My eyes have seen Samson, my only son and the only son of his father, looking hale and hearty. And here I am, being offered help free of charge from the same people God used to heal him. So I am going to be able to stand with my head held high again in society without being mocked as the mother of a mad son? Oh God, so you can be this good? Imagine total strangers promising me a lawyer to fight for my cause! My in-laws were sympathetic but they did not have the muscle to fight Juliet. God, so I am going to get a lawyer to tackle Juliet, who boasted that my children and I would beg her for crumbs?

“Dear God, so you heard when I said that my children and I would rather beg strangers than beg her?” Saying these, she flopped on her knees with her son, crawling and sobbing as they moved

from Ajuwa to Fr Ayodeji.

“Stop!” Ajuwa cried out. “Don't kneel before me for I'm a mere sinner. Give thanks to God because all power and glory come from him. Thank and magnify the Lord for what he has done and what he will still do in your life and the life of your children.”

While they were still on their knees, Fr Ayodeji prayed for them and asked God to prevail in their lives. He gave some money to Samson and offered his mother a place to spend the night. The following day, Samson and his mother travelled to Port Harcourt.

The number of people who came to Ajuwa for prayers increased by the day, and testimonies of the wonderful works of God permeated our compound and the church. Loads of presents and money followed the testimonies, but Ajuwa made sure she never touched any of the gifts or money. She directed that they be taken to the church.

Eventually, a few members of the erstwhile Society for Women of Thunder and Tornado heard that Ajuwa had become a Christian and was praying for people and God was accompanying her prayers with miracles. Those who came and saw a completely changed Ajuwa asked her for prayer. As they repented, they were surprised to see the positive transformations in their lives. They passed

the news to other members and different reactions followed the news. Some were happy for what God was using Ajuwa to do while others felt her miraculous powers were from the Devil. Those who knew her exploits alleged that the powers she used to prevent the police from discovering their base of horror and the one she used to conjure thunder and other evil things were at work in her. They thereafter started a campaign of calumny against her. Ajuwa heard what was going on but kept up with studying her Bible, praying and fasting, and the Lord continued to validate her prayers with miracles that were sometimes instant and others that gradually manifested.

Meanwhile Samson was back to the mission house and the Father, with the help of the finances Ajuwa had garnered for the church, hired a renowned lawyer to handle the case of Samson and his family versus Juliet. The case was scheduled to be heard in a court sitting in Abuja and Ajuwa made up her mind to be in court on the days of the hearing to give moral and spiritual support to Samson and his family.

The erstwhile members of the SWTT regrouped into two camps: one camp drumming up support for Ajuwa and bringing people in need of prayer and financial help to her; the second camp was vicious and fiery in their determination to

bring her down, claiming that Satan was her source of power. The split among SWTT members became the fuel that ignited the curiosity of people who wanted to see this unusual woman and hear her story of adherence to God. The story of the miracles that followed her prayers and her message of repentance had become a big hit with the public. While many people prayed for her and blessed her, some others condemned her.

Ajuwa continued with her seclusion and self-denial and did nothing to counter those who accused her of satanic powers. The fire that was ignited by the rival faction of SWTT drew the attention of the media to Ajuwa. Many newspapers, radio stations and television stations sought to interview her. Ajuwa declined the interviews but the SWTT members who were supporting her opted to defend her in the media even though Ajuwa felt embarrassed and begged them not to do anything of the sort. Confused, she went to Fr Ayodeji to express her displeasure over the undue negative and positive publicity that she was getting.

“Remember that Jesus said we must carry our cross and follow him. This is a cross you must carry because our master Jesus carried his Cross for us. Do you think it is easy to serve the Lord? Do you think everybody will acknowledge and be

happy for what God is using you to do? Was our Lord and Saviour not accused of using the power of Beelzebub? Why would your case be different? Rejoice, like the apostles did, for having the opportunity to suffer for the Lord. Go therefore to the media and proclaim the Jesus, who turns sinners into saints just like he did with Saul who became Paul. Tell them about Mary Magdalene; admit the atrocities you committed while searching for revenge and how your search for revenge brought you sorrow, sickness and pain. Tell them how God forgave you and turned you into a vessel to be used for the greater glory of his name and by so doing, put your detractors to shame,” Fr Ayodeji advised and prayed to the Holy Spirit to kindle in her the fire of his love so that no human smear or detraction would distract or derail her.

She then accepted invitation to give talks and to participate in retreats. Being a powerful speaker, the rapturous response of her audience was unprecedented. She applied the same zealousness and tempestuousness with which she preached hate before her conversion to preach the love of God and the need to turn away from sin.

“I’m a sinner but having repented as much as I could, and taken necessary steps to forgive all those who wronged me, God forgave me and unleashed his power of love on me! If God can

forgive and love a sinner like me, he can surely do same for every believer. When I talk of repentance, I must let you know that we can never repent enough for our sins but our God, who is compassionate and merciful, accepts the dismal efforts we make and wipes away all our sins. If God were to wait for me to repent and make full reparations for all my sins, he would probably not have forgiven me but he forgave me because he knew I was sorry and ashamed of some of the things I did. I was like that woman in the Gospel of John, chapter 8: 11, caught in the act of adultery and who our Lord Jesus Christ did not wait for her repentance before saying to her “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more.” Even the grace to hate sin and all its deceitful bright colours can only come from God. We must therefore be conscious and ashamed of our sinfulness and always ask our Lord Jesus to redeem us.

