

The shrill chime of Tare's alarm shattered the peace of her bedroom. It was 6:30 on a rainy Monday morning, and as she groaned and fumbled to silence the alarm, her hand brushed against the bedside table, knocking over the black-and-white photograph of her paternal grandparents. The image of their smiling faces stared back at her from the floor, and Tare sighed as she put the photo back in its place before rubbing the sleep from her eyes. The incident left her feeling unsettled as if something was gently nudging her to pay attention to what she had long neglected.

Despite her fatigue, Tare went through her morning routine, first seeking solace in prayer and then moving on to her exercise routine. But her thoughts kept returning to the photograph. The sense of disconnection that had lingered in the background for so long now felt more poignant than ever. It was as if the photograph had become a silent messenger, reminding her of something she couldn't quite understand. Outside her window, rain splashed against the glass, revealing a blurred view of the bustling streets of Port Harcourt. The city was just waking up, its heart beating to the rhythm of countless intertwined lives. The kind of intertwining that Tare felt disconnected from. For the past few months, she had felt like an observer of a story that wasn't entirely hers.

With a tired sigh, she pushed through her routine and made her way to the kitchen. As she poured water into the kettle, Tare's mind wandered. Her career as a filmmaker had taken her to far-flung corners of the world, capturing stories of people and cultures she could never have imagined, but something was missing.

With each passing day, Tare couldn't shake the feeling of the photograph's significance. It seemed to haunt her, an unspoken presence in her life, and her grandmother's stories echoed in her mind.

One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon and cast a warm glow over her room, her curiosity led her to the photograph. Tare closed her eyes, and at that moment she felt a connection that transcended time and space. It was as if her grandparents were speaking to her through the photograph, urging her to explore the stories of her people, to honour their legacy. Then it hit her - she had told stories of other people but she hadn't told hers. With newfound determination, Tare made a decision. She would travel to her ancestral village in Oporoma. It was time to uncover the stories that had shaped her family and, in turn, her own identity.

Tare's decision to explore her Ijaw heritage led to a flurry of preparations. She immersed herself in research, gathering every scrap of information about Oporoma and Southern Ijaw (her local government). She spent her evenings poring over old family records, albums and photographs and talking to her parents, absorbing the stories of her ancestors passed down through the generations. She also searched the internet for additional insight into her heritage.

The journey itself was a leap into the unknown. She packed her bags with care, making sure to include a special place for the photograph of her grandparents. As she boarded the small boat that would take her up the river to Oporoma, she couldn't help but feel a mixture of excitement and trepidation.

The boat trip felt magical with the gentle flow of the river reflecting the passage of generations,

while the lush greenery that lined the banks whispered secrets of a land steeped in history and tradition.

Arriving in Oporoma, Tare was greeted with open arms by her extended family. Their warmth and enthusiasm touched her deeply. They told stories of their own, customs and rituals, of the deep connection they felt to the land and their ancestors. Tare listened intently, her heart swelling with a sense of belonging she had never felt before.

As the days turned into weeks, Tare immersed herself in the vibrant Ijaw culture. She participated in rituals, danced to traditional music and shared meals with her family. Each experience brought her closer to the heart of her heritage, and she began to understand the importance of the beliefs and traditions that had shaped the lives of her ancestors.

Her journey of discovery deepened as she wandered the narrow, sandy lanes that wound through the village, taking in the sights, sounds and smells of Oporoma. The houses, with their distinctive architecture, seemed to echo the stories of generations.

Tare's family in Oporoma introduced her to the rhythms of daily life, from fishing in the quiet river to participating in the vibrant village festivals. She learned that the village had a calendar full of vibrant festivals and traditions.

One of the most memorable customs was the "Iria" ceremony, a rite of passage for young girls. The girls, adorned with beaded necklaces and headdresses, danced gracefully to the beat of drums. The ceremony celebrated their transition into womanhood and was a time for the community to offer blessings and wisdom to the younger generation.

