

CHISIMIDI

You could hear Chioma's wails wherever you were on this earth, loud enough to wake the dead but not loud enough to wake her own dead. Very soon the women with their blouses and wrappers tied across their chests will start flooding the compound that housed Chioma, her husband, her dead children and the sweetest mango tree in the village. The women will start with the mourning songs they have now become accustomed to

" Death? Where is your abode?

Death built its house on a rock

Death is for me, Death is for you

Death awaits me, Death awaits you and it

awaits me

Death is for me, Death is for you

Death build its house on a rock"

"Is there a place that death abhors?"

Let's go and see!

Is there a place that death doesn't reach?

Let's go and see!"

followed by whispers and gossip flying around because the new ladies who just joined the group will have to be prepped for the situation. One would think that with the number of tears Chioma has cried, she would stop trying to have children but Chioma still took in, she was the type that a little touch on the lap could get her pregnant, what then is the only solution, tell her not to meet

her husband at night when everybody else was warming themselves up and skins were being melted into one? You can't say that to a couple below fifty years of age.

"Someone does not need a seer to understand that something is wrong in this house."

Mama Ikenna

said to the women who had now gathered under the mango tree.

"What are you insinuating?" Amaka

who everybody knew as Chioma's closest friend asked Mama Ikenna

"Amaka, why do you want to pretend that you don't hear the rumours that your friend is exchanging her children for her unfading beauty?" Chisom the gossipmonger and the starter of the rumours faced Amaka

"Nobody told the gods to give you a face that resembles a masquerade Chisom, if you don't have anything better to say, go home and cook for your husband." Amaka fired back.

"It is better to speak the truth than hide it

Continue to cover your friend's with craft

Who knows? You might both be witches"

Chisom replied as she walked out of the compound.

"I pray the gods seal up your dirty mouth

so you don't talk again

Why don't you clean your eyes before you

attempt cleaning another's

Oh you think I don't know that your

husband follows any small girl in skirt

Nonsense!"

Amaka yelled back, wanting to not lose in their exchange of words.

Chioma was and still is the beauty queen of the village, the growing girls still couldn't measure up to her. But all of these seem useless if she couldn't mother a child who lived more than two years of age. This is the fourth child, this one died at one year and six months, Chidinma stayed up to a year, Chidi a year and two months, and Ezinne died a day before her second-year birthday. What they all had in common was the sickness that never went away, last month it was a cold, last week a cough that caused chest pain, today it might be fever, who knows tomorrow might be intense body pain and when they stare at you, it was like blood wasn't flowing through their eyes, and there's their lean stature. Amaka will say they lack nutrients, they are kids and kids need special food to help them grow, feed them eggs, fish, meat, milk and lots of vegetables, Chioma did all that. Different herbalists will be called to treat them, smelling concoctions will be made for them to drink and bath in, and for a while, you will think they are recuperating but they all end up dying and leaving Chioma in the pool of her tears, sadness, loneliness and thoughts.

It didn't come as a shock when the people of the village saw Chioma's protruding stomach, it had now become a familiar sight, she's always pregnant. However this time, Chioma was determined to keep this new child alive. Come what may, he will grow up handsome and strong like his father and even attend the white man's school. Missionary activities were spreading throughout the small villages and Chioma's community would not be left out.

Chioma named her new baby, Chisimidi, which means 'God says I shall live'. He will live long, and she will make sure he lives long, these were her thoughts as she strolled the bush path that led to the dibia, Okonkwo's hut. Okonkwo was a dreaded witch doctor, he was never seen mingling with the villagers, they say he comes out only at night when he communes with the dead.

"Your child and the ones before him are not yours, they belong to a spirit woman, they are Ogabanjes, sent to frustrate the mother, if the necessary rites are not performed, this one too will die."

"Ah! no ooo, what will the world think of me? I will do anything, anything!."

Okonkwo let out a loud cry and broke into an incantation

" Anytime you see the Frog jumping

He is chasing something or something is chasing him

Our fathers!! those who have walked the earth before us

Our fathers!!! Those who have held us since the beginning of time

We, your children, have come to you

Our ancestors!!! Who sees what we cannot see even if we climb the tallest tree",

he pours a drink on the floor

" Take this small thing and water your mouth",

he proceeds to throw some kolanuts on the floor

"Manage this from the abundance you

have given us, what should we do for

you to keep this boy?."

He closed his eyes and kept quiet for sometime, Chioma thought he had fallen asleep but then with a jolt he spoke,

"Good, after we perform the rites, when he is of age and common sense, another one will be performed to seal all we have done, he will have to give us his Iyi Uwa".

Chioma was given a list of items to bring and rites were performed. Chisimidi grew up tall but lean, she treated him like an egg that was going to crack if left unwatched, he was not allowed to play with his mates or lift heavy objects. He still fell ill constantly but whenever it happened, the dibia was called and a herb or two did the trick, they were all waiting for him to turn ten.

The D-Day came

"Now this is what you will do for me and your parents, take us to where you kept your Iyi uwa"

said Okonkwo, the dibia. Chisimidi

stared at his parents with a confused look on his face.

"Listen, when you were coming to meet your parents, you were given something to hide.

You know where it is, show it to me."

Okonkwo urged. He

responded with a nod of his head to show that he fully understood what was going on. He led the way to the backyard where their fowls were kept, he stood in front of the wooden cages not uttering a word

"Is this where you kept it?"

Chioma

asked with a voice laced with incoming tears, there was no reply. He started walking again towards the graves where Chioma's dead children had all been laid to rest, he stood before the last one's grave, bent down as if to pick up something but immediately broke into a run, his father and Okonkwo ran after him, after running around the compound twice, Chisimidi stopped close to the mango tree and pointed

"There. It is there."