“Eschew hatred and rancour; embrace peace, and love God by striving to keep his commandments. Our merciful God who knows our weaknesses will always come to our aid. God is love and he expects us to love and be charitable for charity covers a multitude of sins. This means we must love our neighbours as we love ourselves. Do to others what we want others to do to us and expect the wonders of our God whose love for us

made Jesus to suffer and die the shameful death on the Cross. Isaiah's prophecy which was fulfilled in Jesus will make us know the extent of the love God has for us. Isaiah chapter 53:5 tells it all when he prophesied about the suffering servant, 'But because of our sins he was wounded, beaten because of the evil we did. We are healed by the punishment he suffered, made whole by the punishment he received.'

“Jesus carried all our burdens that we may be faultless before him. He is always calling us to drink from his ever-flowing river of mercy and love. He does not discriminate in his love. He loves the murderer, the adulterer, the thief, the slanderer and all of us who have fallen short of his glory. All we need to do is to accept his invitation and follow him and then ask him to give us his grace to avoid sin; for without his grace, we remain sinners. Remember he said he did not come for the righteous but for the sinners and we know we are all sinners. Our Lord Jesus came for all of us who acknowledge that we are sinners.

“I am among the worst of sinners! As you may know well in my quest for revenge, I championed all forms of evil. I shopped for supernatural powers from known and unknown sources. I wanted to be like the vengeful gods whose might lie in their power to wreak evil and

make the children of God to live perpetually in fear. At first I thought I had become like the gods as I could conjure all manner of evil and go scot free but the quest brought me all forms of misery because any gift from the evil one can never be free. My body became sick; my mind was invaded, and my spirit magnetized only what is negative and evil. I went to churches that advertised miracles and powers, and sunk a large sum of money in my search for supernatural powers but all I got was misery because these powers could not help me in any way. They could not even help me to regain my only son, who was kidnapped and kept in the kingdom of darkness for months. Thanks to my sisters, my children and a Catholic priest, who kept faith in the true God, as they stood in prayers for me. Their love and care, prayers, petitions and medical treatment brought me out of the kingdom of darkness, and led me to the one and only true God, who is the light of the world. I repented as much as I could, forgave all the people for whom I sought extraordinary power to avenge the evil they unleashed on me and the spirit of the one and only true God gradually became my teacher. The spirit opened my eyes to the truth about God's love for me and all mankind. Led by that spirit, I abandoned my life to this true God asking him to do with me as he wished. Through self-abandonment, the

nothingness of life with its search for power and recognition unfolded before me. Today, all I want from life is to serve God with all my heart, with all my strength, and with all my soul. Whatever the good Lord has given to me will be given back to him through the dissemination of the gospel of Jesus Christ and service to the poor.

“My brothers and sisters, learn from me for I'm now a new being! The old time has passed away and the new life I live is for my Lord Jesus Christ. Have a sense of shame for your sins and repent; believe in Jesus, who suffered and died for you and for me, and he will transform and care for you here on earth and in hereafter. Remember that this world is not our permanent home, and that this body we cherish and care for so much shall die and after that, judgement. Whether we go to heaven or hell, the choice is ours. But we have a God who does not want us to go to hell, and he is right here with us waiting to lift all of us who have fallen that we may become citizens of heaven. Accept the benevolence of our magnificent and ever-loving God by publicly declaring for our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. He accepted and redeemed me and right now he is ready to do the same for you.

“Open your mouth and pray now; pour out your heart to the Lord of lords and King of kings. Ask for whatever you want from him and he will

grant your prayer in accordance with his plans and will for you.”

The response to the invitation for prayers was overwhelming as different people responded differently. Some wailed, others burst into songs and shouts of praise, many kicked and punched the air, some jumped up and down—releasing their pent-up emotions, and their thunderous voices of supplications opened the windows of heaven for God to rain down showers of miracles as a deaf man testified to hearing, a blind man said he could now see and a woman suffering from a swollen neck testified that the swelling had disappeared. The ecstasy of the crowd became uncontrollable as they tried to besiege Ajuwa, but her supportive friends from SWTT shielded her and they managed to smuggle her out of the arena.

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THE CONSEQUENCE

The lawsuit instituted against Juliet in respect of the estate of Chief Kadera was slated for hearing and Ajuwa and the supporting faction of SWTT travelled to Abuja a day before the hearing to give moral support to Samson's family. Unknown to Ajuwa, the opposing faction of SWTT also travelled to Abuja to malign her and cause distraction in court if possible.

Their smear campaign against Ajuwa in Lagos yielded an unexpected result because rather than pull her down, it gave her more opportunities to preach her messages of God's love and salvation for mankind; it gave her further opportunity to preach the need for repentance, conversion and forgiveness. The opposition faction decided to go to Abuja in the hope that they might succeed in telling as many people as possible the atrocities Ajuwa committed before her claim of being renewed in Christ. They were desperate to prove that the miracles that followed Ajuwa's prayers and preaching were the result of her contract with the Devil. They had also set up dragnets to get some of the men who were tortured and raped to come forward and give evidence against Ajuwa.

On the day of the hearing, the court was packed full of people as the opposition faction of SWTT made sure they recruited as many people as possible to embarrass Ajuwa. When the case was called and Juliet appeared behind her lawyer, the supporting faction of SWTT was surprised to see that Juliet, an ex-member of SWTT, was the defendant! They pointed out this to Ajuwa, who though was surprised, remained calm. This discovery was to the delight of the opposition faction of SWTT and they were seen congratulating themselves.

