

SHORT STORY

OMONIJE

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“Mother, be yourself; it's just the time.” The statement was plain, poignantly piercing, and stark. Perhaps it was lost to the rhythmic pattering of rain drumming on the roof. This brought the reminiscence, the faint and painful memory of her birth. Osunfunke held her hand; the expanding fluid of love warmly flowed through her veins, and she became so bloated with heartbeats and, at the same time, shrunk in fear to her bones. Her only daughter's defiant look sent bitter pills down her throat. She wanted to cry. “You say what? Omonije, talk to me...” Omonije stared at her mother, and she stared back at her; their steady gaze remained fixed on each other for a long while. Streams of tears ran down Osunfunke's face, but Omonije's face was dry and determined. After a while, she removed her gaze from her mother and fixed it far ahead of her, far beyond the thick wall of her room. She seemed lost to a strange world; not seeing what she was seeing, not hearing what she was hearing. Yet Osunfunke knew very well that her only child, Omonije, was lost to the world to which she had ever belonged. “Would she go like that?” Osunfunke fought her thoughts, the terrible thought that was as dark as the sackcloth of death, the painful thought of losing her dear, lovely daughter. “No! No!! No!!! You can't do this to me. No, Omonije, you can't do this!” She cried bitterly. Still, their hands were clamped on each other, more stiffened now. She could sense the flow of blood through her veins pulsating, and it sent fear down her spirit as she thought that this would soon stop. Although she hated the thought, she cried.

Her husband and about two relations came into the room when they heard Osunfunke crying. They had been there when her problem began until Osunfunke asked them to go out and leave her alone with her daughter. Segun, Omonije's husband, could not withstand it any longer; he had to come in and see his wife. People outside never knew what was going on. Women were busy preparing breakfast. A lot of people had arrived for the naming ceremony. The child was asleep, left alone in her innocent world. Omonije returned her look to her mother; their hands were still together, and she smiled, not minding the presence of her husband and the two other relations.

“I am Omonije, a child-mother from the great beyond. A cycle is the symbol of our creation. At a point, we are here; at another point, we are there. Yet, on a spot, we are moving on the axis of time. You don't know because you are not

well informed. “To us, nothing is wrong about the world of Abiku; it's a simple world to learn about the creation of the world and the futility of living in it. You may not know that living here is a mere running shadow; the longer it becomes, the sooner it is getting ready to go with the night. “You believe all of you believe that there is real meaning in living here, but we laugh at you all. Your reason is so absurd, thinking that you can break the chains, the shackles of existential futility. You find meaning in meaninglessness; you gloat over it. The maroons amongst you even fight over it, yet lose all beyond the stricture of their imagination. Mother, you know me well. I came to teach a lesson, a truth about us all: we are prisoners of creation. Mother, do not bother; do not cry. I had taken so much from you, so you feel. I've returned all I took, so you should know. Seven times I was born with a bangle as an image of a cycle in an attempt to tie me down to a spot. Seven times I must break it to show the futility of your efforts. Anyway, seven times I've brought back what I had taken. Take care of all the children; they are yours, not mine. It's time to go back home.”

The genesis was as dramatic as the end, and all began thus: On the main road, from the narrow paths and along the bends, legs began to tread towards Akesan. Within a matter of seconds, a crowd of heads, with their crowns of hair protecting them from the scorching sun if they could at all, converged, and their eyes were consumed in admiration of the common object. They were all enjoying the theatrics of Ojeade. Anybody who had not seen an Alarinjo performance before might not have known the sensuality inherent in the theatricality of their performances. They were groups of masquerades, otherwise known as Apidan or Egun Alare. They were itinerant groups and went about from one town to another, doing the job they knew best. Which aspect was not enough to arrest anybody's attention? Was it the bata rhythm, with its consonance of sensual interpretation, as it stirred everybody's emotions and threw every head into conscious shaking and moving with necks and shoulders? Or was it Ojeade's dance? The magical displays, among others, were equally thrilling. The most alluring and appalling moment was when Ojeade turned into a python. A rain of money showered on it before it changed back to human form. Drama was also performed by Ojeade and his group. A satirical re-enactment of a woman engaged in extramarital affairs and caught red-handed by her husband was another spectacle that threw the crowd into a furore of delirious laughter.

Sonorous songs were also rendered by Ojeade.

Among the crowd was Osunfunke, the beautiful daughter of Baale Alakesan of Akesan. Baale himself was powerful, and stories had it that during the prolonged Kiriji War, he was beheaded but quickly carried another head. When he was born, the tribal marks engraved on his cheeks were “pele,” but when he returned from the war, he had a head with “abajá” on his cheeks.

