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My Father's Village – Excerpts from a Memoir in Progress

My father came from humble stock. He was born to a large, close-knit family in Dikenafai - a remote village in the Eastern region of Nigeria, West Africa. Dikenafai's claim to fame was its sole ownership of a natural waterfall named Ezeama (King of the Compound/Home). For many years, the waterfall provided the villagers with their only source of water and had within it, an oracle, a fiercely protective and formidable Water God also known as Ezeama. Ezeama, through his High Priests, predicted the future of the villagers, demanded elaborate offerings and sometimes, at least until the missionaries put an end to the practice, human sacrifices.

The High Priests were all male and came from specific families who had served the Oracle of the water god for many generations. According to stories I heard from various aunts and uncles and, particularly, from my paternal grandmother, Dada, the selection process within these families was rigorous and the initiation ceremonies secretive. Rumor had it that Ezeama chose his male priests after a series of tests of courage that included finding rare medicinal herbs in the deep, dark forest surrounding the waterfall, mastering the healing arts, foretelling the future and killing a man or an animal deftly with a machete.

In the years before paved roads became part of the village landscape, I believe not till the early 1970s, a single dirt road led traders and travelers into Dikenafai and that dirt road led to Ezeama on one side and the large market square, Oriekwu, on the other.

As people approached Dikenafai, my ancestral home, their first glimpse was either of Oriekwu, our large market square or of the massive altar built, in Ezeama's honor, into the side of the forest that surrounded the waterfall.

Oriekwu was a typical Igbo village market; a large, flat expanse of dusty red earth, dotted with rows and rows of woven baskets, metal or wooden tables brimming with colorful fruits, vegetables, herbs, spices, all manner of meats, fabrics, small stools, hunting and farming tools, eagerly displayed under crudely constructed corrugated iron roofs held up by steel or thick wooden poles. The strong, heady smell of fresh foods and game and the din of solicitous traders and farmers gathered to barter their wares and trade stories often filled the air. There was a natural rhythm to the market; an ebb and flow to the stream of people who stopped by the market throughout the day. Some came early to sell/buy a few items then returned later with more wares for sale. Others came by midday to set up multiple items, sell them, then return home to gather more wares or not. The market, itself, started at sunrise, reached its peak at midday and petered out as the sun turned a rich shade of burnt orange in the evening sky, indicating to those traders still around, that it was time to pack up and set home with the day's earnings.

Ezeama's altar served as a starting point of reverence and worship for all who entered or lived in the village. It was also a striking symbol of the terror that could befall any visitor who misbehaved in our village or had the temerity to linger after the market closed at

sundown.

The imposing altar was filled with fruits, vegetables, masks, gourds of palm wine (a potent fermented milky beverage tapped from the palm tree), trinkets and myriad artifacts. Villagers and outsiders made offerings to Ezeama either through the Oracle's high priests or directly at the site of the altar. People, approaching it gingerly and fearfully, would pay obeisance to the water god asking for peace and blessings for their households. In the old days, human heads, mutilated bodies, and slaves were also offered at the site.

The entrance to the waterfall was around the corner from Ezeama's altar. It was a narrow, unassuming pathway cut into the thicket of the forest. From the pathway, one could hear the steady rush of water growing louder as one drew near. A gentle mist hung in the air; a sweet combination of salty rainwater mixed with the smell of fresh wet earth. The pathway, which was less than a ¼ mile long, soon gave way to a clear opening and there suddenly the waterfall appeared, a breathtaking view, like a huge strike of lightening on a bright summer day.

Ezeama looked as if a fissure in the earth; an ancient earthquake, had split the earth in two, creating a deep forested valley on one side of the waterfall, a rock limestone wall on the other, and a treacherous steep slope leading down to the base of the falls where a shallow stream flowed furiously into the surrounding forest.

The beds of rock and earth at the base of the waterfall and behind the thundering rush of cool water were pure white limestone. Salty tasting and easily scrapped off, the white scrapings were used to polish teeth, scrub the body or wash metal pots and even clothing.

Ingeniously, the villagers, to gain easier access to the waterfall and stream below, dug out foot size holes in the steep slope and would climb up and down, several times a day, balancing huge pots or basins of water on their heads.

During the rainy season, the slope would become quite dangerous to climb and villagers collected rainwater in drums or fetched water from neighboring villages. In the late 1960s, during the Biafra war years when my siblings and I spent time in our village, my dad and other elders in our village urged the high priests to consult the oracle to determine if something could be done about the steep slope. Shortly after, with permission from the water god, they hired an engineer and managed to build a few concrete steps at designated parts at the top of the steep slope. A few more were added later at the bottom part of the slope that led directly to the stream.

From time to time, when, as some of my relatives insisted, Ezeama was angry, huge chunks of rock and earth would come crashing down from the waterfalls killing people or impaling others in its large, white, gaping mouth, as punishment for sins that often remained unexplained.

It was from this vantage point that Ezeama seeped into the very fabric and soul of village

life in Dikenafai.

By the early 1970s, running tap water came to Dikenafai and Ezeama, whose stairways remained difficult to traverse, was closed to local use. It became a place of worship and special rituals open to and performed only by his High Priests.