Before the hearing, the lawyer for the Samson's family had done intensive investigations that revealed that Juliet forged the marriage certificate and that the children she purportedly had for Chief Kadera were not her children. Juliet had faked two pregnancies in order to make Chief Kadera marry her legally. She deceived Chief Kadera by pretending that her doctor advised her not to sleep with him in order to avoid losing the pregnancies. The investigation revealed that the twin girls were the children of her younger sister who was abandoned by the man who impregnated her. When she had the twins, Juliet took the children from her and sent her abroad for further studies under the guise that she would help her take care of the babies until she returned. Her sister had

since returned but Juliet refused to release her children to her.

Before Chief Kadera died, Juliet's sister had reported the matter to him. He was trying to deal with Juliet for her barefaced deceit when Juliet, pretending to sympathise with him, brought to him the photograph of Samson, purportedly killed on a refuse dump site. The effect of Juliet's deceit and the shock of Samson's purported death caused the stroke that Chief Kadera suffered. To hide the facts, Juliet nursed him to death! She blocked all avenues to take him overseas for treatment.

Samson's family lawyer had witnesses to authenticate his allegations. Among the witnesses were the marriage registrar, Juliet's sister, Chief Kadera's personal secretary, the chief medical officer of the hospital where Chief Kadera was first admitted before Juliet forcefully took him away, Juliet's parents and one of Chief Kadera's childhood friends. As he was presenting his case, the court was suffused with anger and resentment as some people in the court either shook their heads, clenched their fists or murmured. Others stood from their seats and gaped in resentment and anger.

The opposing members of SWTT were shocked that Juliet could be so careless in the way

she handled such a crucial matter. When Juliet's lawyer stood, opposing members of SWTT cheered him but to their utter disappointment, the lawyer cleared his throat and said, "My lord, I am afraid, I cannot continue with this case because as I was entering the court premises, Juliet's sister and her parents accosted me. They asked me why I would want to defend a clear case of injustice. They threatened me with curse on me if for any reason the court does not allow them to take their twin daughters away from Juliet. Because of the effect of this case on the family and the overwhelming evidence which my learned colleague had adduced, I sincerely apologise to my client and hereby withdraw from this case."

The uproar in the court virtually pierced the roof of the building as each faction sought to be heard, but the judge called for silence and threatened to charge those shouting for contempt of the court. Janet, a member of the vindictive faction of the SWTT who was a lawyer, stood and requested that the case be adjourned to enable her study it as she had decided to defend Juliet.

The judge retired to the inner chamber with the two lawyers and later came back to announce an adjournment. The case was therefore adjourned to the fifth day of the following month. The court rose and the crowd trooped out with Juliet and her

rediscovered SWTT friends bonding together. Ajuwa, the Samson family and the supporting SWTT members also herded together to discuss the way forward.

Angered that Ajuwa was the force behind Chief Kadera's family, Juliet tore away from her friends and confronted her.

“Ajuwa, why you? Why are you meddling in an affair that does not concern you? When did you become the good angel? Remember you were the leader of SWTT and we all worked against men because of what they did to us. You were openly raped and I was duped by a man I trusted and who left me without a kobo, thereby forcing me into prostitution. Why are you working for Chief Kadera's family? Why are you preventing me from taking my revenge for what was done to me? You know you have skeletons in your cupboard and can therefore be exposed; so why put yourself in a situation that will cast aspersions on your newly assumed image?”

Ajuwa took a hard look at Juliet and said, “Yes, I was the leader of SWTT and we did many shameful things in the name of revenge but that was the 'old me'. The Lord Jesus has transformed me and I'm now a new being. When I offered to support Samson and his family, I didn't know you were the one who was trying to reap where you did not sow.

If you were duped by one man, would that be a reason for you to steal from a widow and her children? Was it Chief Kadera and her family that duped you? It is true that SWTT was a vengeful and rancorous society and I led you all to commit all kinds of atrocities in the name of revenge but since I became a follower of Christ, I have learnt that we are sometimes so sinful that we dare not cast aspersions on anybody. If we have been wronged, we should leave God to do what he thinks is right and not seek vengeance

“It is never too late to be saved, so abandon this case and do the right thing. Embrace Christianity; turn your life over to our Lord and Saviour Jesus the Christ. What you will eat or wear should not bother you as God is the one who provides all our needs.

“I'm not afraid of any scandal or aspersions that the world may cast on me because the life I live now is not for the world but for my Lord and Saviour. He has forgiven me all my sins and can do same for you if you hate your old sinful self and put on a new self in Christ. For your information, I have acknowledged to the world around me that I'm a sinner whom our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ bought with the price of his precious blood. He suffered and died that I might be saved. I'm now a free person with a free conscience and above all,

I'm happy, contented and have absolute peace. I appeal to you to repent and surrender your life to Jesus Christ whose immeasurable love for us is not based on human merit.

“Your lawyer had enough conscience to opt out of the case. If I were you, I would relinquish my claims to Chief Kadera's estate to the rightful owners and return the children to their rightful mother. If you want to help your sister to take care of her children, you can do so without using the children to claim what does not belong to you. If you drop this case and work for Christ, you will have peace and the good Lord will make sure that you do not lack the basic needs of life. Refuse to be drawn into a prolonged case that you will eventually lose! Stay away from the SWTT members who are promising you support because the punishment for stealing from a widow will be visited on you and not on them. The peace that will elude you will not be their headache.

“It is you alone who will serve the imprisonment of sleepless nights and suffer the attendant health implications. Stay away from them because all they want is cheap publicity and not your own good.”

Juliet burst into tears and went over to Janet, the SWTT lawyer, who opted to take up the case.