Baale was also known as Egun Apidan before he became Baale.

They always praised him as:

Ojegboyeolori	Onsanmori	Ojegboye the great Socialite
Ajonleto baba	Osunfunke	the itinerant Masque- Osunfunke’s father
Ogbori-Olori	Saye	He who adorns his life with a different head
Ba bawalakesan.		Our Father in Akesan

Little did Ojeade know about Baale. He felt his absence was a slight. Although he felt insulted that he had not seen him, at least to dash him some money which was the usual practice anywhere he went to perform he had noticed Osunfunke. He called her and danced with her. Within him, he felt different, and he knew that he must marry this beautiful young lady. The beautiful picture of Osunfunke did not blot out some words he wanted to send to Baale, wherever he might be. So, he began to sing. He used idioms, proverbs, anecdotes, and allusions to portray Baale as a man who lacked a sense of appreciation and as a miser who was not supposed to be the head of a community. Baale himself got the message from his house as Ojeade was performing at the square, some metres away from Baale's palace. In annoyance, he came with only his cover cloth spread around him. Everybody was amazed to see Baale like this; people knew something was wrong. Some elders knew that Ojeade, a young handsome man, had got the handshake beyond his elbow. He had truly climbed the tree beyond its leaves.

Baale did not mind what might be going on in the minds of his people. He got to the centre and began to dance to the solemn rhythm of the bata drum. This time, Ojeade had stopped and wore a whimsical smile, waiting to see what the old man wanted to do. Baale's performance was incredible. Ojeade watched him as he turned his piece of cover cloth inside out without any part of his body showing. People began to praise their Baale. Ojeade was in trouble. This was an act whose tricks he had long wanted to learn. This was a major artistic feat that could enable him to challenge anybody under heaven. This was a marvellous performance that he dreamt of doing one day. Of all the magical knowledge he possessed and all the intricacies of the trade he had learnt, this

stunt by Baale was the last and only one he still wished to master as the summit of his career and this was done by the panther without stress. He was ashamed. He was afraid. He was in trouble. He quickly prostrated, poured sand on his head, rolled on the ground, and kissed the lotus feet of the Baale.

In the night, the whole episode became a joke as Ojeade drank palm wine with Baale. Later, Osunfunke and Ojeade had time to talk; it was just the beginning of their turbulent journey through life. Some months later, Ojeade's parents and relations went to ask Baale of Akesan to give his beautiful daughter to their son, Ojeade. He gladly consented, and a wedding date was fixed. Before the D-day, Ojeade's mother went to consult Mayegun, the noble witch-doctor in Odo-Oba, near Ogbomoso. He told her that if they could look beyond Akesan, perhaps it would be better. In plain language, as Ojeade's mother understood it, he was saying that her son should not marry Osunfunke, the daughter of the lion himself. How to communicate this to her son was a problem.

At night his parents summoned him for a discussion. His father started:

‘Ojeade what have you done to know your wife?’

‘I know her very well, very well papa’.

‘What if Ifa says you should not marry her?’ mother questioned

‘Mama, Ifa cannot say such a bad thing’.

‘But Mayegun, you know him, Babalawo at Odo-Oba said you should not’, his mother said again.

That's to Mayegun, the short-sighted diviner!

‘Ah! You think you would not listen to the words of Ifa?’

‘Papa,no. I did not say so, but I cannot take Mayegun very seriously. ‘My Osanyin told me everything is good about Osunfunke, what else?’

By this time, Ojeade stood up.‘Is it on this issue you called me?’ He eventually married Osunfunke, and the wedding was elaborate. Shortly after the solemnization of their marriage, Osunfunke conceived and gave birth to a baby girl. However, the unfortunate child died on the very day she was to be named.

Thus, the bitter experience continued for another six consecutive times. It was a difficult period; infant mortality was very high due to the lack of adequate medical care. But could that explain Ojeade's and his wife's plight? Never! The

first child was perfectly healthy until the seventh day, when she was supposed to receive a name. Yet, she was in too much of a hurry to leave. Nobody knew this. On the third day after she came into the world, at about 1:30 a.m., the baby got up from her mother's side. As if by magic, she stood upright. One could watch her as she became tall and beautiful. She ran her forefinger diagonally from the left side of her mother's forehead to her left toe and smiled as she swaggered out of the room. The door opened automatically, and no sound was heard. Anyway, even if there had been any sound, her seemingly lifeless mother was too far gone to notice.