Another such celebration was the Boupre-ugei festival, a unique event that held great significance for the community. It took place near a large pond where everyone gathered to fish. What made this festival remarkable was the respectful coexistence between the villagers and the crocodiles that inhabited the pond. Before the festival, the crocodiles were carefully removed from the pond, as it was taboo to harm them. These sacred creatures were not seen as a threat and coexisted peacefully with the villagers.

During the festival, the entire community came together to fish in the pond, celebrating the abundance of water and the bonds of unity among them. After a successful day's fishing, the villagers would prepare a communal meal, sharing the day's catch and the joy of being together. This tradition typically took place during November and December, adding another layer to Oporoma's rich cultural fabric.

Tare was fascinated by the storytelling tradition of the village. The elders would gather the children around the fire and, with animated gestures and expressive voices, tell ancient tales of heroes, mythical creatures and the bravery of their oru - otu (ancestors).

One evening, gathered around a flickering fire, Tare listened to Chief Tamuno tell tales of courage

and resilience. He spoke of how their ancestors had navigated turbulent waters, both figuratively and literally, to protect their land and way of life. Tare couldn't help but draw parallels between these ancestral stories and her own journey of self-discovery.

Tare learned that storytelling was not just a form of entertainment, but a way of passing on the history and values of the Ijaw people.

As she spent more time with the women of the village, Tare discovered the art of beadwork. Intricately designed beaded necklaces, bracelets and anklets were made by hand, each pattern and colour symbolising different aspects of Ijaw culture and history. Tare decided to try her hand at beadwork and, under the patient guidance of a village woman, Adia, created her own unique beaded necklace as a memento of her time in Oporoma.

But it was on one particular evening that Tare witnessed something truly magical - the Egbelegbele dance. As the sun dipped below the horizon and the first stars appeared, the villagers gathered in an open space, lit by torches and the soft glow of the moon.

The Egbelegbele dancers, dressed in bright costumes that shimmered in the firelight, began their performance. The rhythmic beats of drums echoed through the village square, setting the stage for a dance that seemed to transcend time itself. The dancers moved with grace and precision, their bodies swaying to the music, telling stories of love, bravery and tradition.

The village was not just a place; it was a living testimony to the Ijaw way of life. The people of Oporoma practised their customs with a deep sense of pride and reverence. Tare marvelled at the intricacy of their traditional dress, the vibrant colours that adorned their bodies during celebrations, and the rhythmic beats of the drum that echoed through the village square.

Her own participation in these traditions was met with warmth and encouragement. She learned to dance to traditional music, dress in colourful costumes and cook local dishes using ancient recipes. The experience was a sensory immersion in a culture as rich as the village itself.

The food in particular left a lasting impression on Tare. She enjoyed the flavours of polofiyai, a hearty and aromatic stew made with plantains, yams and a medley of locally grown vegetables and spices. Kekefayai, a delicacy made from fresh fish marinated in an aromatic blend of herbs and spices, was a culinary revelation. Each meal was a celebration of the bounty of the land and the culinary traditions passed down through generations.

Throughout her stay, Tare's camera was a constant companion. She captured the essence of Oporoma - the laughter of the children, like Nengi whose curiosity touched Tare, playing by the river, the wisdom etched on the faces of the elders, and the community spirit that bound the villagers together. Her photographs were a visual diary of her journey, a testament to the enduring beauty of Ijaw culture.

But beyond the customs and rituals, Tare discovered something even more profound - the resilience

and spirit of the people. They had faced challenges and adversity with a tenacity that resonated with her own journey of self-discovery. It was as if Oporoma had become a mirror reflecting her own strength and determination.

As the weeks passed, Tare felt herself undergoing a profound transformation. She was no longer an observer, but an active participant in the history of her people. She had unlocked the treasure trove of her heritage and unearthed the stories that connected her to her ancestors. The photograph of her grandparents had led her to this place of self-discovery and belonging, and she knew that her journey was far from over. It had merely entered a new chapter - one filled with the promise of preserving and celebrating the Ijaw culture that had enriched her life.