“I'm a liar, and a cheat,” she cried. “That lawyer was right; I may never win the case! My mother and sister will testify against me! Many other people will testify against me. I think I should accept the withdrawal and run away to a distant land where nobody will ever set eyes on me.”

“Nonsense! I shall expose Ajuwa in such a way that she will not have the courage to continue to support Chief Kadera's widow. I shall get the police to reopen the case of rape and torture which she championed. I shall dig out some of the men whom we raped, tortured and dispossessed of some of their valuables. I will make sure she is put behind bars before your case is finally heard. Then I shall influence the judge to pass judgment in your favour,” Janet boasted.

Other members of the vindictive SWTT hailed Janet and assured Juliet they were behind her. “We will use our influences, money and connections to deal with Ajuwa, who led us to Ngwelle, an adventure that nearly took our lives,” Madam Nguma, a member of the opposition faction of SWTT, asserted.

“We will tell the world who Ajuwa really is. We will tell the world how she acquired the powers she is using to deceive people! We will bring the witches and wizards she patronised to the full glare of the people. We will let people know that she is

using Christianity as a smoke screen. By the time we finish with her, she would curse the day she was born!”

Ajuwa heard all the threats but kept calm. Her major concern was to see justice done so that Mrs Kadera and her children could regain their rightful inheritance. She returned to Lagos with her SWTT friends and continued her abstemious life, backing it up with studying her Bible, reciting her rosary and being consistent with her Divine Mercy devotion. She combined these with her usual charitable works.

A week after her return, a pick-up loaded with armed policemen laid siege on our premises at about 10 a.m. on a Monday. The police came out armed to their teeth as if they were going to quell a riot. The sound of their siren sent the children and all of us panicking. We didn't know the cause of the unusual siren and as I ran out of the classroom to call Kokome, I met him by the hallway as he was already on his way to calm us down. He advised us to stay in the classroom and keep the children under control. Just then Ajuwa emerged from her quarter, and begged Kokome to keep away because she had an idea of what was happening. She walked over to the police and greeted, “Good day, gentlemen. May I know why you are here?”

“We are here to effect the arrest of a

notorious woman called Ajuwa, the leader of SWTT,” the Divisional Police Officer (DPO) answered.

“I'm Ajuwa. If you must arrest me, I'm ready to go with you, but please don't cause any unnecessary commotion because this is a school premises. Don't scare the children because of me.”

The police officers were surprised by Ajuwa's comportment and therefore asked her, “Are you sure you are the real Ajuwa or are you an impostor?”

“I'm Ajuwa; don't you have my photograph? If you don't, you may want to contact those who engineered my arrest.”

“We came here to arrest a woman we were told is very dangerous and here we are face to face with a woman with an unusual carriage and demeanour. If indeed you are Ajuwa, come with us,” the police officer said.

“If you don't mind, permit me to go inside to take one or two things, and then I'll follow you,” Ajuwa responded.

“Yes, I'll permit you but two policemen will follow you inside.”

“Fine, I just want to pick up my Bible, rosary and something to change to if it becomes necessary,” Ajuwa said with a smile.

Two police sergeants were asked to follow

her inside to make sure she did not spring surprises on them. She went inside, quickly picked up her Bible, one or two other books, her rosary and a few pieces of underwear. She also walked over to the school block still accompanied by the policemen. There she quickly gathered Kokome, Efesi, me and other staff to calm us down, assuring us that everything would be all right. The police opened the door of the pick-up van and she climbed into it to the surprise of the police officers, who had to put away the handcuff they wanted to use to clasp her hands.

Kokome and I drove behind the police van. When we got to the police station we saw some of the vindictive members of SWTT gathered in front of the police station. They booed her as she came out of the police van. Still unperturbed, she walked into the police station without any show of emotion. As some over-zealous members tried to trail behind her, the DPO cautioned them, so they remained outside. Ajuwa was given a seat, and the DPO told her the charge against her. After the charge had been explained to her, she was given a paper and a ball-point pen, and put down her statement in writing.

“Yes I was a leader of SWTT,” she wrote. “I admit we made some mistakes which I later regretted. I was aggrieved and was seeking

revenge on men irrespective of whether they were the ones who wronged me or not but Jesus Christ has changed my life. The Holy Spirit has since opened my eyes to the healing balm of forgiveness. I forgave all those who wronged me and the good Lord forgave me all my sins. Even as I sit here to write this statement, I have forgiven my erstwhile colleagues who reported me to you. I pray to God to forgive them and open their eyes to the truth about Jesus, who loves all of us without counting our merits. God sent his only begotten son to suffer and die for our sins that we might have the fullness of life here on earth and thereafter. God is loving and merciful and his love and mercy abounds for all who believe in him.

“I’m an ambassador of Christ, and if I must suffer for my past misdeeds, I would be suffering the consequence of my sins and it will be a fair justice. But our Lord Jesus Christ suffered and died for the sins of the whole world despite being without a single stain of sin. When he walked the face of this world, he did nothing but good; he healed all forms of diseases and fed the hungry, yet he was unjustly condemned to die the shameful death on the cross. The summary of my statement is that I am ready to suffer the consequence of my past misdeeds for the sake of justice. Therefore, whatever just punishment I am made to undergo, I

shall willingly accept,” Ajuwa submitted, and handed over his statement to the police. The DPO read the statement and was dumbfounded.

“Madam, do you know what you are in for? You had better get a lawyer to educate you. You are supposed to defend yourself, but here you are admitting the allegations made against you when you should be denying them. Do you know you can be jailed?”

