

We Are All Mad Women

We are the lineage of mad women, but Olisa is the official craze woman of Egerton Street. As the oracle, she lives behind the giant electric pole; the one that carries power lines to every building on the street. The one covered with election posters at the Egerton and Jermeni Street juncton. Olisa's official attire is two hundred multicolored fabric pieces picked from Mama Ike's sewing shop. Water sachets, bottles, tins, and other unnameable accessories jingle from her waist.

Every morning, we watch Olisa groan and roll off the side of the electric pole to wash her teeth with a mud paste she spits in four directions. She stretches her aching limbs and rolls up her mat. She forages the streets for unique items and blows her prophecy whistle when she picks up rare gems including water sachets, and broken bottles.

Olisa's clients are businessmen worried about a shipment held up by customs, market women jealous of their neighbor's sales, and students who want to graduate without failing any exams. When a client approaches, she blows her prophecy whistle and dances around the electric pole. Her consultations require an offering of seven hot and perfectly rounded akara balls.

Mama Nneka, her neighbor, sells the pepperyest akara in Egerton. Her shipping container store leans on the oldest-story building in Onitsha built by one Chief Philip Moh right after the war. A frugal Abagana man who returned to Onitsha after the war and refused to drill a borehole for his tenants when the Anambra Water Corporation became useless.

Chief Philip Moh hid out in Lagos during the war and survived the killings by swapping his Igbo name, Emeka, for his christened name, Philip. He came back with survivor's guilt and decided to contribute to the rebuilding efforts in Onitsha. He built the house using free labor from hungry, desperate youths. We know he keeps telling people that after war, the banks liquidated his assets and gave him mere chicken change but he rebuilt his fortune by sheer will and cunning.

Mama Nneka starts frying Akara at 7 am sharp. Our window is strategically positioned to monitor her frying pan. The moment the first batch of akara turns golden brown, there is a line from her store to the cul de sac. She ignores her hungry customers and sends Olisa the first set. After Olisa's blessings and approval, the business day can commence.

Olisa and Mama Nneka have been flourishing side by side for over twenty-two years. Mama Nneka relies on Olisa's divination for her akara sales to soar.

The two women moved here at the same time.

Olisa was aimless and Mama Nneka was nameless, a mere appendage to Olisa. Chief Philip Moh called touts to chase them away when they showed up on his front steps. A clearly insane woman and a pregnant one are bad for the housing value and leasing prospects of a new property. We saw the fear in Chief Philip's eye and it was more complex than a slump in property value. It looked like his nemesis had come back to bite. Olisa turned feral when the touts set loose on her. She jumped on Chief Philip and bit him so bad the scar began to rot immediately.

He begged Olisa for mercy but she laughed hysterically at his rotting flesh. Chief went to the chemist's shop but the man ran away when he saw the injury. Chief Philip swallowed his pride and knelt down to beg Olisa, promising to leave them alone.

"I swear, I no go do am again," he said.

After Olisa was satisfied with his begging, Olisa spat on the sore and shoed him away. The Chief woke up the next morning a subdued man without a scar and the two women settled in front of his house to do their business.

With the help of the disgraced touts, Mama Nneka converted an abandoned shipping container into a kiosk and started her akara business. Her pregnancy was so advanced, she placed the bulging belly in front of the sizzling pan of groundnut oil waiting for the white paste to turn golden brown.

Her business was slow till Olisa gave her first divination. People feared the crazy woman by the electric pole who was always chanting to herself and foraging trash. The rumors about Chief Philip's bite scar helped her reputation but the fear was laced with contempt or indignation but never respect until the very day of that divination.

Olisa gathered her items from the rubbish and saw a young woman walking back from the Red Zone, her red cheeky bum skirt drawing stares.

"Nne!" Olisa ran after her and tapped her bag. The lady ignored the call. People took notice of Olisa talking to someone.

"Nne! Bia" She grabbed the young woman's hands who jumped back in fright. Olisa started laughing at the dumbfounded girl.

"Be careful. Very careful! There is blood. Plenty of sweet blood," Olisa shouted and walked in circles around the young girl shivering in fear. Her teeth chattered so loudly everyone could hear it. The moment Olisa turned her back, the girl turned and ran. Her slippers fell off her feet but she abandoned them and continued running.

Someone was recording the encounter on their blackberry. Olisa charged at them, and the phone fell and broke. She grabbed her prophecy whistle and ran around in a surge of energy thrilling the crowd who had gathered to see.

The wind howled and covered everything in dust the next day. The streets were empty. No car parked on the street survived the brown makeover. Children entertained themselves by drawing scrotums on the dusty windshields.

Out of nowhere, police cars just raised dust and drove into the street bringing wahala with them. Tables overturned and dust lifted. Sand fell into Mama Nneka's oil pan splashing some boiling oil on her. There was a raid at the Red Zone. A woman's body was found in an uncompleted building on Jermeni Street. She wore a red miniskirt with a black strap. Someone recognized her as a regular face at the Red Zone. The police raided the entire place carrying all the matrons and bouncers away. The men's club next to them was also raided. People came out to watch the raid. Others fled for fear of stray bullets.