As Tare sat by the quiet river one evening, the fading sunlight casting a golden glow over the water, her thoughts turned, as they often did, to the photograph of her grandparents. Their enigmatic smiles had beckoned to her on this journey, and now, at the river's edge, she felt an inexplicable urge to understand more.

"Why am I called Ebitare?" she whispered, her voice almost carried away by the gentle breeze rustling the palm leaves. "What does it mean?"

At that moment, it was as if the very air around them held the secrets of centuries. The river whispered tales of generations past, and the palm leaves seemed to lean in, eager to share their wisdom.

Then, like a revelation from the heavens, a cherished memory from her childhood resurfaced in her grandmother's soft and wise voice. "Ebitare means 'love is good', my dear," her grandmother's words echoed in her mind. "It's our way of reminding you that no matter where life takes you, love and goodness will guide your path."

Tare felt tears well up in her eyes, reflecting the shimmering waters of the river. At that moment, she realised that her name was not just a name, but a legacy - a legacy of love and goodness that flowed through her like the river itself, connecting her to her ancestors and to the heart of the Ijaw people.

As her time in Oporoma drew to a close, Tare felt a bittersweet mix of emotions. She had forged deep bonds with her family in the village, and the memories she made there were etched in her heart.

The journey back to Port Harcourt was a reflective one. Tare sat on the boat, gazing out at the river, carrying with her not only the photographs she had taken but also the intangible treasures of wisdom and culture that had enriched her soul.

As Tare settled back into her life in Port Harcourt, she couldn't help but reflect on the stark differences between the urban comforts she had grown accustomed to and the challenges facing her family and the Ijaw community in Oporoma.

The environmental problems plaguing the Niger Delta, the heart of Ijaw territory, weighed heavily on her mind. Oil spills and gas flaring continued to disrupt the lives of local communities, polluting water sources and damaging farmland. Tare knew that these issues had been a source of hardship for her people for decades. One particular incident that stood out was a recent oil spill that had affected the nearby river, a lifeline for the village.

Economic marginalisation was another concern that echoed in her mind. Despite the region's vast oil wealth, poverty and lack of economic opportunity persisted in many Ijaw communities. The unequal distribution of wealth from resource extraction left a stark contrast between the wealth of the oil industry and the struggles of the local population.

Tare also couldn't ignore the political marginalisation that some Ijaw communities had historically faced. The lack of representation and access to government resources had been a source of frustration and led to calls for greater autonomy.

While in Oporoma, Tare witnessed a community meeting where villagers discussed their grievances with local government officials. The meeting highlighted long-standing issues of neglect and underdevelopment. The villagers expressed their desire to be more actively involved in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

Tare knew that her role as a filmmaker could be a catalyst for change. She envisioned documentaries that would shed light on environmental issues, narratives that would amplify the voices of her people, and stories that would inspire positive action like the story of Owei, a skilled fisherman and father of three, who had seen first-hand the devastating effects of oil spills on the once-rich fishing grounds on which he relied to support his family. Her work would now be a blend of storytelling and advocacy, a way of preserving and celebrating the traditions she had discovered in Oporoma.

Tare's journey was no longer just a personal quest for self-discovery; it was a call to action. She was determined to bridge the gap between the urban world and the rich cultural heritage of the Ijaw people. Her path was set and she walked it with purpose, guided by the stories of her ancestors and fuelled by the hope of a better future for her community.

As she looked one last time at the photograph of her grandparents, she whispered a promise - to them and to herself. It was a promise to carry on their legacy, to be a beacon of change and resilience, and to ensure that the challenges facing the Ijaw people were not forgotten, but met with unwavering determination. Tare's journey had become a story of transformation, and it was a story that would resonate far beyond the borders of Port Harcourt, carrying the spirit of the Ijaw people to the world.