“Yes, I know I can be jailed but let justice be done. If I'm jailed, I will only be suffering the consequence of my sins,” Ajuwa explained.

“Are you saying you will not withdraw this statement and write a defence?” the DPO asked.

“Thank you, DPO. Just let justice be done,” Ajuwa insisted.

Kokome signed the bail bond in order to bail Ajuwa out, and she came back home with us. We advised her to get a lawyer to defend her but she refused, insisting that justice should be done.

“What do I need a lawyer for? To lie for me? Obviously no! Let justice be done,” she insisted.

The case was charged to court the following week and the opposition members of SWTT did not spare any pain in assembling as many witnesses as possible. They brought some of the men who were raped; they also assembled some of the witch doctors and wizards whose charms gave them

temporary invincibility. The magistrate called Ajuwa to the stand and the charges against her were read out. To the astonishment of all, she pleaded guilty to the charges.

The court rumbled as everybody was thrown into confusion. The witnesses that the SWTT lawyer induced to come and testify against Ajuwa had no opportunity to do so. Members of the opposition SWTT were confused. Their deliberate efforts to humiliate Ajuwa and rubbish her missionary works went to sleep as the judge had no need to entertain any evidence from any of the witnesses recruited.

Touched by Ajuwa's humility and sense of guilt, the judge said, "Ajuwa, do you know the implication of your plea of guilty? Don't you think we should adjourn this case to enable you get a lawyer to defend you?"

"My lord," Ajuwa replied, "I do not need a lawyer to lie for me. I committed the offences for which I am charged when I was still in the world. I sought for power and might to revenge my public humiliation. My accusers were part of the crimes which we enjoyed then because the Devil blinded us to the good that comes from forgiveness and to truth and equity until the Lord Jesus came into my life to infuse me with his spirit.

"When the spirit of the Lord changed my

life, I thought that I was completely free, but the offence for which I'm charged now is a part of the dark spot of my life which I thought I could forget, move on, and live my new life in Jesus, but my fellow cohorts brought charges against me for me to know that our pasts sometimes live with us. I am happy that I'm in court today to answer for my past misdeeds as this will ensure a complete purgation of my sins in the sight of both God and man.

“Our Lord Jesus was tempted like you and me but he never sinned, yet he suffered and died for you and me that we might have life in its fullness here on earth and thereafter. He was stripped and scourged, crowned with thorns, spat on, and made to carry the Cross of our criminality. The weight of our sins was so heavy that the man in him fell three times under the heavy weight of my sin, your sin and the sin of the whole world. He carried the cross of our sins on his shoulder under continuous scourging to the place of his crucifixion. While he was still alive, they fastened him to the Cross, drove nails into his hands and into his feet, hung him on the cross and even pierced him! The blood and water that flowed from his side is for all of us to bathe for our salvation.

“If my Lord Jesus the Christ could be sentenced to death because of his love for mankind and not because of any offence he committed, why

should I get a lawyer to defend me for the offences I committed? My only plea is to all of you who are present in this court to repent and believe in our Lord and Saviour Jesus the Christ, follow his teachings so that you might be saved!”

When Ajuwa was speaking, many in the court sobbed openly, others continuously wiped their eyes with their handkerchiefs and the rumbles and murmurs overflowed from the people in the court into the courtyard. The judge could not hold back his feelings as tears dripped from his eyes; the prosecuting police fell on his knees and openly asked God for forgiveness. The spirit of the Lord was made manifest as many people openly cried out to God for forgiveness. The judge asked to be excused and he withdrew into the inner chamber.

When he emerged, he fixed his eyes on Ajuwa for what looked like eternity. Finally he cleared his throat and said, “Ajuwa, you have admitted your guilt and opened our eyes to the need for equity and justice. You have also touched the conscience of many of us here and for this I thank you. You have proved yourself as a good ambassador of your Christian religion, and I hope that many who claim to be Christians will emulate you. I could set you free but the law of the land has to be obeyed. For this reason, I sentence you to one month in prison.”

Immediately the pronouncement was made, the supporting members of SWTT surged forward, pleading with the judge to allow them serve the imprisonment with Ajuwa because they too were her partners in the crimes for which she was being sentenced. As the judge was contemplating on the unusual situation, her accusers joined their erstwhile colleagues, and also asked to be jailed with Ajuwa because they too were partners in the offences they accused her of. There was pandemonium in the court and the judge sat on his judgement throne contemplating, with his hand on his chin. The men recruited to testify against Ajuwa burst into tears and submitted that they too were candidates for jail.

Then a woman's voice was heard from behind. The woman walked up to the judge, stood before him with torrents of tears pouring down her eyes saying, "Thank God I came here today. I'm guilty! I did not have children for Chief Kadera; he did not marry me legally! I'm a thief, a liar and a killer! I stole from Chief Kadera while he was alive! He died because I denied him proper medical treatment! I stole him from his wife and allowed him to die so that I could inherit all his estate. I am no longer interested in the case! Mrs Kadera and her children are the rightful owners of Chief Kadera's estate!"

All eyes including that of the judge turned to look at the woman who tore off her wig and instantly became dishevelled. When Ajuwa looked and saw that it was Juliet, she went on her knees and thanked God. The judge did not understand what was happening but Janet, the SWTT lawyer, who had asked for adjournment in order to defend Juliet in the case between Chief Kadera's family and Juliet stepped forward and embracing Juliet; she said, "My lord, this is another case of a repentant sinner. I was going to defend her to acquire what was not hers, but the incident before my eyes has shown that there is a God and that he cares for the downtrodden, the marginalised, the orphans and widows. Ajuwa, my sister, please forgive my attempts to rubbish your ministry and calling."