The village itself was small and hilly with mud huts dotting the lush and heavily forested terrain. The mud huts were circular in shape and rarely had large windows. Instead, two large openings were cut in the front and back of the circular dirt walls and served as gaping doorways. Some of these doorways were covered with colorful raffia mats or elaborately carved and decorated dark wood doors. The exterior walls were mainly red mud. Some families decorated or painted their huts in vibrant colors; hues of Uri -a black indigo dye, henna, yellow, and magenta and burnt orange. One distinguishing color was white – only local seers or medicine men painted their quarters white. I never understood why but this was the common practice in the village. Inside, were straw mats/rugs scattered on the smooth mud floors, low wooden beds covered with hand-woven colored fabrics or quilted pieces of old cloth, and an assortment of clothes, crafts and personal effects hanging on nails in the walls or on thin strips of string stretched across the room and tied securely to the rafters.

Most huts had thatched roofs made of tightly woven straw held up by long pieces of wood that formed a sharp point, like the tip of an iceberg in the center of the hut. Some had tin or corrugated iron roofs fashioned from metals sheets by local carpenters or from bits and pieces collected here and there. Depending on the number of kinfolk living together in a household and the family's landholdings in the village, some compounds had separate huts for men and women; somewhat larger huts for men, smaller ones for the women and children, and even smaller huts built for cooking and storage.

The village compounds, hidden amongst the towering trees, were similar in design. Each compound had a wide open sandy front yard with palm wine trees and a few smaller fruit trees planted on either side leading up to the Obi; the elders meeting place or open-air living room. The Obi, a round mud or concrete floor edifice with open sides, a fire-pit in the middle and a tin/metal or tightly woven thatched roof, was the center of important activities in the compound. It anchored the large mud huts that, placed like pieces of chess, housed various male heads of households and their wives. If the males had several wives, smaller, separate huts were built for the younger wives and their children. The smaller huts were lined in a curving row behind the larger huts.

It was in the Obi that family meetings were held, insubordinate wives were sanctioned and everyone gathered to hear tales of woe and triumphs that shaped every family's history. On cool hamattan nights, during the dry dusty north-wind season, the wood burning fire-pit raged as young and old gathered to learn wise sayings, listen to stories of our ancestors, tales of vendettas settled, battles lost and won and, of course, legends about the indomitable Ezeama.

I vividly remember that I was in my family's Obi when I first heard of the plight of twins

in the old days. Twins were considered an abomination from the spirit world and when a woman in my family, or for that matter in any other family in the village, had twins, the babies would be carried out in the middle of the night and left in the forest to be devoured by wild animals. Unfortunately, in those old long forsaken days, many women in my family, including my grandmother, had several sets of twins who lost their lives to this particular tradition. As a mother of twins myself, I shudder at the thought and rejoice in the fact that the practice was abandoned when the missionaries came to Dikenafai in the early 1900s.

The compounds were protected from the sides and back by mud walls that enclosed the huts and family grounds in a tight U-shaped configuration with holes cut in the walls to help identify visitors or neighbors who chose not to come through the front entrance. A single doorway was cut into the mud walls on either side of the compound for easy exit to farms and other compounds or to the surrounding woods, which, for years, served as an outhouse.

Dirt roads meandered through the village delineating family clans and compounds. The forested areas, which hid small farms cultivated by the villagers, were home to many gigantic palms, iroko, oak, ukpaka, ube, and exotic fruit trees.

The Ube tree, a giant tree at least a hundred feet tall, produced a delicious, oily, oblong pear like fruit that turned from a light shade of green to navy blue when ripe. This blue fruit always appeared in the fall around October and disappeared after Christmas. The only way to savor this fruit was to either boil it or roast it in an open pit of hot ash allowing the skin to crack in several places, releasing its oil and some of the green meaty fruit inside and then eat it while still warm. It had a slight avocado taste but a unique taste, nonetheless. The Ube fruit also had a leather-like casing inside each small fruit that held the seeds that were replanted but took many years to mature.

The Ukpaka/Ugbaka trees also produced an edible brown oil-bean seed that was large, flat and round in shape. The seed was encased in a hard, long and wide shaped shell. When mature, they literally shot off the trees, making large popping sounds and, shaped like boomerangs, would hit an unsuspecting passer by on the head leaving in its wake mildly bruised heads and very frayed nerves. Preparing Ukpaka was an involved process that required a complex combination of steaming, fermenting and thinly slicing the oil-bean seeds, and then using it to prepare a special occasion dish; made with dried cod fish, fresh hot ground up peppers, palm oil and shredded cassava (a smaller, bland tasting member of the yam family).

The trees provided cover from the blazing sun and sustenance for the village locals and, like the dirt roads, bore markings that meant they belonged to particular family clans and compounds. The trees around the various village compounds and farmlands were planted, tended and ultimately owned by individual families or clans. Each tree held memories and a history unique to its owner/family and had become an important part of that family lore for many, many years. My grandmother, Dada, told stories of how her late husband, Obineche, would sit under his favorite Ube or palm wine tree and skin his game after a

good day of hunting in the forest. These trees held a special place in the hearts and minds of village folk, and all the families in my village marked their trees with special symbols to ensure that others would not gather the fruits of their labor.

My father's village remained this way, just like those ancient cities I read about in history books, where time seemed to have waited or stopped, until the oil boom years of the 1970s.

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