Through a passage, she sneaked into an open space, and there lurked a figure. He was fully awake as she came onto the veranda. He wiped his face in disbelief but quickly realized that something strange was happening. He could not pin it down to anything concrete, but psychologically he set out to fathom the mystery. Ogunsakin trailed the figure into an open space, and since the moon was bright, he could see clearly. At first, when he saw her crossing the veranda and entering the dark region beyond Ojeade's house, he knew she could not be somebody who had merely come out to urinate or attend to some other need. Besides, nobody in the village would dare violate the instruction given by the Hunters' Guild that after midnight no one should be seen outside. When he beheld her radiant and beautiful figure shining under the bright moonlight, he knew this was no ordinary event. As if the young lady knew what was passing through his mind and indeed, she seemed to she said: "Look at me, Ogunsakin, as if you do not see me." At that moment, he was struggling within himself to get closer to the strange being. As he determined to apprehend her and had begun making efforts by reciting incantations, the figure vanished into thin air. That was the first mysterious thing the child did.

When morning came, the baby was kicking happily. It was around 9:00 a.m. Women were preparing breakfast for the invited guests and relations of Ojeade and Osunfunke. In the room where the baby lay, three strange faces appeared. They surrounded her and hurriedly summoned her to get ready so that they could leave. They were all young girls, smiling. A girl stepped out to look at them. Women, especially Osunfunke and Ojeade, were overwhelmed with happiness. The girl shook her head and said: "Very soon, I shall watch all of you crying." Nobody noticed that anything unusual was going on. Nobody saw them anyway.

Osunfunke brought out a new dress and placed it beside the bathing tub where the soap and smooth coconut sponge had been arranged. The stage was set to bathe the newborn before giving her a name. Her three friends surrounded her, though nobody could see them. Even Ojeade, whom one would believe could see beyond ordinary beings; a powerful magician, herbalist, and occultist was unaware of their presence. Unfortunately, he was busy moving about, greeting people and attending to his friends, while rams and goats were being roasted for the occasion. Meanwhile, Mojo, a middle-aged woman who was the wife of Ojeade's uncle, sat down to bathe this child of fate. Little did she know that it had already been ordained that, while bathing her, the child would die. That was the assignment the newborn had come to fulfil.

“Queen, it's time to go.” “I know that.” “It's going to be fun to get our Queen back in the kingdom of spirits.” “Yeah.” “No, it's now. Make it look as if this woman kills her,” another said. They all laughed. Bad, so bad, that nobody heard them; nobody saw them. As Mojo poured water on the baby's head, water entered through her nose, and she started convulsing. Mojo panicked and shouted. People rushed in, and everybody was amazed. Ojeade was there in a moment. He took the child from the woman carrying her, put his mouth on the centre of her head, and rained incantations upon her. Ojeade threw away his agbada, sweating profusely, and rushed to get his *sere*. Then he began:

Bi a femoloju a riran, Let me see clearly

Olupara da nialupaida	Change is always immutable, change,
Oko tokobo fi para sale	Hoe always rest, after a tedious labour
Ada to ko boofi koro se yewu	So also cutlass does rest in the room
Olomi tutu mi orukote.	Cold water changes to warm in process.

The child became still, cold and stiff. Ojeade was shaking; he gave a heavy sigh; women around read the alarm and danger in his look. They knew the unfortunate girl was no more. They all cried, Osunfunke wept bitterly. The whole village cried. While women were crying, Ojeade rushed into his medicine room and spoke with his Osayin:

Osanyin, ‘my god why? Why has this happened to me?’

‘Ojeade, the water and calabash are not the same’

But they are related’,

‘Related but not similar, right?’

‘What are you talking about, my god?’

‘Ojeade, your problem is that you are impatient’.

“Pour water on me. Wash your face with it, go out, and you will see.” Ojeade did as he was instructed. When he got to the open passage, what he saw was amazing. He saw three floating young girls. Among them was a lady whom he could recognize as his own newborn baby, but now transformed into a beautiful young woman. They laughed at the people wailing, but when they realized that Ojeade had seen them, they vanished. Ojeade now understood what the problem was. He was able to pacify his wife and disabuse her mind of the insinuation that Mojo must have deliberately killed her daughter, for there was a rumour that Mojo was a witch. That was their first bitter experience. Ojeade tried all he could to reverse this recurring situation for six consecutive times, but all to no avail. Until the seventh time, each child died before receiving a name. Each departed in the same manner. When the sixth child died in the same way the others had gone, people suggested that they should burn her body to ashes and bury the ashes, or cut the body into pieces.

Early enough, before they could carry out their decision, Ojeade's mother returned from Mayegun. The fire had already been set, and Ojeade's friends were coming out with the dead child to burn her when Ojeade's mother met them.

‘Where are you taking the body to?’