The judge looked up, heaved a sigh and said, "I hope there is enough space in the prison to contain all of us for I'm also a sinner. Do we have enough space for all these women who want to serve with Ajuwa? I know there will be enough space for me, and I'm ready to go to jail for one month for my hidden sins."

The prosecuting police officer came forward and said, "I'm the worst sinner and will be very happy to serve the prison sentence with many of my colleagues who were touched by Ajuwa's

written confession. My lord, send all of us to prison so that we might be purged of our many sins.”

Ajuwa saw the atmosphere of true repentance and burst into a song of praise to God, and everyone in the court joined her. And then she added a poem which she titled,

“When Men Were Gods”

They were more hardy and hostile than any god.
They killed, maimed and converted common wealth

And trampled on the poor and the weak
They sold fellow men and women into slavery
And stole in the name of bravery
They raped women to prove they were men
And used them as tools for their pleasure
They beat up those who stood their grounds
And made baby factories out of others
They used unruly children against their mothers

And then,

Vengeful women thought they could be better gods
And men's hardness and hostility came to nought.
They patronised the Devil for power and might;
And enslaved men with beautiful faces and bodies.
They saw men as chickens ready to be slaughtered.
And castrated, killed, and maimed guileful men.
They striped some men of the glory God gave them

And fashioned tools for their vanities with vain men;
They made others to become witless and useless
And dared to rob in trillions but men robbed in billions.

Therefore if men and women were gods,
What a pitiable life this will be!

“My brothers and sisters, today we have realised how sinful we have been but our God is merciful. He is neither the hardy man nor the vengeful woman. He is not the overbearing gods that seek to enslave us. Our God is merciful, compassionate and meek. If we confess our sins and repent, our God, who does not want any soul to perish, will surely forgive us.”

The judge, who listened to Ajuwa with rapt attention, came down from the judgement throne and said, “Ajuwa, this suit against you was for a purpose. I have sent many people to jail in the letter of the law but today you have made me realise that we are all guilty in one way or the other. We all want to go to jail with you to serve our sentences but this is practically impossible. I have therefore decided to ignore the letter of the law and cancel the one-month jail sentence I passed on you. You have touched many of us here; continue to touch many

more souls that they might not perish. Go home in peace and continue to preach your message of Jesus Christ crucified.”

The court hall turned into a place of worship as people knelt and cried out in prayer for forgiveness and mercy, after which they sang and danced to the glory of God. As they trooped out of the court, they milled round Ajuwa, who could do nothing but sob.

“Merciful God,” she cried, “so instead of a jail sentence for me, you decided to crown me with grace to win more souls for you? May your name be glorified forever. May all those you have touched today never go back to their old ways of life. Because of what you have done today, I shall go to some prisons to propagate your gospel so that the inmates will be transformed in the same way you have transformed me so that when they are released, they will never go back into crime again.”

Both factions of SWTT followed her home; the opposition faction that dragged her to court begged for forgiveness and pleaded to be allowed to join her crusade for justice and equity. Although her application for admission into the nunnery was still pending, she felt she could still work with them in order to encourage them to die to the self and take the message of equity and justice to their homes and to rekindle the spirit of

Christianity among the fallen Christians. She felt that their first major encounter with justice, equity and forgiveness which God revealed to them during her trial should be nurtured. She therefore pleaded with them to eschew ostentation and avoid drawing unnecessary attention to their persons.

“No ostentatious living and no unnecessary publicity!” she pleaded. “We must be good ambassadors of whatever we believe in. Those of you who are Muslims should be good ambassadors of Prophet Mohammed (S.A.W.) and you Christians should be good ambassadors of Jesus Christ and mankind. To start with, we must strip ourselves of anger and rancour and forgive all those who offended us and whom we sought to revenge against. We must start from our homes by settling all the squabbles and reconciling with all family members. We must use our conduct and ways of life to win souls and change people for good. Our light must shine to illuminate the way for those in the darkness of sin so that they can see clearly and follow the way of true justice and peace which our various religions teach. The unbelievers among you should reconsider their outlook about life and strive to follow Christ Jesus, who died to set us free.”

The old spirit of camaraderie was rekindled and all the women agreed to go back home and

practise forgiveness and love. A new name was suggested for their association but it was agreed that the acronym SWTT should remain but with a different meaning. They agreed that it should mean Society of Women of Tender Touch.

20

FOR GOD AND FOR MAN

Ajuwa had become worried about the Church's delay on her application for acceptance into the nunnery. She went to Fr Ayodeji to ask what was delaying her application. As she stepped into the church premises, she met Fr Ayodeji on his way out, but he led her back into the mission house and said, "Congratulations, Ajuwa, your testimony about our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in the court is the talk of the town. In a single day, you have won more souls for Christ than most of us who are priests have done. This church has never handled the number of confessions it did in the last four days. I had to sit in the confessional for at least five hours daily in the last four days hearing confessions from people who had not been to confessions for many years. They all said they were touched by your willingness to suffer for your actions and by your testimony of the love Jesus Christ has for mankind, which made him to suffer and die the shameful death on the Cross for the salvation of all.

"From all indications, the Holy Spirit is directing your footsteps to the kind of evangelism that God has designed for you. The Church will

back you up with prayers to continue in the great work of leading sinners back to God.”

“Father, are you saying that my application to be a nun is rejected?” Ajuwa asked in amazement.