Everyone looked at Olisa in fear and trepidation when they heard of the dead girl and the raid. The street was so chaotic, nobody noticed Mama Nneka had gone into labor.

Mama Ike, the tailor, whose shop sat opposite Mama Nneka's kiosk saw her groaning in pain next to her pans of hot oil and charred akara. She rushed towards her and called for help. Some neighbor offered to rush her to the hospital on a motorcycle but Mama Nneka refused shouting that it was nurses that kept her childless in the first place. Olisa who had been swamped with curious bystanders noticed Mama Nneka's pain and jumped into action. She took over the birthing with Mama Ike as her sous. The crowd watched in awe as Olisa became a midwife and badgered her assistant with instructions. Olisa held Mama Nneka's down till she pushed Nneka into the world badgering our ears with those metallic screams.

"His name is Nneka, *Mother is Greater*. I am his father and mother," Mama Nneka kissed the head of the bloodied newborn in view of the whole street. We laughed at the neighbor's children witnessing their first birth and horrified at the sheer amount of blood and bodily fluid inside a body. Mama Nneka bathed her child sprinkling the air with blood and pepper. She sold the rest of her akara that night. Everybody wanted to buy spicy akara from the woman who delivered her baby in front of her shop, even the burnt akara sold that day. Mama Nneka did not mention Nneka's father but we can see an uncanny resemblance to Chief Philip.

"Take that ugly child away from my house," Chief Philip shouted when he saw the newborn. Olisa gave him a good stare down and he shut up. Her fame blew with the birth of the boy and the death of the girl.

From the moment Nneka could walk, he was assigned the task of taking Olisa's breakfast over to her. He woke up every morning excited to serve her breakfast. Olisa smiled to greet him and the young boy smiled in return. We watched Nneka stretch from infant to boy to a man that unfailingly brought Olisa her breakfast every morning.

Every day Chief Philip cursed Nneka calling him a whimp who cannot leave his mother's side and join manly men to trade at Nkpor Spare Parts Market. Olisa would comfort Nneka after every one of Chief's tirade. Chief Philip's frustration extended past Nneka to every young man he could find. He seized every opportunity to complain about the laziness of the younger generation. The few who manage to make it cannot even respect elders. They build five-story buildings with running water to poach his tenants. The ingrate landlords cannot even pay homage for all the fights and suffer early returnees like himself endured for them to build their ugly, cheap, modern houses that will collapse in 10 years.

Olisa's clientele expanded as her fame grew. People wanted foretellings to save them from death. She told the angry woman that sold oranges on Jermeni that her husband was cheating; the woman sacked him from their house. She advised the importer with containers stuck on the high sea for seven months to cut off his business partner. He found out the guy was a swindler. She told the food store woman to sprinkle her shop's front steps with akara oil every morning because her neighbor's envious eye stole customers. After weeks of diligently applying the akara oil, her neighbor packed away and left.

Olisa refuses compensation and gifts but requires all her clients buy more akara. We distrust this sisterhood because how anyone explain such a stupid rule? Maybe Mama Nneka traded Olisa's mental faculties for a son and a successful business. Olisa must be brainwashed and serving Mama Nneka only because of strong medicine.

We slept and a storm leveled Egerton Street. It destroyed everything including Olisa's electric pole. Mama Nneka's shipping container overturned. Car windshields shattered and fallen trees covered the road. The street smelt like clean rot depending on what side of the road you're on. The harshness of the wind settled on us.

Olisa did not sleep at her spot for a few nights. The electricity people came by after a week and repaired the pole after we spent several days in darkness. Olisa returned once her pole was restored, but everything stayed gray. Everyone counted their losses and business slowed down. Mama Nneka went days without selling. Olisa went days without divination. Nneka sat around and yawned. We watched.

Olisa started sleeping in the middle of the day. It started as short naps till she slept the entire day. Flies perched on her half-opened drooling mouth. The rest gathered on the akara that Nneka left

out for her. He made sure to cover her with a wrapper anytime he passed by. Olisa's station was a mess and which is very unlike her but Nneka stood around to clean up what he could. Nneka walked with a limp these days, probably from an accident in the storm. Chief Philip raised his brows at Nneka and shouted *Womanizer* loud enough for everyone to hear the moment he saw the boy's shadow. Mama Nneka ignored the situation and continued frying her akara and hoping for new customers.

Olisa removed her unnamable accessories and got into more comfortable sleeping positions. She had shed her restrictive clothing to turn and toss on her faded mat. Her prophecy whistle decayed from unuse. We noticed and made comments when we passed by her shed.

"Is Olisa okay?" We asked. No one answered.

Olisa's sleep coma continued for days into weeks. She had a few lucid moments when she ate her akara already half eaten by flies and angry hens but the rest of the time, she was drowsy and asleep.

Olisa's pregnant. We did not know at first but we should have seen it coming. She was showing. There's a list of possible fathers, but until sufficient evidence is found, we will refrain from making a claim.