‘To burn the wicked child to ashes’, Fani said

‘No, bring it’ Subu, Ojeade's mother said

She took the baby to the bunch of plantain at the bank of Olojuoro, a stagnant spring at east of their house. There, the child was buried with some totems Mayegun gave Subuola. That was the sixth time.

Not long afterward, Osunfunke became pregnant again and was safely delivered of a healthy and boisterous baby girl, just a replica of the previous children. It was everybody's expectation that the child would die on the day she was to be christened, as had become the usual pattern. It had become a well-known fact that Ojeade, with all his herbal knowledge, all the magical powers he could claim, and all his pride as a prince of witchcraft, could not solve his own problem. His reaction towards the dictum, *"Abiku so oloogun deke"* ("the Abiku

has rendered the herbalist powerless"), was that no cutlass can make its own handle. In fact, on the seventh day, the ceremony was scanty. He merely wanted to give the child a name. The fire of love that usually accompanied the arrival of a newborn and inspired the enthusiasm of throwing a lavish celebration was dead, completely dead. Throughout that day, Ojeade and Osunfunke waited anxiously to see what would happen. They saw, anyway, but nothing happened apart from the child crying occasionally whenever she needed her mother's attention. Indeed, nobody waited until the seventh day before people started calling the child Omonije; she was simply known by that name. This name eventually overshadowed Ojeropo Adeyinka Adekanbi, the name officially given to her. Until the point of her death, she was known and called Omonije.

Ojeade held Mayegun in high esteem; the admiration he had for the man was beyond expectation. On the eighth day Omonije came into the world, he went to Mayegun.

‘Thanks, Mayegun, for your efforts to enable me have child at last’

‘May Ifa be praised’

‘I never knew I should have listened, when mother said Osunfunke might not be a good wife for me’.

‘Never bother about that.

Orunmila^{eleripin}Orunmila the destiny giver
 Odifa fun eku^{asinas} the oracle is cast for eku^{asin}
 Pe oro 'nu eni a maa pani That the caustic tongue kills
 Eku asinnibawonioro? Eku asin wonders how could that be?
 Enu o se ni pa ohun May my mouth not kill me
 Orunmila fun un lesi peOrunmila responds that
 Afe bo, afebo ,afebo Only sacrifice is the solution
 Ai rueboa ma pani Without it there would be problems

‘Mayegun, what can I do now?’

‘When the child starts speaking bring her to me’

Omonije had some unusual characteristics. The child, as tender as she was, would not take her mother's breast milk apart from *agbo*. This was a combination of various herbs boiled together, with the resulting liquid served as food. The strange aspect was that she would take neither cold nor warm liquid,

but only dangerously hot ones. The first day it happened, a crowd gathered around Osunfunke, wondering how a child could develop immunity to the heat of a liquid that an adult would drink and immediately cry out from. Omonije, however, would take her food with ease. Another peculiar trait was that Omonije did not like light at night. Before her parents discovered that the reason she was always crying was the presence of light, both and the child had suffered many sleepless nights. By the age of six months, Omonije could walk and run. She became an object of wonder, especially because of her unusually rotund and protruding tummy. Osunfunke and her husband were alarmed, but they later came to know that the problem with Omonije's stomach would disappear the moment she started talking. Omonije did another strange thing one night. It was the night the family had pounded yam with *egusi* soup laced with bush-rat meat for dinner. In her case, hot water had been used to prepare the pounded yam, and it was still warm at least by Omonije's standards. What she did was astonishing. She took her plate and placed it directly on naked, glowing charcoal and began eating from it. Nobody said anything. They had probably become accustomed to her strange ways.

On the day Omonije was exactly one year old, one halcyon evening, Osunfunke was peeling melons. Omonije sat on her mother's left lap, held her waist, looked into her eyes, and said: "Mama, I want to talk." What she was saying was not clear to Osunfunke, and she asked Omonije to repeat what she had said. But she did not. Instead, she left and returned to her toys. Curiosity and fear all lumped together into nervousness, and it overcame Osunfunke. It was obvious when Ojeade came home and saw his wife. He quickly demanded to know what the problem was, but Osunfunke was unable to say anything meaningful. "Omonije has started talking." "What did she say?" "I couldn't understand. Perhaps it was a question or a statement; I could not tell. But the manner in which she said it was terrific and unusual." "Today I must see Mayegun. Do not forget that he said we should bring her to him the day she opened her mouth to talk."

They went to see Mayegun. He closed the door of his power house after asking his clients, Ojeade and his mother, to remain outside. For hours, Omonije and Mayegun were alone in the room. What transpired between them remained the subject of rumours and speculation to this day. Some said Omonije grew into her true form and revealed the mysteries of her personality in both the physical world and the First Heaven. It was even said that Mayegun and Omonije transported themselves to the First Heaven, where they spent the night together.