“The Church is led by the Holy Spirit in all it does. The Holy Spirit has revealed the best way you can serve God. We are all commissioned to win souls for Christ and from all indications, God has given you the grace to do this more effectively than even some of us who are ordained ministers of God. I shall arrange for you to learn more about Catholic doctrines and also to attend our evangelical school so that you can be well grounded in your teachings,” the Father explained.

Ajuwa, who had wanted to hide away from the world by going into the nunnery to live a life of devotion and prayers, was shocked at what the Reverend Father told her. She could not say a word because she had asked God to do with her what he wished.

‘I have abandoned my life to the will of God and since this is what he wishes to use me for, he will give me the grace to fulfil his will,’ Ajuwa thought.

“I have heard you, Father,” she said at last. “May God's will be done but don't forget that I need a lot of prayers.”

“I will arrange for your training in evangelism to commence as quickly as possible. If your friends are interested, send their names so that we can include them in the next list of candidates,” Fr Ayodeji said.

Ajuwa left the mission house praying that the good Lord should direct her to do whatever he wanted her to do. The following day, she called members of the SWTT to a prayer meeting, and they spent six hours praying and studying the Bible; thereafter, the spirit of the living God filled them.

“My dear sisters, may I remind you that no matter our religions or beliefs, we are all sinners and that it is the spirit of God that helps us in all our endeavours,” Ajuwa preached. “To turn away from our sins or wrongdoings, we need to acknowledge God in our life. We need to call on him to accept our dismal efforts, and forgive us our sins. We need to die to the self so that the spirit of God might live in us.

“Christians are not special people, but Christ does special things through them. Christians cannot do anything special for God, but God does special things through them and for them; so, do not for any moment think that you are special, or arrogate any power to yourselves.

“We shall focus on two areas of

ministration. These will be Prison Ministry and Family Reunion Ministry. We shall take the message of love, repentance and forgiveness to the prisons and take same to broken homes. For those of us who are Christians, we shall go to the prisons and preach the love of God, who sent his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, to suffer and die for our sins. For other believers, God is still love. We shall therefore pray for the prisoners and seek for their reformation and rehabilitation when they finish serving their jail terms.

“We shall start our Family Reunion Ministry from our various homes by reconciling with our loved ones, and then spread this to other homes. This is necessary because we can only give what we have. If we don't have forgiveness and peace in our homes, we shall not be able to give same to others. When we meet again, we shall share experiences and testimonies on forgiveness and reconciliation in our families.”

The women agreed to meet the following Saturday to give testimonies and to make their first visit to one of the prisons.

Meanwhile, Samson led a delegation of his family, who had regained their estate, to Ajuwa to express their gratitude. They came with cash and other gifts to be presented to Ajuwa in appreciation of what she did for them, but she told them to share

their gifts between the poor in their community and the Church.

“The good Lord has shown you and your family his mercy and compassion; you should go and do same to your fellow human beings. I will advise that you do not seek revenge against Juliet, but to show her mercy and pray for her. If you have not been a committed follower of Jesus Christ, you must do so now. God has shown you and your family his love, and it behoves you to do same for your neighbours. Go home and testify to the goodness and love of God and win souls from the clutches of the evil one by your actions and words. Be the mirror through which your friends and neighbours can see the goodness of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,” Ajuwa sermonised.

Overwhelmed, Samson's mother shed tears and said, “Over the years, we may not have been good Christians but before we came here, Samson indicated that he would like to be a priest of the Holy Catholic Church. If he indicated that wish before the malady that befell him, his father and I would have objected vehemently on the ground that we would want our only son to marry and have children. But as fate would have it, he fell sick and all efforts to cure him failed and then, we were told he was dead! Through the mercy of God, a person presumed dead did not only come back to life but

God used you to heal him. Before Juliet deceived my husband into believing that Samson was dead, he had pumped millions of naira into seeking for a cure for his only son. Because Samson was reported dead and God brought him back to life, it is only fair that I offer him to God, who healed him for a purpose. I wish I could offer more to this kind and benevolent God whose unprecedented love is free. I will hand Samson over to Fr Ayodeji to arrange how he can be enrolled into the seminary.”

“Madam, I'm happy for you and your family. I pray that Samson's desire to be a priest be favourably accepted by God,” Ajuwa said while dismissing them.

Samson and his family left Ajuwa for the mission house to see Fr Ayodeji. After thanking him for helping to accommodate Samson at a time he needed it most and for providing them with a credible lawyer who dug out the facts about Juliet, they informed him of Samson's decision to become a priest. They also presented gifts through him to the Church.

“I thank God for his mercy on your family. The God we serve is a loving father whose love for his children never ends. The human person does not appreciate how much love God has for him or her. We take our daily existence and experiences for granted, yet we cannot create the air we breathe

nor decipher why a plant must die first before giving us multiple yields; we do not care about the miracle of procreation, and cannot extend our days on earth by a single minute. We only acknowledge the miraculous works of God when something spectacular happens, like the miraculous healing of Samson, whereas the miracles of God are with us every minute,” Fr Ayodeji sermonised.

“It's nice to hear that Samson wants to be a priest. I shall see the possibility of his being admitted into the seminary but whether he eventually becomes a priest or not depends on his calling. I also thank you for your thanksgiving presents to the Church, and I pray that the love of God will always manifest itself in your family.” Fr Ayodeji prayed.

21

THE TESTIMONIES

By 10 o'clock on Saturday morning, most of the members of SWTT had assembled in the school hall. Ajuwa and one of the Muslims among them led the opening prayers and as was previously agreed, she called for testimonies. Many complained of the difficulties they were having trying to make changes. They said they were trying, but had not made significant progress.