"Oya bring a shovel, let us dig it out."

Okonkwo beckoned to the boy's father. What they brought out were bits of bones, a small rock, a small piece of human hair, all tied up together.

After the Iyi uwa was brought out, Okonkwo

instructed them to give a mark on any part of his body, the reason for this was that when he dies and comes back, he will be identified.

"But you said after this, he will live."

Chioma cried

"We have done our part, if he is willing he will live."

Okonkwo replied

"That is not what you said oh!, that is not what you said oh."

Chioma

continued shouting, her voice followed Okonkwo as he walked down the road leading to his hut.

The land the missionary school was built on was given to them by the chiefs of the village, as a gift, a gift in exchange for the unending knowledge and wisdom of the Whites, The missionaries will pass on to their children, so when other villages are raising their shoulders, they too will raise their shoulders. The teachers at the school were mixed, a few Europeans and some Nigerians who had been trained by the missionaries. Mrs Chukwuma belonged to this category, she taught social studies in all the primary classes.

"Now as I was saying, a family is made up of a father, a mother and the children and this type of family is called the nuclear family, it is the only type of family accepted by God."

Someone's

hand was struggling to get the teacher's attention.

"Yes Emeka"

"But my father has 3 wives and he always says the gods blessed him with all his wives. So why did he bless him with 3 wives that he does not find acceptable?."

"That god is different."

"How are they different?"

inquisitive Awele asked

"Children listen, there is the Christian God and there is the traditional god and before you ask Emeka, your father worships the traditional god." Mrs Chukwuma

answered already irritated

"Oya show me the other God so that I can check if it's different from the one in my father's shrine."

Emeka's seatmate gave him a handshake, recognition of a question well asked.

"I cannot show you, because you cannot see him, nobody can see him."

Mrs Chukwuma answered

with no idea that her answer had just increased the flame

"Ahhhhh!!!!!!" The whole class
exclaimed, everybody started talking

"If you cannot see him, that means he is not real."

"If you cannot see him, how then do you ask for cowries and then give him yams and big
big fowls."

As the debate and arguments were going on and spiralling out of control, Mrs Chukwuma
noticed someone's head lying on a desk, someone was oblivious to what was going on in the
class, trying to shift the attention from herself, she yelled

"Chisimidi! wake up!, how can you be sleeping in my class?"

There was no response "Chisimidi!", still no response, She walked to his desk and touched him,
his body temperature was hot enough to boil beans. She called one of the big boys in the class to
carry him to the clinic.

The clinic barely had any patients because even though the villagers allowed the White man to
pass book knowledge to their children, they still rated their herbal ways of treatment over
whatever the White man thought he was doing in that small house painted white. The clinic had
just one doctor and four nurses to assist, treatment and drugs were free as a way of encouraging
the villagers to embrace the White man's way of medicine. The clinic was not that far from the
school compound, a clearing between bushes connected the school to the clinic. Initially, the
clinic was set to be built in the same compound as the school, but the school compound was too

small so the clinic was built in the compound of Father Paul, the head missionary, it is a 15-minute walk. Osita the boy carrying Chisimidi ran as fast as he could.

"I think he is not breathing again, I think he is not breathing again."

Osita cried out as he approached the clinic. He dropped him on one of the beds and was told to wait outside.

"He is running temperature Sir, I think it's Pneumonia." The nurse told the doctor as he approached the room.

"Give him an antibiotic."

"We have done so, but he is seriously burning up." The nurse answered frantically.

"Let me see him." The doctor found his way to the bed. Doctor Richard stared at the young boy, observing him

"Who brought him here?"

"The school teacher and some boys." the nurse answered

"Mrs Chukwuma, is the boy a sickle cell patient?" Mrs Chukwuma rushed to Dr Richard as she saw him marching towards her

"Sir, I don't understand, sickie what?"

"Does he fall sick often, how often?"

"Ehn yes o!, he falls sick a lot o, he hasn't been in school for two weeks sef because he was sick."

Dr Richard already had an idea of what was going on

"Get his blood sample and run a genotype and blood group test, in the meantime let's try to steady his condition."

The August rain that refused to fall for weeks visited the village that evening and made the roads muddy. Nobody heard the chirping of the birds, children who were supposed to be running around and chasing the chickens back into their cages could not. The night was fast approaching, and everybody was prepared to call it a day, the rain had made the night come faster or maybe the evening already knew. Chioma sat on the verandah of her house waiting for him, the rain must have kept him outside she thought to herself, that was when she noticed the crowd entering her compound, she saw his classmates, tears all over their faces, some even had catarrh dropping down from their nose

"He died of sickle cell anaemia, it is a disease in which the red blood cells are not shaped the way they should. Both you and your husband carry the AS genotype which is not a good combination. Your son did not have a normal body system like his mates." Dr Richard tried his

best to explain to Chioma what the disease was. The test result had come exactly when Chisimidi took his last breath, he had sickle cell anaemia. Chioma kept staring at the entrance of the compound as if she was waiting for him to come back home, as if she had the assurance that he was definitely going to come back home and that the man with the glasses that looked too big for his face was just blabbering. Chioma sat on the stool till the next day and the day after but saw no sign of her son, that was when the tears started falling.

It's been three years since the death of Chisimidi. Chioma turned the new baby's back as she cleaned her with the small cloth that serves as her towel, when she got to the legs, she touched the rough area after her knees and felt the mark, then spoke to the baby

"What nonsense was that doctor saying again? Welcome back, my son."