Half the street woke up to shouts from an angry mob gathered outside Mama Nneka's shop. Nneka was in the middle and with a tire on his neck. Someone carried a JerryCan full of petrol and poured it on him. Mama Ike held firewood in one hand and a matchbox in another.

"Confess!!! She said it is you. Disgusting womanizer. Who did it?" She spat in his face. Nneka could not answer. He cried and held up the tire away from his neck. The crowd was irritated by his silence and tears. Mama Nneka sat on the road, crying and stomping her feet.

One man threatened to bathe Nneka in hot oil. Someone suggested they call a priest.

"What do you need a priest for?" Mama Ike asked exasperated at the suggestion, "I am here. I was at his birth. I will draw out a confession from him." She slapped his face and the crowd started chanting. "Confess!! Confess!!"

Mama Nneka could no longer take it. She grabbed her commercial frying pan full of oil and rushed toward the crowd. Everyone ran away from the oil. Nneka protected his face from the full force of the sizzling oil. Mama Nneka hoisted the pan and poured it on Nneka's body. Everyone tried to stop her but fell when she showered him with the oil. Nneka fell and writhed in pain. We watched in silence to see if Nneka's skin would swell or peel but nothing happened. One man holding a log of wood approached Nneka cautiously and touched his body.

“O mmanu oyi, *It is cold oil*,” Everyone sighed in relief. Nneka removed the tire from his neck and tried to run away. The crowd pursued him and caught him intent on punishing him. The crowd caught Nneka and circled him again. Mama Nneka rolled around on the floor unconsolable. Her wrapper tore in several places and exposed her white undergarment now coated in dust. Olisa sat in the corner cradling her exposed belly, scratching her buttocks like there was an ant colony doing construction in her pants.

“How did this happen?” Mama Ike asked.

Nneka smiled, and the crowd looked around in horror.

“Why are you smiling?” she queried.

“I am not sure,” he said.

“Haaaaaa...” the crowd shouted.

“Why did you do it?” Someone asked from the crowd.

“Did she charm you?” Another shouted.

“Everything was cold. I was cold. The world was cold,” The crowd quietened and paid rapt attention to his blabberings. Olisa was quiet the entire time oblivious to the deliberations happening around her.

“Where did this happen?” Mama Nneka asked and everyone turned to her.

“I swear we did not touch anything,” he said.

“WHERE??? WHERE???” Mama Nneka asked again.

Olisa inched closer to the crowd watching the deliberations with curious eyes unsure why her lover was the center of such attention.

“We hide from the storm?” Nneka pointed to the shop. “Inside...inside the shop.”

“Which shop?” Mama Nneka shouted as she lurched towards him, the crowd restraining her.

“Don’t tell me you shackled that filthy woman inside my shop,” she screamed.

Nneka bowed his head, the ground ready to swallow him. Mama Nneka could not believe her ears. She held her head and shouted. She grabbed firewood from someone and ran towards Olisa. No warning came. Olisa fell to the ground from the impact with a huge gush of blood on her head.

The crowd scattered when they saw the blood. Mama Nneka screamed in horror. Nneka ran towards Olisa. Mama Ike grabbed fabric from her shop to stop the blood. Some men ran out to hail Keke.

“Stop Stop!! Kanayo Maternity Hospital,” The crowd blocked the Keke driver hurrying to catch customers at the junction. Nneka and two other men hoisted Olisa’s bloodied body into the Keke. Olisa’s arms kept slipping from Nneka’s oily body. The other men grabbed her away from him and pushed her into the Keke with Mama Ike calling directions.

“Madam, your money na 500,” the Keke man said.

“Shut up and drive us there,” Mama Ike sat by Olisa’s body as the Keke drove off. Nneka pursued the Keke on foot.

The crowd lingered unsure whether to seize Mama Nneka. They looked at Chief Philip to have an opinion but he leaned on his cane and watched her; his forehead creased and his veins pulsed with trepidation. Mama Nneka sat down next to her weapon of assault staring into space. She entered her shop to gather her things.

“Don’t ever come back here. Madwoman!!” Mr Philip said, wagging his cane at her. “ What kind of rubbish are you and your children? Bringing the scum of the earth into this world and following me around,”he said. The crowd tilted its ear towards his revelation. Chief Philip looked to see people still gathered. He flung his cane into the street and the group dispersed.

Mama Nneka wiped a single tear from her left eye and sniffled. She grabbed her sandals and dusted them in front of her akara shop that leans on...

...The oldest-story building in Onitsha built by one Chief Philip Moh right after the war.

The same house where the Chief died of a heart attack in his sleep.

The one that is hunted because bad water killed 20 residents.

The hospital hires porters to manually fill the tank every week because the Anambra Water Corporation is still useless.

The one that a young woman bought. One Dr. Nneka Moh, the seed of a spare parts trader married to a mad diviner. She remodeled it as the first Neurological Specialist and Research Hospital in Onitsha.

Mad women are a regular sight nothing can cure us.