How do we know any of this? There is no way to know. Is it not beyond our understanding? When the door was finally opened, Mayegun and Omonije were simply laughing. From that day on, Omonije talked and talked. One afternoon, while she was with her father, she explained that her stomach was filled with words and that he should not worry about it. Some months later, she was often seen talking to herself. One day, Ojeade was resting on a chair beneath the big tree in the open yard. His thoughts had wandered far away as he ruminated and planned for the next performance at Abide Village and some adjoining villages. Then he saw Omonije waving away some unseen beings.

‘Go away! Go away!!

Let me be for now until what had been denied her are given back

If I'm the Queen, does it mean I could not be responsible for my actions and in-actions?

It's okay, do not come here again for now.

Me, you can't do anything now until the day I said you should come for us all to have a jolly fly back home.’

Ojeade propped up, looked askance and was berated.

‘What is that? Who are you talking with?

‘Do not mind, papa’

Omonije narrated how she was crowned the Queen in the spirit world. The need they come in human form to test the earth and to punish human beings as the reactions of their actions. She even revealed a story of one of her past lives. Prior to the crowning years back anyway, I was the wife of Oba Arubidi, the king that conquered Dahomey and as far as Benin and extended his Empire to Ketu and Isabe’. ‘So, the story my grandfather told me which himself was told by his grandfather you were a part?’ ‘Yes, not a part, but a factor.’ Omonije turned to look at her friends. One of them tall and pretty, a damsel beamed at Omonije with igniting smile wished her to return to their kingdom where she has her throne. This gesture of theirs would not bulge, this time, Omonije wanted to stay. Ojeade was at sea of what was happening. Although he sensed that Omonije spiritual colleagues were around, he not being an ordinary man. Himself a prodigious medicine man he wasn't fall short of knowing the precarious attitude of the spirits. If he had the power to deal with them, shouldn't he have done that long ago? His predicament and lamentable experience were to ascertain the fact that ‘one does not possess fire and not be burnt by fire made by others’, he thought

Omonije told him many stories and lives she had lived. A life of an animal gloating over others and obstructed their lives with inflection of cruelty, the experience she had with human hunters who in their own cruelty tortured and terminated her life, how she was as spirit child in a mother and caused a train to derail that killed people, another time a mother of two died when delivering the third child. Many astonishing stories were told; stories went on and on. She grew in leaps and bounds. She became a dazzlingly slim and well-structured beautiful young lady. She became a subject of admiration to young handsome boys. Perhaps she must have used her power of attraction to get her place in the heart of Venus to have blessed her. She got all the attention and devotion from eligible bachelors and married men as well, to the irritation and jealousy of her peers who were so envious. To the amazement of many people; Adesegun, the heir to throne of Alaafin, wooed her, and like a joke the consummation into marriage was royally celebrated.

Omonije became a good mother. She had the first child and subsequently gave birth up to the seventh, whose naming ceremony was to be celebrated when she was about to die. Osunfunke carried her. Now that she was speaking, nobody could fully understand her. Ojeade came in, held her hand, and sat beside his wife. A bright smile spread across her face, and a strange radiance shone boldly upon her. She spoke, although faintly. "Out of love I stayed; out of love I leave. Do not think you can understand the way the heavens work. Can any of you?" She beamed with a smile again, although it appeared arrogant and seemed a stark display of callousness toward the plight of her parents. Then her friends came in a dazzling young lady and a young man summoning her to rise and follow them. Nobody could see them. Even Ojeade could not. They were all perplexed and did not know what to do.

Omonije got up, though nobody knew this, and followed her friends. When they got to a big tree in the compound, they stopped and waited to watch what was going to happen. It was time. Ojeade and Osunfunke discovered that Omonije was no longer breathing. There was a serious commotion. Everywhere was thrown into disarray. Wailing and crying rent the air. Mothers could not carry their children. The children themselves were crying. Men struggled to hold back their tears, but it was impossible; torrents of tears ran down their cheeks. Amidst all this acrimony and confusion sat Osunfunke with the baby who was to be named. She was not crying; she merely stared blankly into space. Many people surrounded her, hoping that she would not harm herself. Ojeade, with remarkable courage, said: "The keg has been broken..." And then he fell silent.

Outside, laughing at the men and women in their ignorant display of grief, were Omonije and her friends. “Is there a need for it?” one of them said. “They must do that because they do not see death as a gate of change,” Omonije replied. They laughed and laughed until they vanished into thin air.