“On your own, your efforts will amount to nothing without the grace of God,” Ajuwa explained. “Back up your efforts with prayers; call on God to renew you. When my sisters started preaching Christianity to me, it was garbage to my ears! I read the Bible avidly with a view to proving them wrong, arguing that Christianity was anti-women, and quoted instances in the Bible to buttress my anger against men. When I was doing all these I never mentioned the great women God used to turn the world around. I did not care about such women as Abigail in 1 Samuel 25; I did not mention Ruth, Esther, Judith, Susanna and even notorious Jezebel, all these in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, I ignored the role of our Blessed Mother, the Virgin Mary, whose

surpassing faith and fidelity brought our saviour to the world; I did not care to note that the miracle of turning water into wine was at the instance of our Blessed Mother. I defied the fact that our Lord Jesus the Christ obeyed Mother Mary even when his time had not yet reached. I ignored such women as Joanna, Susanna, Salome and many others who followed and helped Jesus to take care of the apostles during his ministry. I chose to ignore brave women like Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, Mary the wife of Cleopas and others who watched the crucifixion of our Lord and some who were courageous enough to go to the grave to try to anoint the body of Jesus after he had been buried.

“I ignored the special love God has for women by choosing a woman to be the only biological parent of his beloved son. I ignored the fact that God showed his immense love for women by putting aside the law of procreation and using the Holy Spirit to bring about the birth of Jesus through our blessed mother, whom he filled with his grace.

“My quest for revenge blinded me to the love of God for all mankind, but thanks to my sisters who continued to pray for me until the spirit of God permeated my person. No human being is perfect, but God uses us even as imperfect as we are to achieve his purpose on earth, so we shall all pray to God to use us for his greater glory even as imperfect as we are.”

They all joined hands together and asked God to transform and use them as they go to minister to prisoners. SWTT stormed the Tight Security Prison as both the warders and prisoners came out en-masse to see and listen to a bevy of beautiful women evangelists. Looking at the large number of men and women in a single prison, Ajuwa wept.

“I should be in this jail just like most of you. I probably committed more atrocities than some of you here, but God in his infinite mercy rescued me from temporary punishment of imprisonment. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who suffered and died for my sins and your sins and in fact, the sins of the whole world forgave me my sins. By his death and resurrection, he redeemed you and me and all mankind from the permanent punishment that our sins deserve.

“We are here to tell you that God loves you despite what brought you here. We are all sinners but our merciful God forgives every sinner who repents and turns away from sin. When we repent and follow the teachings of Jesus Christ in the gospels and those of his apostles as expounded by Apostle Paul and the general epistles, we become new beings. The old self passes away and the new self takes over.

“Our Lord Jesus the Christ enjoins us to love our neighbours as ourselves. If we all follow this injunction and practise love, we will not steal, kill, commit adultery, or cause our neighbours pains in the

same way we will not deliberately cause ourselves pains. If you can read the Bible, make it your daily guide and ask God to help you in your attempts to turn away from sins. The God of mercy and compassion who does not want anybody to perish will transform you completely.”

As the prisoners listened with rapt attention, some members of SWTT comprising Christians and Muslims came forward and confessed their sins openly to the amazement of the prisoners. Some prisoners cried openly and confessed their own sins too while others wept for wrongful imprisonment. The hymn *Amazing Grace* was raised and everybody joined in. Other songs of praise were sung, and wailing rent the air as prisoners, warders and SWTT members cried openly. Ajuwa called for prayers and the whole crowd responded in their various ways and languages; they shouted, sang, jumped, kicked and punched the air as they called on God to move the mountains in their life. At the end, there was a sigh of relief and bliss; joy and laughter filled the air. The prisoners, warders and SWTT members openly embraced themselves and parted ways.

As Ajuwa and her group visited one prison after the other, testimonies flowed in. Some innocent prisoners were released and many of those on death row had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment. Many others were simply granted

freedom because their punishments were more than their crimes. SWTT women became virtuous enough to be referred to as truly good women of God because their attitudes and behaviours brought peace to their homes and their neighbourhoods.

Kokome went back to school to further his education. Onowe opted for priesthood; Kika got married and we turned over the profit from our school to charitable causes in addition to giving scholarship to over 20 percent of our students.

Ajuwa decided to replicate our fitness training and motivational class in Ngwelle. She also built a vocational centre for the women of Ngwelle. The vocational centre trained the women in modern farming methods and provided them with improved seedlings. The women were also trained in food packaging, sewing, baking, bead making, catering, hair dressing and commodity marketing. Through this intensive training and motivation, Ngwelle women became confident, enlightened and financially empowered and the men accorded them the respect they deserved.

They became a force to be reckoned with as they contributed to the economic development of Ngwelle. King Mameri was proud of them and as a mark of gratitude to Ajuwa for the work she was doing, he reminded her of the chieftaincy titled he had earlier bestowed on her.

Ajuwa kept up her commitment to evangelisation and empowerment of women both in Lagos and Ngwelle, and after five years, she was satisfied that she had been a good ambassador of both Christ and Caesar. She therefore felt that it was time for her to honour Ngwelle women by accepting the chieftaincy title that was bestowed on her. She told the king that she would accept the title on behalf the hardworking women of Ngwelle in order to further encourage them, so a befitting ceremony where the women of Ngwelle stood tall and rapturous was performed to the greater glory of God and for the further emancipation of Ngwelle women.

Looking back and with tears of joy in her eyes, Ajuwa sighed and reminisced, “Awesome God, I thank you, I praise you and magnify your great name for everything and everyone.”